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Knowledge transfer in sport event management teams

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Abstract

The authors investigate how knowledge transfer occurs in the fast-paced and highly demanding operational environment of mega event teams. Mega event teams are structured around the purpose of a specific project, often in a setting that is characterised by individuals working intensively together on a unique project, over a fixed set time period. Using social network analysis (SNA), the authors examine the key individuals and enabling contextual factors in the process of knowledge transfer using evidence in the case of the Asian Games (2010). Results will provide exploratory evidence on factors that contribute to knowledge transfer and ultimately impacts on organisational success.

Key Words: Knowledge Transfer, Social Network Analysis, Mega Event Teams, Complex Organisations

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Introduction

Although the argument that knowledge transfer leads to increased organisational success has been investigated (Alavi 2001; Kogut 1992, 1993; Tsai 2001), very little is known about how event organisers manage knowledge transfer within their working teams. Knowledge transfer in mega-events, have limited coverage from organisational behaviour and strategic management literature, however, this type of research is growing in event studies (Getz 2012). Hence, further research is needed to obtain "an understanding of the unique and collective features of managing major sport event complexities" (Emery 2010:168), as research on "process and actors in knowledge creation for event tourism is largely absent" (Getz 2008:419).

Knowledge as a competitive factor and the ability to absorb information has been recognized as a significant source of creating value in many industries (Argote & Ingram 2000; Haas & Hansen 2007). Thus, studies explored how organisations manage, exploit and nourish their knowledge in order to receive a competitive advantage (Alavi & Leidern 2001; Closs et al. 2008; Massa & Testa 2009). With knowledge creation in firms comes an increase of a skilled base workforce. It enables the organisation to react on change and most importantly, recognises learning as the enabler for innovation (Brink et al. 2002). Knowledge is consequently one of the key strategies to stay competitive in any fast changing service sector, and in particular for event management organisations (Emery 2010).

The aim of this project is to contribute to a better understanding how to effectively manage learning within teams and contribute to event success. This developing paper will investigate knowledge transfer in major-event operational teams within the Guangzhou Asian Games. It will provide a review of the event management literature, discussion on the knowledge diffusion process and a review of the success factors that enable knowledge transfer. The use of social network analysis (SNA) will be addressed with an emphasis on the method choice, design and execution.

Theoretical Background

Event Organisations

Event organisations carry out their operations in a very complex service environment specifically in terms of their organisational design and the nature of mega-event team coordination (Pemsel & Mueller 2012; Yeoman et al. 2012). The increased complexity results in event organisations usually operating under a large amount of uncertainty (i.e., number of participants, associated tasks, time). The demands of successfully operating and managing a mega-event require a strong working knowledge on the management of their stakeholders (e.g., their host organisation, their host community/country, their sponsors and the media). Their external environment is fast changing environment, and they face unpredictable operational challenges (Allen et al. 2006; Tum et al. 2006; Wrathall & Gee 2011; Yeoman et al. 2012).

Their short-term orientation is similar to 'project-based organisations (PBO)', which are defined as institutions "in which the project is the primary unit for production organisation, innovation, and competition" (Hobday 2000:874). Furthermore, they are tackling operational tasks that are difficult to standardise, as every event is unique (Pemsel & Mueller 2012; Thiry & Deguire 2007).

The purpose of existence for event organisations is to design and execute tasks using developed team structures that often differ from traditional functional structured or matrix organisation (Hobday 2000), thus mega-events operate more like 'project-based organisations. A variety of authors highlight the specific importance of human resources management in event organisations (Hanlon & Jago 2004; Van der Wagen 2006) as they are more frequently challenged with human resources related issues than other organisational settings (i.e., in terms of requirements for training, staff motivation) (Wrathall & Gee 2011).

Event teams can also be exemplified as high performing project based teams, with the high need to exchange knowledge. Project based organisations are considered to be advantaged to traditional firms (e.g. functional or matrix organisations) as they are more innovative, and more capable of absorbing different types of knowledge. Also they are seen to be coping well with uncertainties and accomplishing complex tasks. On the contrary those organisations are less successful in managing routine tasks, and in producing economies of scale (Hobday 2000).

