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Knowledge Management and the Learning Organisation Constitute New Means for the Managerial Appropriation of the Knowledge and Skills of Workers

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Abstract

This paper investigates into what extent, and in what ways, Knowledge Management (KM) and Learning Organisation (LO) constitute new means for the managerial appropriation of the knowledge and skills of workers.

Keywords

Knowledge management, skills, organisations, education

I. Introduction

Knowledge Management and Learning Organisation are phenomena that "are understood to have arisen as a response to the new socio-economic exigencies of the post-war to Millennium era" (CLMS, M2C, U5: 6). On the one hand, LO aims to create, improve and maximise the learning of the organisation while on the other hand, KM is focused on how the knowledge is distributed and transferred within the organisation. Both LO and KM deal with learning, knowledge and skills.

For the purpose of this analysis the authors judges essential to refer to the meaning of managerial appropriation of the knowledge and skills of workers. The term appropriation is originated from the work of Marx (1977) and Braverman (1974, 1998).
Marx supported that capitalism makes workers to be alienated from their creative humanistic nature and be seen as products. "The product of labour is labour which has been embodied in an object, which has become material: it is the objectification of labour" while "appropriation appears as estrangement, as alienation" (Marx, 1977: 68, 79). According to Ashley and Plesch (2002) appropriation is connected to the act of taking something and making it a personal property which in turn leads to gain power.

Similarly to Marx's theory, it is the analysis of labour process of Braverman. Appropriation for Braverman (1974) meant the process of deskilling and subordination of labour. A large part of Braverman's argument based on the "deskilling" of jobs in a capitalist economy is a systematic effort to more efficiently control and coordination of the labor force to maximize profit. He believes that technology cannot only develop production but it can also help the management control. According to Noble and Lupton (1998), the result is on the one hand that the workers are deskilled, separated from their knowledge and skills, and on the other hand that management can manage and control them more easily. In other words, the term of appropriation has to do with the taking away skills and knowledge from the workers in order to become more manageable and controllable.

Additionally, the extent to which an organisation is active in encouraging and facilitating the appropriation of knowledge by and from its individual professional workers is referred to by Brown and Starkey's (1994) as organisational "information consciousness".

II. Literature Review

A. Knowledge and Knowledge Management

Knowledge is a very complicated term and therefore very difficult to determine. According to McDermott (1999), the majority of people have difficulties in describing with words what they already know. Nobody can see knowledge and usually it only comes to mind when people need to give a solution to a problem or answer a question. Knowledge is an element that helps the organisations to differentiate themselves from their competitors. Davenport and Klahr (1998), Stewart (1997), Swan and Newell (2000) pointed out that knowledge is necessary for an organisation in order to gain competitive advantage in the global business area.

The first given definition of knowledge, originates from Plato (1953), who supported that knowledge is "justified belief", an opinion supported also by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995). A recent popular definition of knowledge is given by Davenport and Prusak (1998) who argued that knowledge comprises of a wide blend of contextual qualities and experiences which set the basis for interesting and analysing new relevant (experiential) data, that is born and processed by the knowers; it is broadly applied in organisation's texts and practices.

A recent and popular phenomenon in business is the idea of Knowledge Management, in other words the management of knowledge. There are many advocators who support that the success of the organisation is linked to KM (Bollinger and Smith 2001; Gurteen 1998; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). KM includes organisational learning, strategic management, information systems and innovation (Alvesson and Karreman, 2001).

There are overlapping and competing definitions about the term of KM (Lopez et al., 2004). Nevertheless, this study presents the most relevant definitions. "KM is defined as a tool in managing the transfer of knowledge within an organisation" (Nor, 2004: 4). Offsey (1997) defines KM as a general procedure of detecting, transferring and more capably using information and skills within an organisation. The authors tends to agree with the definition of KM as given by O' Dell and Jackson: "KM is a conscious strategy of getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time and helping people share and put information into action in ways that strive to improve organisational performance" (1998: 4).

