Organizational Knowledge, Learning and Capabilities in action: The case of the British Council

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Abstract

This paper presents the British Council's Knowledge Management strategy. It outlines how this organisation approached Knowledge Management through an attempt to engender communities of practice among strategically significant groups. Using one of these groups as an example the paper explores widely held assumptions regarding communities of practice in relation to the organisational case study as a whole. By exploring "de-generative" structures the analysis surfaces issues of individualisation and risk, and highlights how attitutes towards technology, organisations and knowledge management can affect the success of such initiatives.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Communities of practice, British Council, risk, individualisation.

Suggested track: - Communities of practice, knowledge networks and networking

Introduction

In this paper the conception, initial development and launch of a corporate Knowledge Management initiative is described. The study was initiated as the organisation in question was beginning to become concerned about the future use of its Intranet and as senior management were starting to see Knowledge Management as a potential benefit to a set of issues which had been identified as a key concern for the organisation. The research carried out was thus defined by the concerns of the organisation, matched with its significant potential to provide a useful research context in which to explore issues of Knowledge Management (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995).

The paper explores how various factors impacted upon the Knowledge Management programme. In order to analyse this intervention the paper adopts a social constructivist stance towards Knowledge Management in order to avoid the usual dichotomies

between overtly subjectivist perspectives on Knowledge Management and more conventional objectivist stances. Instead, the paper recognizes a continuum of intersubjective social consciousness (Berger & Luckman, 1966) (Schultze, 2000) as being necessary for a coherent reflection on Knowledge Management practice (Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999). Social reality is thus understood to be an ongoing dialectical process in which individuals both externalize their being into the social world, and simultaneously internalize the social world as objective reality (Berger & Luckman, 1966). The focus of this research is upon the way in which the social actions of individuals are internalized, expressed and inscribed as products of human action and on how this influences any initiative to intervene in this process. Knowledge is thus considered to be a socially constructed and emergent property of human purposeful activity and through this lens the concept of communities of practice is also explored (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998).

The British Council provided a unique organisational context within which to explore a Knowledge Management initiative. As a truly global organisation that aims to connect overseas individuals with the knowledge, culture and expertise of the UK the British Council could conventionally be described as a knowledge organisation (Newell, Robertson, Scarbrough, & Swan, 2002). Its not-for-profit status also increased its usefulness within Knowledge Management research since organisations have been less researched in this particular area (Capozzi, Lowell, & Silverman, 2003). Its global presence meant that Internet technology formed the most significant communications infrastructure within the organisation. The organisation specialises in knowledge related activities such as individual networking, teaching, organising conferences and promoting the arts and sciences. Furthermore the organisation also has similarities with the World Bank in which a widely influential Knowledge Management programme had already been undertaken by Stephen Denning (Denning, 2000) and which had influenced the British Council in its focus on the engendering of communities of practice.

As far as this research project was concerned it was decided to focus on a single research site in order to observe, in the words of Pettigrew, *"the social dramas longitudinally [in order to] provide a transparent look at the growth, evolution, transformation, and conceivably decay of an organisation over time."* (Pettigrew, 1985). Any attempt to select another field site would have detracted from this ability to observe

these dramas, and would have presented problems in comparing another organisation with the arguably unique context of the British Council.

The paper concludes by reflecting upon the case study in light of Beck's notions of risk and of individualization (Beck, 1992; Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), highlighting how the prevailing attitude of the individual towards technology, the organization and Knowledge Management affected the way people made sense of the Knowledge Management systems and of the information they presented. The paper thus contributes to the developing debate on communities of practice and Knowledge Management by describing how, within this particular case study, the interdependence of employees perceptions of each other, of the initiative and of the organization impacted upon the community, and upon the Knowledge Management programme.

