

TALKING ABOUT KNOWLEDGE WITH HUMAN RESOURCE PRACTITIONERS

Katrina L. Pritchard^a
Rob B. Briner^b
Gillian Symon^c

^{a,b,c}Department of Organizational Psychology, Birkbeck College,
University of London, UK

^a eprit01@students.bbk.ac.uk

^b r.briner@bbk.ac.uk

^c g.symon@bbk.ac.uk

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Abstract

In all that has been written about organizational knowledge in recent years, the voices of organizational actors have rarely been heard. This paper presents the findings from a study that explored how Human Resource (HR) professionals talked about knowledge in relation to their practice within large organizations. They talked about areas of knowledge, the importance of knowledge and the use of knowledge in practice. The data enable us to examine the complex relationship between knowledge and practice, which variously reflects both broader occupational and specific organizational influences. Our findings provide useful insight into the application of existing theoretical ideas about knowledge. We also highlight areas that are as yet insufficiently addressed; particularly consideration of the co-existence of different constructions of knowledge, the purposes these may serve beyond the traditional view of knowledge as enhancing operational business processes and consideration of the role of affect in knowledge processes.

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1 Introduction

There is a vast array of literature pertaining to the study of knowledge in organizations, from many different research fields and orientations. Discussions about the nature and definition of knowledge itself dominate much writing. A further focus has been identifying knowledge processes within organizations, particularly how it is created, transferred and applied. Much work on knowledge management has built on these ideas with the objective of ensuring knowledge is captured and leveraged for maximum competitive advantage. More recently there has been increased emphasis on the social and situated nature of knowledge. The ideas relating to these different academic approaches to knowledge are explored in more detail in the next section of this paper. Specifically we will focus on social and situated views of knowledge

since these ideas informed the approach to our research. It is our belief that these ideas represent a significant advance in academic thinking about knowledge and its relationship to practice, particularly the key concepts of communities of practice, sensemaking and social capital. To date however, little is known about how individuals within organizations view knowledge, their perceptions of its relationship to their work or how they go about developing, sharing and interpreting knowledge in practice. We therefore take these concepts as a starting point seeking to extend existing thinking through exploring both how individuals talk about knowledge and how their descriptions of practice depict knowledge in action.

A common (and in our view fair) criticism of existing academic work is that writing about knowledge is overly conceptual and abstract (Davenport and Hall, 2002) while empirical research, although increasing, lags behind. Furthermore, empirical studies have explored a limited range of organizational contexts. Studies examining knowledge processes have focused on product development functions and manufacturing organizations, while those concerned with the social nature of knowledge have looked at the practice of highly skilled manual or craft workers. In studying HR professionals this research examines knowledge in a very different type of practice, enabling us to consider how existing ideas might apply and what new questions might be posed in this context.

2 Theory and issues

2.1 Defining knowledge

Arguments about the nature and definition of knowledge itself dominate much writing (Lam, 2000). Many authors focus on the difference between 'explicit' (easily codified, articulated and shared) and 'tacit' (personal, practical and context specific, difficult to formalize or communicate) based on Polanyi (1962; 1966). Some (Stenmark, 2000) use these as distinct categories, often implying one can label and 'manage' each differently (Robertson and Swan, 1998). Others, such as Martin et al. (2001) and Thomas et al. (2001), prefer to conceptualise a continuum between 'very explicit' (such as data and information) and 'very tacit' (including: aspects of skill, (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001); action, (Daley, 2001); judgement, (Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001); emotion and spiritual knowledge, (Linde, 2001).

More complex classifications have also been proposed. Lam (2000) provides a four-way classification that takes account of both the tacit/explicit categorisation of knowledge and whether it is individually or collectively owned resulting in a definition of knowledge as embrained (individual/explicit); encoded (collective/explicit); embodied (individual/tacit) and embedded (collective/tacit). Johnson et al.(2002) also propose a four-way classification of knowledge suggesting that categories of know-what, know-why, know-how and know-who represent a “richer taxonomy” than traditional tacit vs explicit definitions provide. There are numerous other classifications (e.g. Birkenshaw et al., 2002; Cook and Brown, 1999; Lowendahl et al., 2001), many of which use variations on similar terms.

