UNDERSTANDING THE INDIVIDUAL CREATIVE PROCESS WITHIN ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT

Organizational learning and knowledge management literature has focused on how an organization can successfully socialize, articulate, store, retrieve and use knowledge which resides within each individual. It remains uncontroversial that the individual is the main agent who learns and creates or brings new knowledge to the organization. But there is little on organizational learning and knowledge management literatures on how an individual creates or innovates: processes like information storage and dissemination have received much more attention. This paper reports on an ongoing work on how professionals manage their personal creative processes. Using a qualitative research design, the work of advertising soundtrack producers is analyzed. Findings suggest that, despite individual differences, there is a common process professionals follow to create soundtracks.

Key Words: Organizational Learning, Knowledge Creation, Advertising Industry

1   INTRODUCTION

Much of what has been said both on organizational learning and knowledge management is about how an organization can successfully socialize, articulate, store, retrieve and use knowledge which resides within each individual. Despite the different perspectives that have been developed on those processes, it remains undisputed that it is the individual that learns and brings new knowledge to the organization. Indeed, organizational learning propositions have long acknowledged the fact: March and Olsen´s (1979) model starts with the individual, who observes the environmental response to organizational action, makes sense of it and acts, closing the learning cycle. The first process of Nonaka and Takeuchi´s (1995) model is concerned on how to make individuals share, or socialize, personal (tacit) knowledge in order to transform it into explicit, which is amenable of storage and dissemination. Following the same path, Hedlund´s (1994) proposition on how to manage knowledge also starts with the articulation of individual knowledge, i.e., the translation of tacit into explicit knowledge. The first of Crossan et al.´s (1999) learning processes is intuition, i.e., how an individual reaches new insight and creates knowledge.

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But, despite that agreement, there is little on the organizational learning and knowledge literatures on how an individual creates or innovates: processes like tacit knowledge articulation or information storage and dissemination have received much more attention. One exception is Crossan et al. (1999), who relate individual learning with intuition, the ability of recognizing patterns among different situations (expert intuition) and drawing connections between facts or concepts (entrepreneurial intuition). To understand how individuals come to create new knowledge is a understudied area on the learning and knowledge management literatures.

One strand of research that is concerned with the individual ability to create new knowledge is the study on creativity within organizations. That work deals with four areas (Runco, 2004): (a) the study of creative people's personal characteristics, what makes them able to create, (b) the behavioral and cognitive aspects of the creative process, (c) the related contextual and environmental issues, i.e., what facilitates or hinders the creative work, and finally, (d) the outcomes of the creative process, its results and corresponding assessment. The creative process has been conceptualized as socially constructed, depending not only on the individual capability to generate novelty, but also on the social field to recognize it as something valuable and innovative (Ford, 1996). A creative work has to be assessed as such by others, it has to be given value, or else it will be deemed as something just awkward or weird. The literature on creativity points that, despite the efforts to understand it within the organizational context, there is still work to be done, even to properly define creativity (Taylor and Callahan, 2005).

This paper reports on an ongoing research that seeks to contribute to the understanding on how individuals create new knowledge within an organizational context which is constrained by pressures to be creative and to meet stringent deadlines at the same time. Those are, to the common sense, conflicting requirements, which should frequently either hamper the creative process or impose time delays. But on today's business environment, there is frequently no slack to fail to meet them both at the same time. Thus, the question is: how a professional manages to be creative, to produce novelty, restrained by tight schedules? This is a relevant question to many organizations, especially those which struggle on competitive business environments characterized by short product life cycles.

The setting that was chosen to conduct this study is the music industry, and more specifically the production of advertising sound tracks. This is a very interesting activity, since it is placed on the very boundary between art and business: artists that work in this business need to have musical talent and sharp business intuition at the same time. It is an activity that perfectly exemplifies the creativity *versus* deadline pressure conflict: musicians working in such jobs have to create new and attractive soundtracks to stimulate audiences to consume products and services, on very tight schedules, as it is increasingly common in the advertising business. A musician that manages to be successful in this business masters a unique creative process, which brings together a sharp business feeling, artistic value notion and creativity, not only to understand his clients needs but also to hit the popular taste.

2 INDIVIDUAL LEARNING AND CREATIVITY

The starting point of models of organizational learning and knowledge management are the individuals, who produce new knowledge by taking action and learning from experience, as well as observing and collecting a multitude of environmental inputs and making sense of them (e.g. March and Olsen, 1976, Hedlund, 1994, Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Crossan et al., 1999). The literature on organizational learning and knowledge management has devoted little attention to individual learning, but the individual ability to produce new knowledge can be related to and studied within another inquiry area: creativity.