Methodology

This paper draws upon the outcomes of a series of action research studies undertaken within the British Council over a three and a half year period. Action Research is an approach founded upon the premise that action brings about understanding and further that the social setting is irreducible. Such an approach is generally considered to be highly applicable to the understanding of change processes within social systems (Baskerville & Pries-Heje, 1999). The approach is relevant to the study of change initiatives through Knowledge Management because *"with the increasingly complex role of information technology as a key enabler of social change that can lead to new forms of practices, organisations and communities, the use of an action-oriented methodology should improve our understanding of such social phenomena through "doing" and learning through "experience""* (Lau, 1999). Within this paper the narrative is drawn from the researcher's direct involvement in the development of the British Council's Knowledge Management strategy. Following this involvement the research project was engaged in developing two Knowledge Management systems for the organisation. While these systems are not in themselves the focus of this paper, the interviews undertaken during that work are used to develop an overarching thesis regarding the organisation's Knowledge Management strategy. During the course of the research a large number of interviews were conducted, transcribed and analysed using Soft Systems Methodology (Checkland, 1981). These interviews are used here simply to present the case study of the overarching strategy.

This paper therefore presents a grounded account of an organisational Knowledge Management intervention on the basis of Action Research. An understanding has been extracted through a reflexive analysis of the narrative of that investigation. It is thus a post hoc reflexive account of the research project and its conclusions are drawn from the researchers' reflection upon the organisations Knowledge Management strategy.

Case study

The British Council began life in 1934 and secured its status as an independent public body, guaranteed by Royal Charter in 1940. From this point on the organisation operated at arms length from government, although central government remains its primary source of funding. The British Council of today, according to its "brand statement", is the UK's cultural relations organisation with a purpose to "*win recognition abroad for the UK's values, ideas and achievements, and to nurture lasting, mutually beneficial relationships with other countries".* The "*organisation connects people worldwide with learning opportunities and creative ideas from the UK and builds lasting relationships between the UK and other countries."* As a not-for-profit organisation it is against these aims that the organisation is judged and thus receives its funding.

The overall purpose of the British Council is to enhance the reputation of the United Kingdom in the world as a valued partner, and this purpose is achieved by creating opportunity for people on a worldwide basis. It is fundamentally an organisation focused on innovation, learning and knowledge sharing and is, therefore, an exemplar of a truly knowledge based organisation.

The organisation offers opportunities in six core areas in which it works:

- Education

- English language teaching

- Information exchange

- Arts, literature and design

- Science, engineering, technology and the environment

- Governance and human rights

The British Council has headquarters in both London and Manchester administering a network of offices overseas. In 1999 the British Council had 257 such offices, based in 110 countries. It also operated a network of student support offices in the UK, as well as offices to represent devolution in Cardiff, Edinburgh and Belfast. These offices were also a response to the need for promotion of the Council's activities within the UK where historically it had been relatively unknown (Lee, 1995).

Faced with such a diverse and geographically distributed operation, it is not surprising that the Council perceived the sharing and development of knowledge to be of paramount importance to its future success. Senior managers in the organisation had come to a realisation that the concepts and ideas of Knowledge Management presented an opportunity to deal with the organisational change required by a spending review undertaken by Government. This review had dictated that the Council must shift from a primary focus on influencing strategic decision makers overseas through close relationships with individuals, to an approach that embraced new technologies and techniques in reaching a "wider public". In achieving this goal the senior management of the organisation appreciated the need *"to design and implement measures which will encourage people working in the Council to generate and share information and knowledge in ways which advance [the organisation's] purpose and strategic objectives and will become a permanent feature of the way we work"* (internal memo 1999). In particular it was felt that there were many knowledgeable individuals working within the organisation, particularly in overseas offices, whose expertise was not being used beyond their local country.

A significant influence on this view was the belief that the organisation was structured as a *"hub and spoke".* This phrase was widely used to describe the organisation's communications and control structure in which overseas offices would generally communicate with the headquarters operation in the UK, rather than having significant contact with other overseas offices. The Knowledge Management strategy was focused upon widening this to enable more "spoke-to-spoke" communication based on the belief that the knowledge necessary to respond to this strategic change resided in the "spokes" and that the structure was thus an inhibitor to the Council becoming a learning-organisation.

Given these various perspectives the strategy came to focus on "knowledge sharing" rather than Knowledge Management, as the knowledge strategy group believed that the overall aim was the collective empowerment of such knowledge rather than the external management of knowledge as a resource.