One danger of such classifications is the ascription of stable, often somewhat abstract, characteristics to knowledge itself. They also rely on the use of oppositions to establish definitions resulting in over simplification. It is perhaps time to look at this from a different perspective: that of individuals working in organizations today. It seems probable that exploring their observations, perceptions and feelings about knowledge can extend our understanding of the concept.

2.2 Process views of knowledge

Aligned to the debate about classification is writing on knowledge processes, often linked to the concept of knowledge management. Nonaka and Takeuchi’s suggestion that “new knowledge is...created [by]... continual cycling from ...tacit to explicit...explicit to tacit” in a “knowledge spiral” (1995:70) prompted much discussion on the ways in which knowledge can be converted from one form to another. While this provides a more dynamic conceptualisation of knowledge, many writers have adopted these ideas to suggest linear processes of knowledge creation, transfer and utilisation, considering the problems of storing knowledge at each step along the way (e.g. Landry et al., 2001; Stenmark, 2000). Network analysis has provided a means of examining such processes and of identifying the utility of different types of inter-personal relationships (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Hansen, 1999; Weenig, 1999) as pathways for knowledge to be transferred (Hansen, 2002). However, such literature tends to talk in terms of knowledge as an object and assumes rational decision-making processes. Although the range and scope of research is increasing, the emphasis remains on identifying effective knowledge processes in certain ‘knowledge intensive’ organizational functions (such as product development e.g. Carlile, 2002; Posterel, 2002). There has been considerable criticism of this approach for its treatment of knowledge (Marshall and Brady, 2001) and for emphasising an “epistemology of possession” (Cook and Brown, 1999:381). As a reaction against this there

has been an increasing emphasis on the social nature of knowledge, the key concepts of which are explored in the next section.

2.3 The social nature of knowledge and knowing

Here there has been an attempt to “seek richer explanations by looking at the context and looking at knowledge via practice” (Brown and Duguid, 2001:200). In this work both “the social nature of knowledge construction” and the “socially constructed nature of knowledge itself” (Alvesson and Karreman, 2001:999) are explored. Yet, although social interaction and communication processes are clearly central to these ideas, there has been little research that looks at talk in relation to knowledge. Our research takes this approach to knowledge as its starting point, seeking to add to existing research in this area through exploring both how individuals talk about knowledge and how their descriptions of practice depict knowledge in action.

Research and thinking on the social nature of knowledge has crystallised around three key concepts: communities of practice (Brown and Duguid, 2001; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), sensemaking (Weick, 1995) and social capital (Adler and Kwon, 2002; Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998).

Communities of practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991) are groups of individuals “doing real work” (Cook and Brown, 1999:386). Here the term practice is used to refer to both the way in which work gets done and the processes of social interaction that take place (Wenger, 1998). Individuals working and socialising together determine a “locally negotiated regime of competence” (Wenger, 1998:137) in which “knowing is defined only by the context of specific practices” (Wenger, 1998:141) and underpinned by shared mental models or schemas (Druskut and Pescosolido, 2002). This has specific implications for what counts as knowledge, how certain knowledge is positioned explicitly or tacitly and the means employed for sharing such knowledge. As such knowledge and knowing are inextricably bound with practice, local context and group identity (Marshall and Brady, 2001).

However, such representations, and indeed the use of the word community, may convey a cosy, somewhat simplistic view of practice. Although the dynamics of power relations were considered important in the early writings on communities of practice (Wenger, 1998), these have remained underdeveloped in subsequent work (Contu and Willmott, 2003). It is perhaps also surprising, given the emphasis on social processes, that the role of affect in knowledge

and knowing has not been more fully considered to date. In contrast, identity has received more attention, and the reciprocal relationship between knowledge and identity is a key component of the concept of communities of practice (Wenger, 1998). This may be particularly relevant for the HR practitioners that are the subject of this study, as Alvesson (2001) suggests that knowledge and identity are particularly closely intertwined for professional groups.