Creativity, at the individual level, is the ability to generate new and valuable ideas and solutions, products, services and processes (Perry-Smith, 2006). The notion of creativity thus encompasses two levels: the individual, who actively creates and proposes something new, and the social context, which accepts and gives value to the new creation (Ford, 1996). Research on creativity has been undertaken by psychology researchers and sociologists: the first have investigated individual characteristics of creative persons, whereas the latter have studied contextual factors that enable or hinder the creative process.

In the psychological domain, a well known classification of the research on creativity was proposed by Rhodes, who divided it in four categories: person, process, press and product (Runco, 2004). Work within the person category focuses on the creative person, his/her personality and characteristics. The process category relates to how the creative person works, while press refers to his/her relationship with the environment and the social context. Finally, product relates to the outcomes of the creative process, and with its productivity. As for personal characteristics, "broad interests, attraction to complexity, intuition, aesthetic sensibility, toleration to ambiguity and self-confidence" (Oldham and Cummings, 1996, p. 608)) are found to be positively related to creative outcomes. At the sociological level, research has focused on the assessment of the work environment (Amabile et al., 1996) , the influence of motivation context, task complexity and supervisory style (Oldham and Cummings, 1996) and personal network structure (Perry-Smith, 2006).

Sternberg (2004) proposed a taxonomy of creative contributions. A creative contribution is "something that is relatively original and high quality vis-à-vis some purpose" (p.84). Creative contributions can either accept existing paradigms, bringing to the field something new but in line with what is currently known, or reject them, challenging existing knowledge and proposing innovative paths. Unsworth (2001) points that Sternberg's classification is based only on retrospective analysis, looking to contributions that reach the end of the creative process. To allow prospective studies, Unsworth (2001) proposes that two dimensions should be taken into account to assess creative contributions: the driver to innovate, if internal, i.e., from personal sources, or external, from the environment, and the nature of the problem that triggers the innovation process. Closed problems are well-defined and methods to tackle with it are known, whereas open problems are ill-defined and solving methods unknown. Unsworth's dimensions define a 2x2 matrix of four creativity types: contributory creativity (internal driver, closed problem), responsive creativity (external driver, closed problem), proactive creativity (internal driver, open problem) and expected creativity (external driver, open problem). Artwork in general is classified by Unsworth as expected creativity.

Ford (1996), bringing together the psychological and organizational literatures on creativity, proposed a theory of creative action. Individual creative action starts with sensemaking, searching for information and building an interpretive schema that gives meaning to a problem or episode. Individuals must be then motivated, i.e., must be willing and seeking to take creative action, since Ford (1996) argues that creative action competes with habitual action. Motivation to be creative depends on personal goals, the perception of the possible rewards, and the individual confidence on his personal capabilities and emotions. Lastly, creative action depends on personal knowledge and abilities, i.e., it depends on intelligence and expertise related to the domain, and on social abilities, e.g. skills to communicate and to create and keep social networks, and also on creative-thinking ability, which can be either an ability to think taking a different way from the existing path (divergent thinking) or to be able to draw new connections on what is known (associational skills).

Personal knowledge and abilities also include intuition. Dane and Pratt (2007) define intuition as a fast and non-conscious process of drawing holistic connections to reach emotionally charged judgments, or put in other words, it is the process of making very fast and subconscious assessments and decisions. In the knowledge management domain, Crossan et al. (1999) make distinction between two types of intuition: expert intuition, the ability to recognize patterns, like chess masters who are able to recognize 50,000 chessboards patterns in a glance (Dane and Pratt, 2007) and entrepreneurial intuition, the ability to draw connections between different fields or subjects. Crossan and colleagues define intuition as an associational skill, either as an expert on an entrepreneur.

In summary, the individual ability to create is connected to personal characteristics and contextual factors. Creativity can also be related to the nature of the problem. Creative action is related to sensemaking, motivation and personal abilities: intelligence and expertise, social skills, creative thinking and intuition.

3   RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

A qualitative study is being conducted within an advertising audio producing firm located in Sao Paulo. The city houses a thriving advertising business, composed by branches of large multinational agencies, large local firms and also small and medium size shops. Their number reach close to 30 thousand in the country, with annual revenues reaching 13 billion US dollars in 2004. The Brazilian capability to produce top quality advertising pieces have been recognized by several international awards given to local advertising agencies. The firm under study is among the six largest soundtrack producers in the city, and despite its short history (five years) was founded by very experienced professionals: the leading partners worked in several advertising agencies and have more than 20 years in the business. The data presented here was gathered through interviewing producers and also by observing them during their work. During a period of 4 months I visited the firm several times, spending about 21 hours in total. I talked to producers both during formal interviews and informally, during their break times, and also with technicians and professionals who were at the firm to perform some specific task (e.g. singing). I was allowed to shadow producers during the entire production process, from the conception stage to recording and post-production. I interviewed three audio producers and the partner in charge of the recording studio and all sound equipment used in the firm, all of them musicians with

previous work experience in the advertising business. Formal interviews were tape recorded and lasted from 50 to 80 min. The mean length is 58 min and all interviews were fully transcribed. Also, hand notes were taken while observing producers at work.