The Knowledge Strategy Group within the British Council and, in particular, the Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO) were tasked with finding significant funds to implement a knowledge sharing programme across the whole of the organisation. The strategy was to be based on a number of themes, which mirrored closely the CKO's draft strategy on knowledge sharing:

- making the most of the technology

- building teams

- access to information

- improving quality

- putting your ideas into practice

- values and behaviours which support knowledge sharing

The approach to knowledge sharing within the Council was based upon a set of strategic needs, in particular the need to innovate new corporate practices. The ongoing focus by the CKO and the Knowledge Strategy Group on the pressures outlined above and the concern as to how Knowledge Management would contribute to the organisation's objectives, demonstrated that Knowledge Management was not being approached simply as a "fad", and this contrasted with the suggestion that many organisations had indeed embraced the subject in this way (Davenport & Grover, 2001; Galliers & Newell, 2001; Swan, Scarbrough, & Preston, 1999). Indeed it demonstrated clearly that many of the concepts of Knowledge Management appeared to resonate with the CKO's appreciation of the real problems that the organisation was facing at that time.

The knowledge sharing strategy was therefore an organised and planned response to these identified problems. The strategy consisted of three stages, directly employing concepts from the Knowledge Management field and relating these to the operating context of the organisation and its need to change. These three stages were:

- ➢ Stage 1: making the most of a new technology infrastructure being introduced into the organisation.

- ➢ Stage 2: a knowledge sharing programme to support the current organisational goals of the organisation

- ➢ Stage 3: a knowledge and learning strategy with the aim of transforming the organisation such that Knowledge Management practices are core to the organisations principles.

The first stage aimed to better exploit a recently upgraded and standardised global IT infrastructure. Its focus was on training the staff to better use the system and on developing a better corporate intranet and e-mail system.

The second strand, running concurrently with the first, was perhaps the most recognisable as a Knowledge Management initiative. Its aim was to exploit existing cross-departmental, inter-regional collaboration and to extend this behaviour across the Council in order to create a *"comprehensively networked organisation"*. A Knowledge Management team was established with the aim of *"finding the best ways of supporting group activity…Analysing the groups' knowledge needs and encouraging access by others to their skills and knowledge"* in particular using both the Internet and the Intranet as "*the main feature of the immediate future will be the growth in the use of the intranet and e-mail."* (Khalid & Marsden, 1999).

The third stage provided a longer term vision for Knowledge Management, building on the lessons from the first two stages and essentially arguing that expanding the boundaries of its activities would require the organisation to generate capacity for effectively innovating and learning a core capability of the organisation (Khalid & Marsden, 1999). "*This strand supports planning to equip the Council with the knowledge, expertise and processes required to support an increased customer base and the capacity to maintain contact with a large number of people over time"* (Khalid & Marsden, 1999). The conclusions to this paper will thus reflect on the potential of such a drive for change within the organisation.

Analysis

In order to present our grounded account of the intervention these three stages of the knowledge sharing programme are used here as layers in our analysis. Each of these stages expresses the desire to take seriously the ideas of Knowledge Management in order to change the organisation as it strived to become a truly "learning organisation" as espoused in the third stage of the strategy.

The first stage essentially focused on IT infrastructure for knowledge management – the provision of necessary information and communications infrastructure by which each individual in the organisation could effectively communicate, share documents, and access the intranet. Its focus was upon training individuals to make use of the new IT infrastructure, in particular Microsoft Outlook as an e-mail client and global address book. It was assumed that once such infrastructure was put in place, so breaking down the communications barriers between areas of the organisation, new forms of communication could emerge. Furthermore it was hoped that this would enable a shift in the social practices of the organisation to include the overseas offices in more decision making. Precedence for technology providing such a shift in the social practices of the Council's employees was demonstrated by the introduction of the fax machine and e-mail. One interviewee in South Korea recounted how the fax suddenly meant that they could send questions and post memos to London for immediate response. This facility enabled them to participate in a dialogue about planning rather than simply awaiting "orders" sent slowly via the diplomatic bag. The interviewee in South Korea recounted how "*When I first entered this office I couldn't dream of intranet or the internet or e-mail. At the time fax was marvellous, we were quite satisfied with just using the fax machine".* In contrast to this view a senior director based in London complained that the fax machine had made his job far worse because he had less time to think and was at the "beck and call" of the overseas offices. He even described how since the introduction of the fax machine he was in less control of his time and needed to respond to overseas offices more. Similarly the development of local country-websites had previously meant that the organisation's headquarters were forced to consult overseas offices about changes to the corporate website.