B. Learning and Learning Organisation

Learning is a term that is used to describe a human function. Some authors argued that there are contradiction and ambiguity between the terms learning and organisation (Weick and Westley, 1996; Prange, 1999). The organisation cannot have memory, cannot learn or have emotions like a human. So, how an organisation can be named as a learning one? By the same way, is it learning an individual function or can be seen as an organisational one?

Considering the following definitions of the terms, we support that the juxtaposition of learning and organisation can be accomplished. The definition of Learning Organisation refers that the learning is connected with the members of organisation (individuals) hence it can be argued that it has a human substance. "Organisation can be seen as more than the sum of their individual or collective parts" (Vince, 2001: 1330).

Although there are different types of learning, for the purpose of this study the authors will refer to individual and organisational learning. Individual learning obtains skills and knowledge via the support of communication and the formation of learning opportunities (Senge, 2003). However, the learning became also a social, collaborative and organisational process (Slotte et al., 2004). According to Edmondson and Moinggeon (1998), organisational learning is the procedure by which the members of an organisation vigorously use data in order to change the behaviour of the employees as to promote the alteration of the company. Workplace learning is a set of procedures which take place in specific work environment and targets to the integration of skills, values and knowledge of individuals and teams, by modifying their behaviour (Garavan et al., 2002).

The term of LO can be found also in bibliography under the names "workplace culture" (Weldy, 2009: 60) and "learning company" (Pedler et al., 1997: 3). Many scholars dealt with the phenomenon of LO (Ratner, 1997; Wheatley, 1999; Argyris, 1994; Pedler et al., 1997; Schon, 1983). However, the concept of LO was widely spread by Peter Senge. According to Senge (1990), LO is the organisation where the capacities of people can constantly be expanded in that way that new desirable results are created and innovative patterns of thinking are being developed; the capacity of people leads to the appreciation of the importance of learning together. Moreover, Watkins and Marsick (1996) defined LO as a full worker's participation in a cooperatively conducted procedure, of which any accountable modification is based on common principles and values. Finally, Garvin (1993) has defined LO as an organisation expert in creating, acquiring and transferring knowledge. This is a definition which clearly shows the connection between LO and KM.

III. Analysis and Discussion

A. KM and LO as new means of managerial appropriation of knowledge and skills of workers

Leadbeater (2000) supported that companies must invest not just in new technologies to improve their production but also to the flow of knowledge. According to Senge (1990) an organisation has to be good in knowledge appropriation. In view of author's research, knowledge management and learning organisation indeed constitute new means for the managerial appropriation of the knowledge and skills of workers.

In the following section the authors supports the aforementioned argument. The authors presents in which ways the LO and KM help the promotion of the appropriate management of worker's skills and knowledge. The authors refers at the same time to both LO and KM, since "LO requires KM, and KM in turn assumes a LO" (Aggestam, 2006: 297). Furthermore, according to Van Gigch's (1991), a LO targets to the development of learning which generates new knowledge. Therefore, the new knowledge needs

to be effectively managed by KM. As it is evidenced, the general system is the LO, while the sub system -the core- is the KM. Consequently, LO and KM are interrelated and coexistent.

Denning (2009) suggested that KM is a more holistic way of understanding and taking advantage of the knowledge in doing and managing the job, as well as a guideline for people and enterprises in handling the complexity of modern economical environment. KM targets to the best utilisation of intellectual capital, knowledge and skills of the employees or knowledge of the organisation (Cummings, 2001; Atkociuniene et al., 2006). In other words, KM, by its definition, aims to the appropriation of the skills of workers.