4 THE ADVERTISING BUSINESS VALUE CHAIN

The advertising value chain starts with the client, the organization which is willing to promote its product, service or its institutional image. The client hires and advertising agencies, or ad agencies, to manage the product or service promotion process. Some ad agencies may be in charge not only of promotion, but of the entire marketing effort of the client, reaching even the distribution process. Ad agencies may be specialized by industries, like government, health care or retail, etc., or by media: printed matter, TV and radio, internet, etc. To deliver their services, ad agencies rely on a network of specialized service providers: graphic designers, web designers, photograph shops, video producers, soundtrack producers, etc.

While some clients may choose to manage their promotion effort in house, creating a kind of internal ad agency, ad agencies usually do not verticalize and develop internal service departments, hiring service providers instead. That strategy is usually adopted for economic and creative reasons: to keep teams able to produce an entire high quality ad piece (e.g., in a TV ad, from the conception to the movie and its soundtrack) would raise fixed costs. In addition, an in-house team might have trouble to consistently deliver ad pieces from different artistic styles, defined by broad terms as "modern", "traditional", "bold", etc., since creative teams usually develop a creative profile which might not fit the client's profile or needs. Also clients might sometimes ask for changes in their advertising strategies, calling for different creative styles. By keeping a portfolio of service providers with different creative profiles, ad agencies can search for firms which profile match to what they understand are their client's requirements, giving to them much more flexibility to deliver high quality ad pieces. Thus, the market is composed by a large number of specialized service providers: webdesigners, video producers, soundtrack producers, etc. Those service providers range from one man shops to medium size firms, each with its own profile, which makes competition limited, since their services are not perfect substitutes.

5 THE SOUND OF BUSINESS: CREATING A SOUNDTRACK

On top of a large desk, two 19"LCD screens and to each side, a loud speaker. Also on the desktop, two computer keyboards, two mice, one printer, one telephone handset and a cell phone. Just below the desktop, on a sliding stand sits an electronic organ, carefully positioned to allow both access to its keys and to the computer keyboards, sometimes simultaneously. Under the desk, two CPU's and at one side, a rack with sound pre-amplifiers, one amplifier and a mixing console. At one side of the desk, an acoustic guitar on a stand. Sitting at the desk, mumbling a sort of tune, a man skillfully operates the computer and plays the keyboard. He sometimes stops, thinks, reads a sheet of paper, and goes back to the computer, or makes a call and discusses something over the phone, and then goes back to his mumbling and composing.

What I described above is a glimpse of the work of an advertising soundtrack producer. Using new technologies, that professional is able to create one, two, sometimes even three

new songs or soundtracks each day, while keeping close contact with advertising agencies and video producers. When art is understood also as a business, it concerns to the creation of two different and hard to measure: the artistic value and the entertainment value. The first relates to creativity, aesthetics, technique and skill and the second, to the extent by which people are willing to experience what the artistic piece conveys, and thus, to pay for it. A soundtrack producer is a professional that needs to blend artistic with entertainment value in each music or soundtrack he produces.

In fact, advertising soundtrack producers are music composers who, arguably more than other artists, work on the very edge between art and business. They create new songs, but their goal is not, as to many artists, the creation of "pure and unspoiled art", music without business concern. Their creative activity has a clear and strong commercial intent. Indeed, advertising producers are sometimes criticized by their "art by art" peers, who blame them for selling their soul to the devil, in this case, money, and compromising their talent by applying it to commercial purposes. Some advertising soundtrack producers, as it is the case of two of the interviewees, also develop a parallel artistic life, where they create and record songs only with the purpose of expressing their aesthetic view.

The work of advertising sound track producers starts when they receive, from the ad agency's creative manager, a briefing defining what is to be created. It may be a song for a TV or radio ad or a soundtrack blending music, voice and sound effects. The briefing informs on the client, the product or service, and describes the intent of the ad, giving some guidelines about what is expected from the song or soundtrack. The new song may be a reissue of an existing tune, as in the case of one new ad piece within a bigger campaign, or a stand-alone piece. It may just be a backing tune, or the centerpiece of the commercial. In any case, the more detailed and clearer the briefing, the more comfortable and confident the producer feels, since their first major concern is to identify what is really expected from them, what is the goal of the ad.