The second stage of the strategy, which forms the bulk of this analysis, focused on the "creation" of a greater sense of community within specific, strategically significant,

groups in the organisation. A Knowledge Management team was created and was authorised to provide technology, events, leadership and communication within those groups identified by the Chief Knowledge Officer as "requiring Knowledge Management". The focus of this action was upon engendering a situation in which communities of practice might emerge within the groups.

This second stage was based on a belief that "communities of practice" (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Wenger, 1998) would be of desirable in improving the organisation by moving beyond its hub-and-spoke structure, and therefore that it was worthwhile attempting to bring them about. Such a view was strongly supported within the Knowledge Management literature of the time which suggested that *"Companies have found that the most used, and useful, knowledge bases were integrated into the work of one or more communities… [they are] the ideal social structure for "stewarding" knowledge"* (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002). Since "communities of practice" are linked to learning, and learning is an emergent process, so it is argued that "communities of practice" are themselves emergent and evolutionary. *"They come together, they develop, they evolve, they disperse, according to the timing, the logic, the rhythms, and the social energy of their learning"* (Wenger, 1998). Wenger goes further in suggesting that there are events and perturbations which can either stabilise or destabilise a "community of practice", but that the community cannot achieve complete stability since change is an on-going part of that practice. Further that such stability (or modification) cannot be forced since *"it is a mistake to assume that practice is inherently a conservative force, and it is a mistake to assume that practice is erratic or can be modified by decree"* (Wenger, 1998). And yet for this organisation there was a desire to engender such "communities of practice" in order to achieve the strategic goals of the organisation. The aim was thus to put in place communications infrastructure (employing the Intranet development from the first stage of the Knowledge Sharing programme) which would enable communication between groups within the organisation.

In order to achieve this, the knowledge sharing team drew on Wenger's assertion that *"organisations need to cultivate communities of practice actively and systematically, for their benefit as well as the benefit of the members of the community themselves"* (Wenger et al., 2002). In achieving this organisations can create an environment in which they can prosper. For this the Knowledge Sharing team drew upon Wenger's (Wenger, 2000) suggestion to consider the following elements; events, leadership,

connectivity, membership, projects and artefacts. Each of these elements was considered in a variety of projects to engender the emergence of communities of practice among the selected strategically significant groups.

It should be noted that the knowledge management team who introduced the groupware tools did not have the authority to dictate involvement; indeed knowledge is associated with cognition and thus individuals have a choice, so it may not be possible to acquire such authority (while people may comply with Knowledge Management this compliance does not necessarily mean their knowledge is being shared (Snowden, 2000)). The Knowledge Management team attempted to encourage, rather than mandate, the development of communities from the groups of individuals based on the assumption that existing institutional structures prevented direct communication between these individuals. It was hoped that a lack of communications technology was inhibiting the evolution of "communities of practice" and that its introduction might (as suggested in some of the literature) enable the emergence of such communities (Pan & Leidner, 2003; Von-Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000; Wenger, 2001; Wenger et al., 2002; Wenger & Snyder, 2000). However it was acknowledged that other institutional factors might also be inhibiting the evolution of such a "community of practice" and would influence any such intervention.

Perhaps unsurprisingly the groupware systems, leadership and events introduced achieved success among certain groups, but were less successful or failed among others.

In particular this paper will focus on one of the interventions undertaken within this organisation which aimed to provide a groupware technology to support the most senior members of staff (so called Country Directors) in each of the 110 overseas countries the organisation operates. This system (titled CD:net) was provided as a website discussion board. A recently retired country director was employed to facilitate discussions, to act as boundary spanner (Star & Griesemer, 1989) between the community centred around CD:net and the organisations senior management, to facilitate the creation of various artefacts of the community. He was employed as "catalyst" for the emerging community of practice of country directors. Prior to its launch CD:net was strongly supported by country directors (evidenced through a survey), upon launch however it was used for a few weeks and then quickly participation dropped until it was forgotten. Using CD:net as

an example the paper will now discuss how various factors within the organisation may have inhibited the success of CD:net, and other initiatives, and indeed the wider knowledge sharing programme. In this the paper will critically evaluate the steps suggested by Wenger in "cultivating communities of practice" (Wenger et al., 2002), and so evaluate the broader knowledge sharing programme of the British Council. In particular the paper will explore how existing institutional arrangements may significantly inhibit such change programmes. In order to better understand the reasons for country director's failure to engage with the CD:net system a series of interviews were undertaken with 9 country directors.