Communities were originally proposed as self-organizing and informal (Wenger, 1998). However research has typically looked at groups that correspond to functions or teams within a formal organization structure, while sometimes ignoring the relationship between formal structures and the informal structures that are the focus of attention. There is also a danger that a community may be viewed as a closed entity rather than acknowledging multiple membership and overlapping communities, some of which may be embedded within a “wider epistemic community or some functional or geographic area” (Araujo, 1998:326). This is thought to be particularly the case for professional groups (Lowendahl et al., 2001) for whom “communities of practice transcend organizational walls and link up with wider occupational communities” (Araujo, 1998:327).

Descriptions of single communities of practice, often ethnographic studies, form the mainstay of research in this area (e.g. Cook and Yanow, 1993; Orr, 1996; Tsoukas and Vladimirou, 2001; Wenger, 1998). Other research has focused on the boundaries of communities of practice (Carlile, 2002; Salisbury, 2001). Many studies have focused on highly skilled manual or craftwork and on product development teams, who, it could be argued, are producing tangible outputs. As yet however, research has not applied these concepts to examine the practice of HR professionals as an example of an organizational group who also form part of an identifiable occupational community and whose outputs are less well defined and more intangible (Watson, 1977).

While the concept of communities of practices emphasises local context in understanding the social nature of knowledge, sensemaking is more specifically about process. The two are closely related and Weick's (1995) writing on sensemaking has been credited with inspiring the concept of communities of practice (Davenport and Hall, 2002). Sensemaking is the continual processes of “information seeking; meaning ascription and associated response” (O'Connell, 1998:205). Knowledge or knowing are not static or ‘out-there’ but constructed by and between individuals in response to a particular set of cues constructed and interpreted in a particular way. Storytelling and narrative are seen as particularly influential in the sensemaking process

and have been suggested as a means of enabling the sharing of knowledge that is difficult to make explicit in other forms.

While the concepts of both communities of practice and sensemaking highlight the importance of relationships, they are the primary focus in the concept of social capital. Indeed, relationships between individuals within and between firms have been a key focus of those investigating knowledge from many different perspectives particularly network analysis. However, while network analysis typically investigates flows of knowledge as a function of the configuration of the network itself, Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) suggest that such networks need to be understood as more complex social systems, sharing language and norms and in which trust and obligations are key to effective relationships.

Social capital is defined as “the goodwill available to individual or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actors’ social relations. Its effects flow from the information, influence and solidarity it makes available to the actor” (Adler and Kwon, 2002:23). The term itself though is controversial, as some suggest ‘capital’ connects with economic rather than social perspectives on the firm. Recently Smith and Kulynych (2002) suggested the term social capacity might be more appropriate.

Trust is an essential element in the functioning of social capital, although the relative importance of affect-based (from emotional bonds) and cognition-based (from good reason) trust (McAllister, 1995) has yet to be fully integrated. The concept of social capital allows us to think about knowledge and knowing within a social context in which negotiation, communication and influence (Starkey and Madan, 2001) and membership, credential, obligations and social status (Nahapiet and Ghoshal, 1998) all play a role.

The concepts of communities of practice, sensemaking and social capital are clearly closely related (Davenport and Hall, 2002). The emphasis on social processes and the focus on practice provide a new lens with which to explore the concept of knowledge at many different levels of analysis. It would also be wrong to suggest that these concepts are themselves static. Key writers continue to develop their ideas and the empirical base of research, though still small, is growing. However, there is a continuing need to expand the types of organizational and occupational contexts under consideration, to give voice to the experiences of different actors and to extend the range of social phenomena that influence knowledge in practice.

Through exploring how HR practitioners talk about knowledge and their practice this research aims to go some way towards meeting this need.

