

RELEVANCE DISCOVERY IN THE INTERNATIONAL KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER

PROCESS:

KNOWLEDGE GATEKEEPERS AND CONTEXTUAL INTERPRETATION

Andrei Kuznetsov (UCLan)

Olga Kuznetsova (MMU)



Manchester Metropolitan
University



How does the process of discovery of relevance of incoming knowledge affects knowledge transfer?

- In IB literature answers are based mostly on the examination of knowledge flows between units of MNCs where knowledge transfer tends to be *a monitored and managed process* that deliberately targets performance enhancement
- Accordingly, uncertainty over relevance is not seen by researchers as a major obstacle to knowledge absorption.
- The assimilation of new knowledge is made easier by similarities and overlaps in the knowledge trajectories that exist in different units of the same multinational corporation.

What if 'new' and 'old' knowledge do not agree?

- The IB literature typically assumes that the need to ascertain relevance does not happen very often because knowledge normally flows to places for which it is deemed relevant
- *We discuss the consequences of a situation in which discontinuities in knowledge trajectories make available new knowledge that has uncertain relevance.*
- We consider the role in a relevance discovery processes of a particular group of experts whom we call 'knowledge gatekeepers'.
- *Originality* - we investigate the process of relevance discovery in a situation in which knowledge transfer is accompanied with a dramatic non-trivial discontinuity in the existing knowledge trajectory, thus making the relevance discovery process particularly problematic.

Knowledge gatekeepers

- They are selected individuals or groups thereof who are qualified to make a judgement about the relevance of knowledge
- They contribute to relevance discovery through contextualization of new knowledge
- We use a specific group of knowledge gatekeepers - academics in the domain of business and management working in the university sector in emerging market economies.
- We frame our study as a case in demonstrating that knowledge is always socially embedded and context dependent, and more so in technologies of governance such as management theories.

Relevance: potential and revealed

- Relevance is a measure of how new knowledge is connected or applicable to a given matter
- Something has revealed relevance if this something causes people to react
- Transition to revealed relevance does not require changes in the substance of knowledge as such, but is caused by a change in perception held by the users of knowledge following the expansion of their horizons of cognition based on increment in skills, intellectual capital and experience.

Context and contextualization

- Context is critical for our ability to comprehend because it is the sum of the characteristics of the world that give clues to our perceptions.
- To do contextualisation knowledge gatekeepers unavoidably rely on own experience and expertise: 'new' knowledge acquires relevance by being exposed to and recombined with old knowledge
- When knowledge gatekeepers face the necessity to adjust to a radical change in the knowledge paradigm caused by a major institutional shift they have to cope with an acute conflict between new ideas brought about by this shift and own convictions entrenched in the outgoing institutional settings

Context and contextualization

- Literature emphasises the role of institutional commonality as a prerequisite for the generalisation of management theories.
- Knowledge is what has been learned from experience or study.
- In post-communist countries in these countries academics, in their role of the gatekeepers of management knowledge, had to go through a period of extreme stress and uncertainty caused by fundamental institutional changes.
- 'A person need not have a strong feeling that something is true in order to know that it is'. Keith Lehrer *Theory of Knowledge*

Context and contextualization

- *For knowledge gatekeepers the relevance discovery process is to a great degree the act of contextualisation that gives knowledge credibility and acceptance.*
- As far as indigenous academics are concerned, in cases when they demonstrate scepticism towards Western business theorising, an important question is if this is an assessment of the objective business environment in the recipient countries as they recognise it, or a consequence of subjective limitations reflecting lack of awareness and understanding of imported concepts.

The tutor as knowledge gatekeeper

- We propose that the performance of indigenous tutors as knowledge gatekeepers (mediators) will depend on their evaluation of the *revealed relevance* of the message they are passing on: if they see it as irrelevant this will negatively affect their effort.
- At the same time, their ability to evaluate relevance is related to how receptive they are to knowledge that they transmit.
- Their receptivity, in turn, depends on a combination of factors that include both subjective elements related to the intellectual aptitude of individual academics (e.g., ability to think critically, creative problem solving, memory, etc.) and certain objective characteristics representing the environment in which they operate.

Data collection

- In Belarus questionnaires were sent to all 628 full-time academic staff of all economic faculties and faculties of business and management of the state universities in the country. The response rate 43%.
- In Kyrgyzstan we surveyed 115 members of staff of the business departments of two most prominent institutions of higher education, the International University of Kyrgyzstan and Bishkek Academy of Finance and Economy. The response rate 38%.
- The questionnaire included 26 questions split into four sections: general information about the faculty; use of foreign literature and other sources; involvement in the process of international knowledge transfer; perceived barriers to international knowledge transfer.

Competence and perceived relevance

- Knowledge itself is just one of a number of factors that influence the subjective perception of the validity of knowledge
- Two aspects of the perceived relevance
 - the tutor's awareness and understanding of imported concepts
 - the tutor's awareness and understanding of the local reality and its demands
- The level of enmity towards Western ideas was low - 10% of respondents. This suggests that the “not-invented-here” syndrome was not a strong factor shaping the attitude of the academics.

What was lacking

- Exposure to means that could allow to get the feeling of the context
 - regular use of original scholarly and professional literature
 - regular consultation with foreign colleagues
 - native lexis capable of handling modern management know-how
- Understanding of the economic realities in their own countries
 - a third of respondents in Belarus had had no work experience outside the university sector
 - absence of authoritative indigenous research
 - mass media was found to play a disproportionate role as a supplier of information used by academics for scholarly and teaching purposes

Relevance is relative

- Relevance is relative and subjective and the competence and worldview of the gatekeeper are critical for relevance discovery.
- Lack of common experience with respect to 'old' and 'new' knowledge removes salient clues enabling sensemaking: despite modern communication techniques, the flow of knowledge is hampered because the tacit elements of knowledge cannot be articulated and shared by means of codification
- In the absence of a common field of experience the validation of imported social knowledge by the recipient is, in a sense, an act of faith because some evidence that confirms its relevance cannot be reproduced locally

Implications

- Establishing the relevance of imported knowledge is necessarily a prolonged process that takes more time than is needed to introduce the formal attributes of a new knowledge paradigm (course content, textbooks, professional literature, etc.)
- The prominence of contextualisation as an enabler of relevance has established itself very strongly as an outcome of our study
- Practical implication
 - the demonstration of the boundaries of expertise in situations in which superficial similarity may disguise substantial discrepancy, calling for willingness to question existing assumptions in both business and learning
 - under certain circumstances the contextualisation of 'new' knowledge acquires the characteristic of knowledge creation and therefore benefit from interaction between experts in source and recipient countries

Internal conflict

- The role of the tutor as a gatekeeper for imported knowledge has an internal conflict
 - the tutor is expected to provide those elements of social experience that instils imported information with meaning by interpreting it in reference to a particular paradigm
 - This may be achieved either by presenting to the audience a mental model of the context in which knowledge was created originally or by reconceptualising knowledge to make it more relevant to the actual context in the recipient country.
 - The *first option* may help maintaining the integrity of knowledge, but at the cost of undermining its relevance. The *second option* puts the tutor on the path of 'creative destruction' of knowledge when relevance is enhanced through the rethinking and, hence, inevitably some degree of distortion of the original concept-message.

Creative destruction

- Without the backing provided by inspired interpretation that puts imported concepts in the context of local realities business knowledge transfer is more likely to remain a formality than become a powerful tool of changing existing practices as, deprived of context, knowledge cannot fully reveal its social relevance.