Discussion.

Significant perhaps is that the country directors did not appear to exhibit the natural characteristics of a "community of practice". Wenger suggests that these natural characteristics include mutual engagement in similar practices, joint enterprises and a shared repertoire of knowledge (Wenger, 1998, 2000). On this basis, if the groups had been able to exhibit such characteristics prior to the Knowledge Management interventions then the likelihood of successfully encouraging the formation of a "community of practice" would have increased.

Reflecting therefore upon the intervention it appeared that the lack of engagement with CD:net by the Country Directors was perhaps not surprising: Their purposeful activity was focused on the operation of the organisation within their country and was not collectively undertaken with other Country Directors. They did not appear to have a shared repertoire of skills since they often took different approaches to their work. Finally they did not collectively develop or use artefacts associated with being a Country Director.

However one is still led to ask how it is that these individuals, undertaking broadly similar activities and generally very supportive of the Knowledge Management initiative (a questionnaire of country directors prior to CD:net's development returned a hugely supportive opinion), did not possess a far greater propensity to become a "community of practice"? Given that the British Council aimed to develop them into such a community, how might the various inhibiting social and institutional factors have been identified and then altered as part of the interventions? The interventions were undertaken in a

controlled, thoughtful manner by a team who were fully aware of the lessons from the literature on Knowledge Management. The development of the interventions was not limited by budget or by technology but only by the institutional factors which influenced and inhibited the development of "communities of practice". The question for this analysis therefore is what other factors should have been observed in order to improve the acceptance of such groupware tools in engendering such a sense of community. Therefore from post hoc interviews with those people who did, and didn't use the system the following conclusions emerged.

Discussion of stage 1: The technological infrastructure.

Failure in the technology associated with this intervention may be cited as a significant inhibitor in the emergence of a community of practice. Indeed an overemphasis on technology has been cited as an inhibitor of knowledge management in general (Galliers & Newell, 2001; Swan, Scarbrough, & Preston, 1999). Yet for this organisation technology remains the central facility for cross organisational communication, and yet such communications infrastructure are never ideal. The CD:net system was separate from the daily activity of country directors, requiring them to click on a desktop-shortcut in order to access it. It did not therefore become a habitual, comfortable and standard part of employees work as necessary for ongoing involvement with the tool (Winograd & Flores, 1986). Indeed one country director outlined that his *"first impression [was] that is was, something separate... I won't use CD:net if it is something separate from the e-mail system".* In addition to e-mail presenting a potential substitute tool for country directors to communicate (Ciborra, 1996), so the necessity to design the tool in conformance with the Intranet standards of the organisation meant that the system was perhaps perceived as a website information-board rather than a discussion space. While this technology aimed to provide the "connectivity" deemed necessary for the emergence of communities of practice such connectivity was not ideal and created breakdown (Ciborra, 2002; Heidegger, 1962; Winograd & Flores, 1986) among users.

Discussion of stage 2: Knowledge sharing to support the current organisational goals.

In contrast to the generative structures that Wenger identifies as enabling the emergence of a "community of practice", the following section attempts to identify those "de-generative" structures which conditioned and thus limited the emergence of

"communities of practice" among country directors (Mutch, 2003) within the British Council and thus its attempt to become a learning organisation. In this way the concept of "communities of practice", that was used as an aspiration within the development of CD:net and other systems is used here in order to look at the broader context of the Knowledge Management interventions (something suggested as necessary by (Neef, 1999)).

In the interventions it appeared that the Knowledge Team and the employees were all strongly influenced by the latent features of the organisation, in particular its *"Hub and Spoke"* nature; the very features that such "communities of practice" aimed to reduce.

The "*Hub and Spoke*" structure of the organization was central to this broader context; indeed *"the critical feature of the Council is that it is a head-quarters administering a network of offices overseas."* (Lee, 1995). The *"hub and spoke"* structure within the organisation was highly evident throughout the long history of the UK's influence overseas. It stretches back into both British colonial history and the overall running of the Foreign and Commonwealth Office, as evidenced within the research by people using phrases such "*London-appointed Brits"* and *"the UK's Mission"*!