3 Methods

In this study, the topic of knowledge and the research process was broadly approached from a social constructionist perspective (Gergen, 1999). In particular this research focuses on the 'actors' and on 'practice' (Gheradi, 2001) in exploring how knowledge and knowing feature in the day-to-day work of HR practitioners using qualitative data collection and analysis methods. 16 semi-structured interviews were conducted with HR practitioners in two companies (a consultancy organization and an investment bank). Following discussions with a key contact in each company each provided a list of volunteers, resulting in a form of 'snowball sampling'. The final sample consisted of 7 participants from the consultancy and 9 from the bank. Participants experience in HR ranged from 1 to 17 years and they performed a wide variety of roles within the HR departments.

Interviews took place in the workplace, were tape-recorded and lasted approximately one hour. Two different approaches were used within each interview. Firstly, prior to the interview each participant completed a 20-statements test (Rees and Nicholson, 1994) as a primer. Participants were asked to respond to the statement "I believe a Human Resources professional should be...". This approach avoided the imposition of our own definitions of HR practice or knowledge. Individuals returned these to the first author prior to the interview session. The first half of each interview then involved a discussion of these responses with the participant, focusing on the issues relevant to our research questions. The 20-statements were not analysed as a source of data in their own right. The second approach was the utilisation of critical incident style questions to explore specific responsibilities or projects with which they were involved. This approach has been suggested as a promising technique to elicit stories about knowledge (Ambrosini and Bowman, 2001). Each interview was fully transcribed by the first author and King's (1998) description of template analysis most closely fits the approach to data analysis although the process was also similar to that described by Schultze as "tacking back and forth between data-driven analysis and theory driven deductive fitting of the data" (Schultze, 2000:26).

4 Results

This section presents the main themes emerging from our analysis of the interview data. These themes are grouped under the following broad headings: areas of knowledge, the importance of knowledge and knowledge in practice. Given the methodology adopted it is not

the intention to present these themes as a representation of an objective reality for HR practitioners but recognise they are constructed by the process undertaken, the participants themselves, our roles as researchers and indeed your own interpretation in reading these accounts. Furthermore, these themes do not reflect any attempts to present an average or dominant view.

4.1 Areas of knowledge

Not unsurprisingly participants did not talk about knowledge and knowing in terms used by academics rather they talked about what they needed to know, how this related to their role as a HR practitioner and the sorts of knowledge relevant to their day-to-day practice. The themes identified from the data are: best practice; basic HR knowledge; legal knowledge, knowing what will work and common sense. In some instances, this was illustrated with examples of how they used this knowledge to inform their own decision-making or persuade others. While this is also relevant to themes explored under the heading of knowledge in practice, it has been presented in this section to maintain the integrity and coherence of the data. Looking at both individual areas and at these presentations of knowledge as a whole provides a basis for reflecting on the influence of both professional and organizational constructions of knowledge and different images of HR practice they convey.

Best Practice

Participants talked about needing to understand and apply best practice. Individuals talked about seeking out and trying to apply best practice in their own organizations; often in terms of tools, products and solutions to be implemented. In this sense, it was positioned as concrete and tangible. Yet although many participants talked about the importance of best practice, there was not a clear or consistent definition:

“Leading thinking and application of that thought in the field.... It is a difficult thing to sort of definitively pin-down”

“I guess its just a benchmark is best practice really best or is it the best of what’s out there is the question that I would ask”

“Because they are leading they must be best practice is almost like a default....it gets attached to success I suppose... but often its not clear whether that best practice was the reason for that success”.

Best practice was also presented as dynamic, always changing and as tied to a sense of progress in the field of HR. Furthermore, best practice was sometimes positioned as aspirational, a goal that has been validated by other organizations or bodies (through awards or

publications for instance). A complex set of ideas, images and values are therefore contained within this notion of best practice.