Additionally, KM is very similar to the scientific management. According to Braverman (1974: 86), scientific management "is a theory which is nothing less than the explicit verbalization of the capitalist mode of production". Taylor (1911) proposed that scientific management's application was adjacent on a high level of the control of management over employee work practices, by deskilling of the worker and the dehumanization of the workplace. Considering the literature, KM also includes emphasis on efficiency, redistribution of power and deskilling processes from workers to empowered individuals. KM seems that when skills belong to the company as a whole, they can construct competitive advantage of the organisation (Stewart, 1997). Additionally, considering Braverman's view, Lewis (2007: 400) quoted that "technical features of production become dominated by the social features introduced by the capitalist, who takes away the power held by the worker by privileging only those skills needed for production". It is clearly seen that KM can be a mean of managerial appropriation of knowledge and skills of employees.

Knowledge managers appropriate the knowledge and skills of workers by power relations. According to Foucault (1980) knowledge contributes to the exercise of power, while at the same time the exercise of power makes knowledge possible. He supported that knowledge is not an innocent tool but gives opportunity for the exercise of power. Similarly, the research of Carter and Scarbrough (2001) argued that the power is the heart of knowledge management. Power relations help managers to moderate how learning takes place in an organisation and consequently to control the knowledge and skills of workers. "Power relations (politics) moderate how learning and change does or does not happen in organisation"(Vince, 2001: 1331). Similarly, Duncan and Weiss (1979) supported that political processes of a LO associated with learning.

In more detail, the authors refers to the theory of Braverman which provides a significant starting point in understanding the importance of control in management. Braverman (1974) supported that control is the central concept of all management systems. He used the technology in order to transfer control over the work practice from workers to management. "It is essential for the capitalist that control over the process pass from the hands of the worker into his own" (Braverman, 1974: 58). Using this control, the managers transfer and appropriate the knowledge of workers.

According to Alvesson and Karreman (2001) one of the main objects of focus of management is the mind of the employees. Managers try to indirectly affect the behaviour of workers via

beliefs, values and norms. Normative control plays a significant role to this objective. Kunda (1992) argued that normative control is a mean for directing the endeavour of workers by controlling their thoughts, experiences and actions. Authors believe that normative control is a smart way of directing the knowledge and skills of workers in order to serve organisation's interest.

At this point, it would be an omission if the authors did not refer to the disciplines by Senge (1990). He proposed five disciplines which are necessary for an enterprise in order to become a LO; the personal mastery: a process by which people are committed to the lifelong learning; the mental models: models that deal with the way that we see the world and they are revealed when people expose their thinking to others in order to be recognised and understood; the shared vision: it concerns the development of a common consensus and therefore a common organisational vision. The systems thinking: "involves the recognition and conceptual accommodation of the fact that all things are inter-connected and inter-dependent" (CLMS, M2, CU2: 6). These disciplines are created by the LO in order to control the human capital by using at the same time the personal visions of workers for the sake of the organisation.

Moreover, Dixon (1998) pointed out that LO is described by democratic and distributed power depended on the knowledge that belongs to all members of the organisation. Learning organisation creates a control system via its own learning culture. The members of a LO share the same values, visions and purposes aiming to a successful LO (Bhatt, 2001). LO presented as a workplace where members can find human affection, harmony in human relationships, mutual respect and personal fulfilment. One of the oldest models of KM is the community of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991), which is also supported by the LO. Wenger (1999: 4) defined community of practice as "a group of people informally bound by a shared practice related to a set of problems". In other words, the organisation develops an organisational culture which promotes the collaboration and communication, the mutual understanding and the interpersonal relationships.

As a matter of fact, LO seems to be an organisation with humanistic values. The purpose of the LO is to develop a specific behaviour or learning environment among the employees of the organisation (Dodgson, 1993; Thomsen and Hoest, 2001). According to Handy (1995) this kind of organisation generates the desire of its staff for learning and cooperation. This is a convenient factor for those in powerful positions who can promote organisational culture in such way that would serve their interest. Nicolini and Meznar (1995) supported that people in powerful positions might use the formation of shared values and the common understanding in order to control over the managerial members. Undoubtedly, when the organisational culture is set up in a manner that serves organisational interests, it can very easily mislead the workers and appropriate their knowledge.