Given the British Council's long history and its success whilst structured in such a way one is led to ask why knowledge sharing and the creation of such "communities of practice" was important to the senior management group within the British Council? Why did they desire to broadly change the organisation's structure from such a "hub and spoke" form? Why and how was this desire to improve translated into a desire to develop a "community of practice" by the CKO? Answers to these questions perhaps lie within the changing nature of both the social world and the world of cultural diplomacy.

The British Council's history has been strongly influenced by its historical role of providing propaganda and of imposing influence from the UK (Donaldson, 1984). Its role during the Second World War was to battle in neutral countries against the influence of Fascism (Cull, 2003; Donaldson, 1984). Furthermore *"during the Cold War the British Council maintained its propaganda value and developed an important double function. It provided a point of contact with western ideas in the non-aligned world and, when thaws permitted, the Eastern Bloc."* (Cull, 2003). This role required an organisation structured

around a strong central hub providing information, propaganda and comment to overseas offices.

The modern world however has shifted in such a way that the west now influences culture in foreign countries through trans-global corporations, the media, language and the Internet more than through institutions such as the British Council (Giddens, 1999). The BBC world service which was once the main western broadcaster in many parts of the world (partly funded by the FCO as part of its cultural relations operation), now competes with a huge variety of other western broadcast companies that are also broadcasting globally. Suddenly, the kind of information and cultural influence previously put forward by the British Council and the World Service are available in many different ways within an increasingly globalised world (Giddens, 1999). When Manchester United Football Club encounters throngs of supporters in China and opens shops in Singapore one is left questioning the future role of the British Council itself. The senior management within the British Council however strongly argues that it is these very influences that mean that the world needs the British Council, since they argue that globalisation and cultural imperialism requires a body that balances the opinions of people across the world towards the UK (Taylor, 2003). So providing a counter view to the western cultural-imperialism represented by Hollywood and organisations such as McDonalds and Manchester United. It was this change that was the basis for the organisations strategic change, and through this the Knowledge Sharing Strategy (Taylor, 2003).

The British Council's strategic change initiative essentially argued that modern cultural diplomacy must concern the development of mutual understanding (British-Council, 2000; Taylor, 2003). This was reiterated by the British Council in arguing that "*mutuality is central to the work of the British Council, our belief in internationalism stems from an appreciation of the interdependence of today's world*" (British-Council, 2002). Indeed the British Council now argues that its *modus operandi* is one of dialogue based on mutuality and shared benefit (Green, 2002). According to a recent speech by the Director General of the British Council, *"a sense of community, and the mutual respect this brings, grows out of shared experience and memories. By creating opportunities for shared experience between peoples of different cultures, the foundations are laid for bridging cultural gaps and expanding cross-cultural understanding"* (Green, 2002). This focus on mutuality was reinforced by the events of the 11th September 2001. The

reaction to these events even included the suggestion of a mutual sense of community among western cultural relations organisations; *"The events of 11 September shocked us all. But as I have argued, the case for international educational and cultural exchange is even more relevant. And the next step will be to think beyond military coalitions to a coalition of cultural relations agencies. We will – and must – strive even harder for honest, open and mutual dialogue"* (Green, 2002). Such a focus on mutuality requires a more networked, interacting organisation where the outlying offices lead communication, rather than the traditional hub and spoke structure.

Both the knowledge sharing strategy and wider organisational strategy represented an attempt to refocus the structure of the organisation away from its historical roots and to face such challenges. This was perhaps the broader desire-to-improve within which the knowledge sharing strategy was located. For the British Council it was insufficient that the proponents of Knowledge Management argued that knowledge creation could only occur within a community when such a community did not exist within this form of "hub and spoke" organisation. The organisation needed a way of changing the existing practices and felt that "communities of practice" represented the route to achieve this. The Knowledge Team thus needed to try to encourage the development of "communities of practice" even if this proved problematic. Yet the latent organisational structure, and the interpretive frameworks (Polanyi, 1962) of the employees presented a significant constraint on attempts to develop "communities of practice" within the organisation.