Basic HR knowledge

There was a sense that a core of basic HR knowledge enables individuals to navigate around the world of HR and this common set of concepts, language and tools enables them to share ideas and experiences. Ideas about this basic foundation tended to be discussed in terms of possessing knowledge:

“there is a difference between what I would call a core set of knowledge that I would feel very uncomfortable not to have and then areas that I am never going to have done every single thing”

“things like performance management are sound areas that once you have learned them as a baby in HR you sort of carry those and and really the fundamentals stay the same...the tools might evolve but your basic knowledge stays the same”.

This was also mentioned when individuals described what they fell back on when faced with unfamiliar areas of work or needed to react quickly to requests from business clients. An element of both stability and security appears to be particularly associated with the ideas that are encompassed in this area of knowledge.

Legal Knowledge

The law is seen as a key area of knowledge as it underpins many areas of practice and is perceived as being valued by the business clients as something unique that HR practitioners bring to the table:

“I think there are some things like employment law that they would that your client expects you just to know”.

Some emphasised the particular and specialist HR knowledge necessary to apply the law:

“I didn’t just mean that you understand the law as its written I meant you understood how to apply ityou could have a law degree but not know how to manage a redundancy situation”

“.....you know employees are all different you might have a similar scenarios but its never quite the sameyou cant just follow the letter of the you know certain rules and guidelines ...I think nothing is black or or and white you have to use your judgement”.

Beyond this, a few participants mentioned leveraging the law to achieve their objectives with the business:

“this sounds awful- on occasions when it is difficult to persuade a manager that it’s the right way to go if you believe it isit’s a great way to back up some of the things that you are doing sometimes”.

While the objective and factual nature of the law is acknowledged, legal knowledge is presented as being significantly more than simply possessing the facts. Rather it is the art of application within HR practice that is emphasised.

Knowing what will work

When participants talked about their relationship with the business they talked about delivering solutions – tools, products and projects. Participants emphasised the importance of knowing the local context – having a sense of what will work – as being critical to the success of this delivery. Two key aspects emerged from the data. Firstly, an awareness of the local business circumstances, which seemed particularly to involve some concept of readiness for particular practices:

“I think is really just an assessment of where your business happens to be....and some individuals within the businesses are much more able to deal with some of the..... so I think you have to make that assessment in terms of which business are ready for which tools”

“the main criteria for me is how would that go down with my managers does this make sense at this stagewhen to do it who to do it with and how to place it.... knowing the people knowing the people and how far you can go and what I think is important for the process”.

Secondly, there was an emphasis on understanding the local politics:

“a lot of what you do in the job is understanding what you can influence now, what you can’t influence and will never be able to influence and what it is worth having a damn good try at and it is and its deciding which ones you are going to fight forever and get nowhere with and therefore you are just wasting your time you could be concentrating your efforts somewhere else”.

When these individuals described knowing what will work they emphasised the importance of personal judgement and experience. Thus while the focus of their work appeared to be on implementing tools and techniques, knowledge that is important for their success was also constructed as personal and specific.

Common sense

The term common sense was used in two distinct ways. Firstly there was the view that most HR practices are common sense. In using the term in this way several participants implied that

there was a shared view with their colleagues but many found it difficult when probed to define what this common sense was or how it was developed:

“normally in HR common sense works very well.....its not rocket science really its putting this probably no brainer stuff into frameworks and language”

“to us quite a lot of what we do seems like common sense”.

The second use of the term had more of an action orientation. This was talk of applying common sense to the problems that they faced:

“a little bit of common sense well probably quite a lot of common sense”.

This discussion of common sense may be related to difficulties of articulating some areas of knowledge. But it is also interesting to compare this presentation of HR knowledge with others that emerge from the data.

4.2 The importance of knowledge

Having reviewed areas of knowledge, we now move on to consider how the importance of knowledge was presented in the interviews in relation to two themes: confidence and credibility and experts and expertise.