Moreover, organisational culture in many cases promotes attractive reward systems for promoting knowledge sharing among colleagues (Swan et al., 1999; Smith 2001). The rewards might be bonus on salary, day off or vouchers. It is logical that many workers are tempted by the offers and they share more easily their knowledge with other employees. Thus, one can say that it is a tricky way, designed by the company, in order to exploit in an easy manner the knowledge of its workers.

Additionally, an example of managers' power and control is micromanagement. "Micromanagement is a classic exercise of surplus power through which management seeks to control all the actions of subordinates […] and control all information flow through hierarchical channels" (Owenby, 2002: 56). By controlling the information flow, managers control and appropriate at the same time the knowledge and skills of the workers. The network model of KM develops network structures in order to share and transfer knowledge and therefore to control its flow (Swan and Newell, 2000). This model represents an appropriate management model which manages the knowledge of workers.

Another important feature is the information technology, based on the fact that the information runs freely and this helps the knowledge workers to transfer it around the enterprise. According to Nor (2004), knowledge workers can be employees, partners, consultants and contractors. They are mobile (i. e. in hotels, on the road) or stationary (i. e. working from office or home). They "are expected to create and share intellectual property freely within the borders of the organisation, but must not take that property out of bounds" (Snell, 2001: 325). This is a manner by which management try to capture the experience and the skills of workers.

KM uses high technological networks like File Maker, Lotus Notes and Intranet (Nor, 2004) which help the workers to capture knowledge and be more creative. According to Ciborra and Patriotta (1996), communication technologies are very significant due to the fact that they supply organisations with new technology that can run globally by connecting employees/users to the network of the organisation. KM trains the employees to the new technologies, because it is a mean by which it can appropriate the knowledge of the workers in its databases.

Furthermore, top managers dominate the creation of meaning and the processes of learning in organisations (Daft and Weick, 1984). According to Weldy (2009), training and education of the people of an organisation is one of the major keys for the success of a LO. Thus, managers promote strategic practices that target to the training of the employees and which can offer knowledge and develop the skills of the employees. Kramlinger (1992) claimed that training is an essential part of the organisation and it should be redefined according to the methods of learning and the organisational changes. "Training is important so that members of the organisation learn, retain, and apply valuable skills and knowledge to improve performance" (Weldy, 2009: 62). Nevertheless, training and educational programs serve the interest of the organisation.

Despite the fact that, practitioners try to understand learners' needs prior the implementation of any learning course, according to Owenby (2002) the learning programmes are designed in favour of dominant power interests. Thus, managers organised the training programs and the learning objectives of the organisation by giving limited importance to workers' needs. The strategic management of training development and management, "ensure the full utilization of the knowledge and skills of employees" (Garavan et al., 1995: 6). In other words, learning serves the interest of the organisation and targets to the appropriation of knowledge and skills which can promote organisational goals. Managers use the training programmes in order to control the worker's knowledge.

Additionally, power is related to emotion. Besides, as Knights and McCabe (1999) reported the power is inside the human being and apparently cannot be detached from relations and emotions. Many researchers (Hirschhorn 1988; Hoggett, 1992; Obholzer, 1999) argued that emotion plays a significant role in organisation. According to Vince (2001) the connection of emotion and power - called establishment - is a controlling force in the hands of managers. Therefore, an establishment pursues to contain learning that can be affected by power relations and then be both explored and exploited (March, 1996). Exploitation of learning is in other words, the exploitation of workers' knowledge and in turn the appropriation of it.

The organisational culture that is controlled by managers might lead to workers' exploitation and conformity (Coopey, 1995; Armstrong, 2000). Despite the fact that LO promises the participation of employees by promoting learning at all levels, it can actually direct the learning process by promoting specific kinds of knowledge and skills. New knowledge sometimes is limited because it might not be connected to the established norms of the organisation (Hendry, 1996). The workers would learn based on the directions given by organisation and therefore they will get knowledge that can serve its needs. At the same time, the members of the organisation are leaded to learn in order to enhance the organisational goals without even knowing the validity of them.