The knowledge sharing strategy tried to develop "communities of practice" within the organisation in order to support a shift in cultural relations activity. Throughout the research many individuals were strongly vocal in supporting such a change, and yet they did not easily form the kinds of communities that they desired to participate in. In a sense therefore the Knowledge Sharing programme was attempting to encourage the antithesis of the historic *"hub and spoke* bureaucracy evident in the organisation.

Moving away from the historical pressures on the organisations structure one is also able to identify individual actions which inhibit the changes desired by the knowledge sharing strategy. For individuals made sense of this intervention on the basis of their past experience within the organisation(Weick, 1995), and were strongly influenced by their socio-historical construction of understanding (Berger & Luckman, 1966).

The concept of individualisation is a key theme within social theory, sociology and globalisation currently; as is the issue of how to manage and develop technology for such individualisation, in contrast to attempts to develop communities.

Hallier and James (Hallier & James, 1997) have described the general decline in loyalty felt towards organisations, and the way that individual perception of risk can also lead individuals to subvert organisational strategy (Miles, Miles, Perrone, & Edvinsson., 1998). This was paralleled in the British Council by a backlash by some Country Directors against the organisational strategic change.

It is interesting to note that at a time when the organisation was placing pressure on Country Directors and other employees to improve their work, the organisation had increased their personal insecurity through a series of redundancies and office closures as part of its strategic change programme. *"The re-structuring of overseas operations, particularly in Western Europe, Africa and South Asia, will result in job losses in a number of countries"* (British-Council, 2000). "*In a 5 year period in headquarters we have lost something like 3 or 400 jobs in downsizing. So headquarters is much smaller than it used to be, and [a] number of people overseas fail to understand this, and they think that Headquarters should still offer a wide range of support services that they were used to in, not so very long ago my job was done by 3 people. And there are people in the region who still treat me like I am 3 people."* (Senior director in headquarters). Such policies which were likely to reduce loyalty and increase individualisation (Beck, 1992), and yet the organisation also invested in Knowledge Management with the aspiration of increasing a culture of knowledge sharing, peer support and openness.

The organisation also regularly rotated senior staff around the globe, a practice strongly supported by Nonaka among others (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000), and yet this appeared to inhibit knowledge sharing as *"people are always succession planning and as a result people are always looking at their next move, they are trying to place themselves to get what they want in their next move."* (Country Director).

Such staff rotation, the ongoing change in working practices, the significant reduction in staff numbers in the UK, and the threat of such a reduction overseas leads to individualisation in which the individual takes control of their own career and work (Beck

& Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). The role of the employees within the British Council had, at the time of this research, lost the assurances and the protective functions previously evident within the organisation (Scott & Walsham, 1999). Country Directors may have been in confusion as to whether they should adopt an "*I am I*" attitude (Beck, 1992) or to support the development of a "community of practice" within the institution. These two stances appear to be mutually exclusive, and thus a route needs to be sought such that organisations of individualised employees can still work in a mutually supportive way (Du Gay, 2000).

The *"excessive individualism"* (Beck, 1992) evident within the British Council during this research is also a theme in modern life. As Beck and Beck-Gernsheim argue *"we live in a world in which the social order of the national state, class, ethnicity and traditional family is in decline. The ethics of individual self-fulfilment and achievement is the most powerful current in modern society"* (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002). They further argue that attempts at creating a social cohesion must start from recognition of individualism, diversity and scepticism. Knowledge Management however attempts to recreate the lost sense of community, and *"Communities of practice"* is an appealing notion (Williams, 1976) even though the employees of the British Council lived multiple disconnected lives in which they were not always members of such social groupings. The British Council is an organisation of the global age in which life is nomadic (Beck & Beck-Gernsheim, 2002), spent in cars, on aeroplanes, on the telephone and the internet, and involved with activities in many countries and organisations. Even the influence of national cultures was problematic; one consultant working within the organisation described Country Directors as being "cultureless", suggesting that they wore the clothes that were in fashion on the day they left the UK and then they assimilated aspects of the culture in each of their postings. In contrast to this the organisation also imposes a form of life influenced by the neo-colonial "hub-and-spoke" structures represented by the headquarters. The Knowledge Sharing programme attempted to sit as a mediator between the existing bureaucracy and the changing reality of life within the organisation. It is no wonder that the Country Directors, when quizzed, intended to use CD:net to discuss both political issues and their personal tax arrangements, and that others in the organisation were keen to develop local networks that were disconnected from Headquarters when boundaries between work and home, and locality were blurred for these groups.