Confidence and credibility

A sense of personal knowledge was presented as important to individuals' confidence and for building their credibility with clients. This seems to result from interaction with the client and through the application or demonstration of useful knowledge rather than any inherent property of possessing knowledge oneself:

“they [business clients] see that you have knowledge and you are able to apply that, and you do have expertise in an area then they start to trust you so the guidance and support that you give them so I think you have to have that in order to be able to build the rest of it”

“I think the knowledge gives you confidence actually....they [business clients] will see straight through if you don't know what you are talking about”.

In contrast, some individuals spoke of the feelings associated with situations in which they did not feel that they had sufficient knowledge:

“I feel very uncomfortable and exposed when I don't know necessarily the answer”

“I did feel very exposed..... you do have to make the best of the skills that you have and just get on with it”.

These and other examples suggest that considering feelings about knowledge is also important.

Experts and expertise

There was a strong sense of the importance of expertise in relation to the role of HR with the business:

“you need to bring something new to the table [with business clients] if we couldn’t provide that, if we couldn’t bring some expertise to it then forget it”.

However, individuals expressed frustration at the constraints that limited what they could actually demonstrate or deliver to the business but positioned this alongside a belief in their collective knowledge or expertise:

“we are quite lucky in this type of organization because we have a lot of resourcesI think we have plenty of expertise more expertise than we can utilise in this company”.

Working together as a group and sharing expertise was presented as a necessary and important aspect of their practice:

“I mean I am not personally an expert on succession planning or recruitment or whatever kind of initiative we come up with I am not going to be an expert on most of them so part of my role is linking in with other resources in HR”.

Individuals talking about their own expertise, however, were concerned about the legitimacy of their expert status:

“in [COMPANY] terms I ‘d probably be regarded as a bit of an expert I personally think its something I know hardly anything about”

“I think you can be seen as an expert it’s a bit of a joke you know you run two team builds and suddenly you are an expert in team building”.

Furthermore, one participant highlighted the potential downside of being labelled an expert:

“now its kind of seen as [name] is this expert..so that’s it is a bit of pressure”.

4.3 Knowledge in practice

Participants talked through specific experiences related to recent projects highlighting ways in which they developed, shared and used knowledge in practice. The themes explored in this section are: brainstorming; using trusted advisors; personal reflection and gaining exposure to new ideas.

Brainstorming

This typically involved bringing individuals together to share experience and apply this to a particular issue:

“we sat down as a team and said right what are the options available to us and we just came up with lots and lots of different scenarios and came up with what we thought was the best options I think we are probably quite arrogant in the fact that I don’t contact IPD or other national bodies to see if what we are doing is right I we just do it ourselves”.

Those who used brainstorming expressed a belief that this group process was an effective way of not only sharing knowledge but of moving the issue forward – there was a sense of progress not just discussion. Here the group is also presented as containing all the necessary answers – there is no need to look elsewhere.

Using trusted advisors

This was described as process of sense checking and using another individual as a sounding board. It involved asking questions and sharing stories and in doing so not only seeking input but also moral support:

“yes you discuss it with peers you know so as long as you discuss things in a solution oriented way then I think that’s very healthy”

“Going back to what people want I think that they want to be reassured that they might be doing the right thing...its an interesting one”

“you don’t need to get buy in from everybody but you do need to check your ideas to make sure you are not going down the wrong path ... to make sure you weren’t straying too far from what other people were thinking”.

Many different relationships were described by participants, including those with other HR practitioners inside and outside the organization as well as family and friends. Trust was seen as the key to these relationships, with some participants saying that they felt little need to verify or further investigate the feedback they gained from these relationships:

“they are best really done with through relationships I think because you get a deeper understanding...I guess that’s another reason its best done with people you know very well, because you have that relationship which helps you make that judgement”.

Two specific types of exchange warrant further comment. Firstly, a few individuals mentioned the importance of actively seeking input from those with a different point of view:

“talking to her she just brings a totally different mind set to something that can be quite traditional so talking to her is really useful”.

Secondly, several participants mentioned seeking input from those whom it was politically astute to get in front of. Although such individuals were talked about as trusted advisors, this seemed to be more about participants demonstrating or playing out their knowledge and seeking recognition:

“its finding out who you need to be in front of and its finding out how you do that and you learn quite quickly is the people that know it what are they doing and the people that are getting somewhere who are they talking to”.