Furthermore, according to Driver (2002) LO can deceive the workers by fastening them to purposes and visions that seem to be for their own good but, in reality, they are for the sake of the organisations. It is evidently reported that the ideology of a LO can be a strong managerial tool to motivate the productivity of learners (Marsick and Watkins, 1999; Easterby-Smith, 1997). Indeed, when the workers believe that they work for their own development and progress they are more productive. By this way, the organisation deceives the employees and appropriate their knowledge and skills in order to increase its efficiency and output. Of course, there are advocators, such as Senge (1990), who deny to accept that there are political procedures, which can challenge the humanistic concept of a LO and generate exploitation, deception and abuse. Nevertheless, it should be apparent to anyone reading the literature that the aforementioned issues happen and serve organisational power and control.

However, it is evident from the literature that there are some obstacles in the appropriation of knowledge management and skills of workers. This study presents the major ones in the following section.

The most important difficulty is the objectivity of knowledge and skills. Alvesson and Karreman (2001: 999) quoted that "KM draws much of its power from the idea that knowledge reliably can be separated from the individual and thus stored and retrieved". However, are knowledge and skills products that can be separated from the worker? Habermas (1972) argued that knowledge is a product of intentional human activity. On the contrary, the authors believe that knowledge and skills are not products, they do not belong to the organisation but are part of the individual. The transfer of knowledge inside the organisation can be seen as the passage of some of the knowledge from one employee to another. However, the use of technology can help to the appropriation of a part of knowledge. According to Hansen et al. (1999: 107) "knowledge is carefully codified and stored in databases, where

it can be accessed and used easily by anyone in the company". As the authors will refer shortly, learning and extraction of knowledge is not an easy matter.

According to Vince (2001) study, there are emotions and power relations that restrict learning. "Learning is simultaneously likely to be both desired and avoided" (Vince, 2001: 1345). Sometimes, the empowered individuals of the organisation have different opinion about new knowledge and organisational change. Thus, they try to block learning and change. In more particular, emotions like mistrust, envy, fear about conflict and anxiety about failure make the managers to feel threatenen and therefore perform defensively.

Moreover, regarding Foucault (1980) workers have the power to resist, an important factor of Marxist perspective, while Braverman (1976) seemed to underestimate and ignore it in his labour theory. Some workers resist espousing a common understanding of the world because they do not accept that there is not a trace of diversity in the whole organisation. In many cases, learning can be a painful experience for organisational members (Driver, 2002). Workers may keep back information because of the fear of being wrong (Goleman, 1998). According to Bechtold (2000), employees feel unhappy and reluctant to share their deepest thoughts and knowledge with the other employees. They do not want to share their covert skills because they might be jealous and insecure. Sometimes, some expert workers refuse to provide guidance and support to the newcomers, because they feel that they may loose their status or be displaced (Moore, 1986; Lave and Wenger, 1991). For example, at the author's working environment, a teacher whose students have always success in the exams, refuse to become a mentor of a newcomer teacher. She claims that her knowledge and skills are her gifts, and she would not share them with anyone.

Furthermore, some workers are suspicious and have negative feelings for learning because they "may question whether they are learning to transform the organisation or rather learning to be transformed by the organisation" (Driver, 2002: 43). In other words, they understand the power control system of the organisation and try to avoid it. Similarly, Owenby (2002) referred that workers deny taking part in learning programmes which are formulated by others and have no relation with their personal improvement.

In the same vein, Foucault (1980) argued that there is tension between the individuals who wish to chase an individual career and the structural restrictions imposed on them by virtue of the organisational context they are in. According to Senge (1990), via personal mastery the employees are encouraged to chase their higher aspirations, get excited about their work and develop lifelong learning. It gives the opportunity to workers to have personal vision and therefore to promote their career. Workers who prefer to promote their career and have personal development are more similar to resist on management policies and power control. This is an important obstacle for the managerial appropriation of knowledge and skills.