Conclusions: Discussion stage 3: The aspiration of transforming the organisation into a learning organisation.

In order to present conclusions from this foray into reflexive analysis of the British Council's knowledge management strategy we draw on the overarching aspiration of the knowledge sharing programme – that the organisation has a *"strategy to transform the organisation such that Knowledge Management principles are core to the organisations principles"* – essentially for the British Council to become a "Learning organisation".

The conclusions thus reflect on the appropriateness of this aspiration following the learning from analysis above.

The section above described how the external pressures for mutuality in cultural relations, and the internal structure of the organisation impacted upon the desire to create communities of practice among the organisation, and to so move beyond the hub-and-spoke structure considered problematic by many in the organisation. However it also demonstrated that at the time of this research the organisations structure appeared in turmoil (or at least under pressure). It is therefore necessary to go beyond the idea of a single employee or group and to consider the aspiration of the third strand in relation to the organisation as a whole.

The British Council was facing pressure to change its approach to cultural relations from both "outside" and from "within". Customers of the British Council could increasingly use the Internet to communicate directly with educational institutions in the UK, to gain an understanding of UK culture, and to access services traditionally provided by the British Council. Further within the organisation overseas staff could also circumvent Headquarters for information - while the intranet and internal discussion boards were not relied upon, interviews with staff overseas highlighted greater reliance on the Internet *"I use the web, [it's] typically, my first response if I get an enquiry from somebody, the first thing I do is… I go straight into [Alta-vista] and… I use this to do a quick search and see what information is on there and then tailor something from that – so the web is probably now the most important source"*. Staff acknowledged that they were members of groups (communities of practice) which were not bounded by the British Council. Many staff appeared to have strong networks with local universities, embassies, cultural relations organisations upon which they relied for ideas and knowledge.

The complaints of the UK that they were no longer consulted over activity planning is perhaps evidence of this circumvention – as one employee stated "*We never truly know what people overseas are doing*". Whilst a role still remained for overseas offices of the British Council as promotional centres, the suggestion by one Consultant that headquarters had become a "knowledge management system" in itself perhaps hinted at an underlying truth. As another in headquarters stated *"Overseas colleagues often have every information tool we have".* The headquarters of the organisation was centred on the belief that the overseas offices required support and information to be collated and sent to them, yet internet technology appeared to reduce such a need. There was some evidence that overseas staff worked more closely with other agencies in their local country than with the UK headquarters. Certainly for ideas, innovation and knowledge on how to respond to the need to engage a wider public they appeared to regularly consult outside the organisation.

One can speculate that a future British Council which succeeded in breaking free of its hub-and-spoke might operate as a truly networked (Hedlund, 1994) organisation, without a focal point centred in the UK (apart from perhaps administration and policy). This view challenged further the attempt by both the researcher and the Knowledge Team to provide technology which aimed to develop a sense of community for this group since such a technology might challenge the very existence of those in headquarters tasked with its creation and support. Further since communities of practice need not be bounded by the organisational hierarchy or boundary such a future may challenge the very nature of the organisation,

One might surmise therefore that the "hub-and-spoke" structure, although universally criticised within the organisation for its bureaucracy and for its lack of knowledge sharing also provided a stabilising influence across the British Council. Certainly across the global organisation most members of staff were well aware of the politics and activity going on in *"London"* (as Headquarters was generally called) and still held it in warm regard. People may have criticised its approaches and yet they seldom spoke against the people or the overall structure. Furthermore the researcher did not meet a single member of staff who was not fully committed to the cause and beliefs of the organisation, even though many did not agree with its actions. Such commitment therefore might well have enabled overseas staff to communicate through a shared

culture and body of knowledge associated with London (Yoo & Torrey, 2002) and therefore keep their eyes somewhat focused back towards a London based centre.

In conclusion, Knowledge Management programmes cannot be considered in isolation from the way in which they are interpreted within an organisation and, further, the ways in which they are both understood and applied. Taken to their extreme they may well have the propensity to challenge the very nature of the organisation that they are intended to improve.

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