Personal Reflection

While social interaction was presented as an important aspect of knowledge in practice, some participants also talked about the importance of reflection – working out what it all meant, stepping back from the detail and piecing together the way forward:

“I sit down literally in fact I sat down in this room with a piece of paper and work out all my head you know”.

This process included relating what was happening to their personal experience and what they observed others going through. There was a sense of reaching a personal judgement about the situation and the way forward. When individuals talked about this it was accompanied by a sense of frustration that in their day-to-day role finding the space and time to think was increasingly difficult:

“I think sometimes that there is so much to do on a project that you get very focused on the delivery of what you have to do rather than always stepping back and taking time to look at it from a different angle”.

Gaining exposure to new ideas

Several participants commented on the danger of becoming insular, more cynical and trapped inside the box of their own experience as their careers progressed:

“I think as you progress in your career more and more actually you rely on your experience you tend to be less good at drawing in completely independent inputs of knowledge or information”.

Some gave quite vivid stories of how attending conferences or undertaking further education had provided them with new ways of looking at old problems. Much of this was not just being exposed to new ideas but a factor of the context. Often away from the workplace, in reflective mood and sometimes inspired and motivated by the speakers, individuals talked about returning with a new lease of life:

“yes for me that [presentation] was a good boost in terms of having you know another thinking process”.

5 Conclusion

5.1 Summary of findings

Our findings enable further consideration of the complex relationship between knowledge and practice. Knowledge and knowing appear to frame practice in many ways. The broader HR community impacts concepts of core knowledge and notions of best practice, which in turn seem to influence their day-to-day work. Similarly, common sense and understanding of what works appears to impact their approach to delivery to their clients. Their individual knowledge when shared with those around them plays a key role in shaping both individual and collective identity that in turn influences practice. Practice also seems to frame their knowledge and their knowing particularly through an emphasis on informal, verbal and social processes such as brainstorming and using trusted advisors. The nature of relationships with the business also seems to influence views on valid and important knowledge (for example, the importance of legal knowledge). Sharing experience about practice seems to reinforce ideas about common sense and understandings of what will work.

The data also prompt us to reflect that in these accounts knowledge is variously described as static and dynamic, seen as objective and subjective and combines both tacit and explicit elements. This suggests it may be premature to suggest that there is a consistent or continuous view of knowledge in practice. What seems more likely is that while shared at a generic level, specific meanings of knowledge and practice may be located in a time and a place, such as an individual conversation or project activity.

Looking at participants' presentations further highlights the variety of functions that knowledge and knowing perform within practice. Different constructions of HR knowledge and different processes within practice may serve a wide range of political, professional and personal purposes in addition to the traditional view of knowledge as enhancing operational business processes. This further highlights the need to move beyond considerations of knowledge in

terms of its content or application but to examine the functions of knowledge and its construction within practice. What becomes interesting is not simply whether knowledge is apparently tacit or explicit, but when, how, why and by whom is knowledge constructed in this way.

5.2 Relating these findings to the existing literature

Academic taxonomies of knowledge that imply that there are consistent and simple differences between types of knowledge are not supported by these data. Such taxonomies do not capture the complex ways in which the participants presented knowledge nor provide a close enough link with these variations and the occasions of their use. In particular these data suggest the need for further examination of the link between talk and practice and at how and why such certain presentations of knowledge are meaningful or useful for the groups and individuals that use them.

Literature taking a process view of knowledge has typically looks at linear processes of knowledge creation, transfer and utilisation, knowledge as an object and rational decision-making processes. This research found that knowledge was sometimes discussed in terms of possession; individually or collectively; and as present or absent. Yet there was also much discussion of knowing and knowledge as interaction. These findings seem to suggest that both aspects need to be considered when examining knowledge in practice. Findings on knowledge processes do not reflect the linear view frequently presented in the literature or the emphasis on rational decision-making as driving these processes. The data contain several references to feelings about knowledge that suggests closer examination of the role of affect is necessary.