Knowledge Transfer in Project-Based Event Organisations

Studies have shown that knowledge transfer in teams leads to higher innovation, better processes and practices and a better overview over the entire firm's strategy (Mäkelä & Brewster 2009). In terms of their knowledge transfer performance, researchers remain unclear if short-termed project organisations are advantaged. Hobday's (2000) study found that project based organisations are good in absorbing knowledge, whereas another study found issues for project based organisations around integrating new knowledge: Thiry and Deguire (2007:649) see the integration of knowledge in those short-term oriented firms as

rather difficult and problematic: "project-based organisations are struggling to integrate knowledge and structures and (.) projects are often viewed as singular ventures."

Event teams work intensively together for a specific amount of time; hence knowledge is rather kept inside the team and is not often passed on for future use nor evaluated after the experience of its use. For the organisational environment of those project teams it therefore can be difficult to absorb knowledge from inside the event team, as project boundaries are clearly set (Bartsch et al. 2013). The problem however is that it is crucial for event teams to pass on their knowledge, as the Asian Games event is a recurring event and knowledge needs to be transferred to the next project team.

Forms of knowledge that is usually required to be transferred in order to improve the organisation's success can be summarised into five clusters: (1) Process knowledge (i.e., information about steps and procedures), (2) subject matter knowledge (Haas & Hansen 2007), (3) information on organisational issues and attributes (i.e., norms and policies), (4) performance information related to specific tasks and (5) information on role and responsibilities related topics (Wolfe Morrison 2002). The diffusion process of this information starts with the individual's knowledge that is spread and communicated towards groups and teams; and further onwards shared with, and absorbed by the entire organisation. Knowledge-based theory of organisations suggests that "knowledge is viewed as residing within the individual, and the primary role of the organization is knowledge application rather than knowledge creation." (Grant 1996:109).

Organisational behaviour theory perceives learning as an ongoing change process, in which individuals learn and then decide to share their knowledge with the organisation to finally enable the organisation's learning and their progress in competence building (Borgatti & Carboni 2007). The transfer of knowledge resembles the traditional communication process influenced by sender, receiver, and the chosen channel. Formulated as a management process, the input consists of the individual's information and when processed leads to the output of organisational competence (Haas and Hansen 2007; Mäkelä & Brewster 2009). Consequently, each of these process components is of high importance for organisations' leaders, as the output suggests impacts on organisational success.

Research Questions and Method

There are two major research questions that emerged after the synthesis of the literature:

RQ 1. How is information transferred within the specific organisational structural setting of event teams?

RQ 2. What are the key enablers of knowledge transfer in this mega-sport-event setting? (And to what extend are contextual factors such as trust, shared cognitive ground, collegiality and organisational culture relevant to stimulate or hinder knowledge transfer)?

Two instruments were developed and used within the proposed study. Specifically, the semi-structured interview guide (Patton 2002) and the social network analysis survey designed as per Borgatti and Carboni (2007). The semi-structured interview guide is composed of open-ended questions designed to assess the individual experiences and the perceptions of network relationships within a mega-sport event environment. The items were validated through an expert panel and were designed as a semi-structured guide to allow for further probing on the specifics related allowing a greater insight on the perceptions of the mega-sport event team members on the relationships within the various networks, correlatives, and outcomes of network interaction (Patton 2002).

The social network analysis survey assesses network ties to be used in calculating network metrics. Network metrics will include the measuring distance, density and centrality within the network (Wasserman & Galaskiewicz 1994). As the network metrics are descriptive and are measured simply as responses on the existence or non-existence of such tie (i.e., advice, friendship, trust), the instrument was validated by an expert panel (sport event managers) who examined the item relevance and face validity. Further, items representing the correlatives were taken from existing measures (e.g., organisational identification, satisfaction, organisational commitment) (e.g., Camman et al. 1983; Mael & Ashforth 1992; Meyer & Allen 1990). Review of item relevance and content validity by the research team was used as a sufficient means to address the validity of the correlatives in the social network analysis survey.

Outlook

This developing paper synthesised event management literature, discussed the knowledge diffusion process and highlighted particular success factors for knowledge transfer, relevant to event organisations. It also presented the rationale for using the method of a social network analysis (SNA) to investigate knowledge transfer. Hence this paper provides the conceptual framework for the larger project, this research is embedded in. The next step will be to analyse the obtained data to investigate how learning within mega sport events teams is managed and factors that contribute to event success. Once completed, the study will contribute significantly to a better understanding of knowledge transfer in complex, faced-paced organisations.

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