Additionally, another problem is the difficulty to make the tacit knowledge explicit. Explicit knowledge defined as "what can be expressed in formal and systematic language and shared in the form of data, scientific formulae, specifications, manuals and

suchlike" (Nonaka et al., 2000: 7). Tacit knowledge is "highly personal and hard to formalise deeply rooted in action, procedures, routines, commitment, ideas, values and emotions" (Nonaka et al., 2000: 7). According to Van Zolingen et al. (2001) study, there is poor knowledge exchange regarding work experience and skills. The majority of the knowledge generated from experience is tacit. It is on the head of the employees and it disappears in a staff turnover. Knowledge that is tacit is less teachable and observable and it is more difficult to detach it from the employee. According to Spencer and Grant (1996) explicit knowledge is transferred via communication while tacit knowledge is revealed through application. Thus, skills cannot be an explicit knowledge, except if mentoring and technical means such as videotaping took place (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Day, 2001) or the knowledge workers, as it is aforementioned, are highly skilled workers.

Finally, the authors believe that another important difficulty is the language. To share and appropriate knowledge, employees need to know the language in which the knowledge is expressed. On the one hand, workers need to know the international accepted spoken language, English, while on the other hand, they have to know more specific language such as technical language; statistics and blueprints. The latter one is difficult and expensive to be learned and used by every worker. Thus, it can be a very significant obstacle in appropriating workers' knowledge and skills.

At this point, the authors have completed the support of their argument. They presented in which ways the LO and KM appropriate the knowledge of the workers and the difficulties that hinder the appropriation. In the following section theypresent their main recommendations.

IV. Conclusion
Learning organisation is one where people develop their capacity to learn and gain knowledge. Knowledge management refers to how an organisation manages that knowledge. Both phenomena are directly related to the appropriation of knowledge.

Despite the aforementioned obstacles, this analysis has very clearly found that knowledge management and learning organisation can constitute new means for managerial appropriation of worker's knowledge and skills. In other words, they can gain the organisational information consciousness of the organisation. Nevertheless, the authors believes that deskilling, exploitation and manipulation of employees does not lead to a morale improvement of the organisation. Managers should promote a balance between individual and organisational interests. Power control relations should serve both the individual and the organisation. On the one hand, knowledge management should promote the lifelong learning and the professional development of workers for the betterment of themselves and organisation, while on the other hand, learning organisation should maintain its humanistic purpose. The authors strongly argue that the appropriation of knowledge and the deskilling of workers is not a fair labour management.

The authors refers to some measures as proposed by Storey and Barnett (2000) which can help the KM to control its power. Top management should be continuous and be delivered in public and practical way. Moreover, managers should explain the reasons for knowledge transfer and be sure that every worker understood them. At the same time, employees should be informed about the

interrelation among knowledge sharing, creation and organisational change. Workers need to know the real goals of the organisations in order to feel safe and confident. "The organisational focus is to ensure the efficient exploitation of the technology, which is achieved by making explicit the rules, procedures and processes surrounding its use" (Kakabadse et al., 2003: 82).

However, the authors claim that the knowledge management and learning organisation cannot be free of controls. Thus, further research should be conducted in investigating how control mechanism in learning organisations can be improved in order to develop worker's learning, how managerial and employee control can be balanced and how the exploitation of knowledge and skills of deceived workers can be constrained.

The future environment of work will be more complex and the way that people gain knowledge will change. Consequently, the enterprises should develop fresh and dominant methods for learning. In order to cope with future challenges the organisations have to apply new procedures of learning. According to Sambrook and Steward (2000), the organisation should focus on how to build up a suitable learning culture in order to help the management of workplace learning. In the face of the above considerations, the authors support that a key in balancing the control and the power among the members of the organisation is to see the power as an entity that circulates never stays in anyone's mastery (Foucault, 1980).

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