Managing Knowledge in Organizations: An Integrative Framework and Review of Emerging Themes

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In this concluding article to the Management Science special issue on “Managing Knowledge in Organizations: Creating, Retaining, and Transferring Knowledge,” we provide an integrative framework for organizing the literature on knowledge management. The framework has two dimensions. The knowledge management outcomes of knowledge creation, retention, and transfer are represented along one dimension. Properties of the context within which knowledge management occurs are represented on the other dimension. These properties, which affect knowledge management outcomes, can be organized according to whether they are properties of a unit (e.g., individual, group, organization) involved in knowledge management, properties of relationships between units or properties of the knowledge itself. The framework is used to identify where research findings about knowledge management converge and where gaps in our understanding exist. The article discusses mechanisms of knowledge management and how those mechanisms affect a unit’s ability to create, retain and transfer knowledge. Emerging themes in the literature on knowledge management are identified. Directions for future research are suggested.

(Knowledge Management; Organizational Learning; Knowledge Transfer; Innovation; Organizational Memory)

Introduction

Research on the topics of organizational learning and knowledge management has enjoyed an extended and prosperous history. The importance of these concepts for understanding the coordination of organizational activity can be traced back to the early writings of such influential thinkers as Adam Smith, who described the pin-making example as an illustration of how specialization promoted experience-based learning (Smith 1776/1937); Alfred Marshall, who argued that good ideas are quickly picked up and discussed by others in regional agglomerations (Marshall 1920); and Max Weber, who described the ability of bureaucracies to learn from experience (Weber 1922/1978). It was the Carnegie school, best exemplified by the work of Richard M. Cyert and James G. March (Cyert and March 1963), that transformed these rudimentary and largely anecdotal observations into a formal theory of organizational learning and knowledge management, however. Four decades later, the field is characterized by a wealth of empirical evidence and a wide array of theoretical perspectives.

The highly differentiated nature of organizational learning and knowledge management is a hallmark of the field and is evident in the multitude of disciplinary perspectives brought to bear on the topic. As we noted in the introduction to this special issue, research on organizational learning and knowledge management spans the disciplines of economics, information systems, organizational behavior and...