This study provides further support for the themes of “the social nature of knowledge construction” and the “socially constructed nature of knowledge” (Alvesson and Kärreman, 2001:999). One of the key additions of this study has been in exploring a different organizational context from previous studies, which in the past have particularly focused on highly skilled manual labour and on product development teams. Questions emerging from this study – such as the many different constructions of knowledge, the purposes these may serve and consideration of the role of affect in knowledge processes – may be more pertinent to the nature of HR practice, which has often been described as poorly defined and weakly positioned within organizations (Watson, 1977).

The findings of this research reflect many of the ideas behind the concept of communities of practice. As the literature suggests, knowledge appears to be closely linked to issues of identity for both individuals and the group as a whole. However, ideas emerging from this project suggest that there is need for more investigation of the impact of various knowledge constructions, particularly as there may be many conflicts or contradictions between these. Furthermore, it is clear that communities should not be regarded as closed or static entities. The practice of these HR professionals is influenced by, and in return influences, both formal and informal organizational processes and the broader occupational community to which they belong. What is interesting is the different ways in which these influences are played out in their talk about knowledge and practice. While processes of communication are seen as central to the social construction of knowledge within ideas about communities of practice, little is known about the role of talk itself in knowledge construction. This research highlights both the many different ways in which knowledge is presented through talk and the strong emphasis of verbal and social processes within practice. The findings also extend previous research in suggesting the importance of affect and highlighting the need for investigation from an individual as well as a group perspective.

It is possible to find many examples that correspond to Weick's (1995) descriptions of sensemaking in the data. In particular the data reflect the notions of the continual construction of knowledge as a both an individual and collective process. It seems particularly to support ideas of the importance of storytelling in facilitating sensemaking in complex, ill-defined contexts where codified knowledge may not readily be available. Findings also suggest there is a need to consider how the motivations of individuals and, once again, the role of affect impacts these processes.

The importance of social relationships is a key thread running through much of the data and examples support the importance of social capital as a key concept in understanding knowledge in practice. However, it also suggests the need to consider more closely the variety of relationships and the roles played within a community of practice. The data highlight many types of relationships (for example friendships, peer-relationships and professional contacts) that may, at different times and in different contexts, play different roles in creating and sharing knowledge. While trust has been identified as an essential element in the functioning of social capital this research suggests that the nature of trust in these different relationships warrants further attention.

5.3 Limitations

This study set out to answer two very broad questions that together related to a wide range of existing literature. This can be seen as both an advantage and a limitation of the study. It is possible that a narrower focus would have enabled some areas to be examined in more depth. Obviously there are many types of HR practitioners undertaking a wide range of activities and contracted via many different forms of employment. Our sample includes employees of two large HR departments and therefore the generalisability of the research to other HR practitioners may be limited. A further concern is the reliance on interview data for descriptions of HR practice however access and time limitations prevented a more ethnographic approach.

5.4 Final Remarks

Through exploring how HR professionals talk about knowledge in the context of their practice this paper provides a useful insight into the application of existing thinking about knowledge within a new organizational context. However there is much more work to be done. It is clear from these data that individuals don't only think or act with regard to knowledge; they feel about it too. They may feel empowered, pressured, confident or exposed, to highlight just a few examples from our data. It is also clear that the personal relationships between individuals are a key aspect of the social nature of knowledge. In particular how these relationships develop or change in light of the content and types of exchanges between individuals and how these relate to practice. Further investigation into the interplay between affect and knowledge therefore seems a worthwhile endeavour. Focusing on how HR practitioners talked about knowledge raises the issue of the nature of the language used. In particular it would be interesting to explore and compare the differences in talk about knowledge in general and talk about practice. This research suggests that examining how language is used in the different types of relationships and contexts experienced by HR practitioners would be a worthwhile extension of this project.

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