Thanks to digital technology development and low costs, producers have at hand very powerful equipment and software, which allow them to actually compose and perform an entire tune without leaving their desks. Databases make available samples of the actual sound of almost any instrument, from violins to brasses, electric guitars to drums, which can be assembled to create melody or rhythm line tracks. Specialized software packages allow saving multiple tracks, each for a different instrument, synchronizing those tracks in a single tune, and saving all tracks in digital format. Producers, applying their talent and creativity, use those software packages and create songs in a matter of a couple hours at their desks. After the creation of the song, depending on the concept and final result the producer has in mind, singers can record voice tracks on the song, or some instrument track can be replaced by a real performance. When all tracks have reached a stage considered adequate by the producer, they are finished and merged into a single file, which is delivered to the ad agency, to be performed on the radio or recorded on the movie to be aired on TV.

6 CREATING MUSIC: INDIVIDUAL ABILITIES

The ability to create observed in ad sound producers is based on individual skills, individual talent, as it would be expected. The individual abilities identified during the research are: musical skills, knowledge of business and a clear and up-to-date sense of

audience preferences and tastes. As for musical skills, all producers are talented musicians, mastering at least one instrument: bass guitar, keyboards, or electric guitar and although all three producers do not have formal music education, they know music theory and a basic level notion of composition. That enables them to, for instance, as listening to one song, identify key, tempo and chord sequences used by the composer. That knowledge make possible to them to identify and understand why a specific song sounds like it sounds, i.e., what musical elements give a particular "personality" to one song, they can tell why it conveys happiness, energy or sadness, due to the composer's choice of scale, tempo and instruments. Knowledge of theory also can permit them to say what makes samba sounds like samba, or bossa nova sounds like bossa nova, what particular combination of rhythm line and harmonic progression characterizes one music style. That enables them to emulate one song without copying it, but to create a new song using the same elements, which will produce a similar feeling in the audience as the original song.

Knowing the business is also a key ability to a sound producer. All producers have former experience in ad agencies: two worked as account managers, i.e., they were in charge of managing relationship with clients, and one worked in several positions in ad agencies, being even the creative director of one large ad agency for a certain time. Thus, they possess deep knowledge about the advertising business, its dynamics, its main actors and its power balance. They also know how an ad agency works, how it operates and how it manages the relationship with its clients. That knowledge helps producers to quickly understand what ad agencies are demanding, since they are familiar with their language and how they operate. That is important to allow producers to create and deliver exactly what ad agencies and clients expect, shortening production time. It is also important since, in the advertising business, as in many other businesses, the pressure to lower production costs make ad agencies rely increasingly in less experienced, and thus less expensive, professionals. Young professionals, due to lack of experience, sometimes do not clearly state in their briefings what they need, or they just may not be sure about it. Producers can put themselves ahead of the problem, and even foresee potential troubles and pitfalls. In many cases they can, for instance, have a feeling that a specific demand is not properly formulated, when it seems inconsistent, and they take the initiative to talk to the ad agency and try to clarify it. The proactive attitude shortens delivery lead time and increases accuracy.

Individual abilities also include a clear and up-to-date sense of audience preferences and tastes. Producers know what people are listening, what is playing on the radio, which are the top songs on the Brazilian parade and on the Billboard. That is important to make them understand what is regarded by the general audience as good music, regardless their own tastes and opinions. That perception is very important to create entertainment value: popular taste changes over time and people consume what they feel as good at the moment. Since advertisement music has usually short life cycle and needs to be consumed at the moment, the soundtrack producer do not work on breakthrough innovation, something new that will take time to be understood and consumed by the audience. They rather work to produce what is currently enjoyed by the average consumer. The creative process to a soundtrack producer is an exploitation process.

In summary, Table 1 lists three abilities soundtrack producers rely on to produce their pieces.

Table 1: Individual abilities

Individual Abilities	Examples
Musical Skills	Producers are talented musicians
Knowledge of the business	Three producers have also worked in ad agencies, and understand how ad agencies work
clear and up-to-date sense of audience preferences and tastes	what plays on the radio what people from diverse social levels enjoy Movie trailers are a good source, they show how music connects with emotions, and people are used to that

7 CREATING MUSIC: PROCESS

Despite individual differences, the sound producers observed during the research use a similar process to create their songs, constituted of five steps: they start by analyzing demand, they identify elements, assemble those elements and finish the tune. When the producer receives the briefing from the ad agency, his first concern is to understand what is demanded. His knowledge of the business comes in hand here, since in many cases the briefing from the ad agency does not define clearly what is needed. Since music produces an intangible outcome, a subjective experience to the listener, it is hard articulate what is expected from the music… Thus, the briefing from ad agency professionals, especially when they are more inexperienced, is in many cases vague and unclear. They may ask producers to compose a song that is "modern" or "energetic" or "inspiring", which ultimately does not give much guidance to compose a song (what is to sound modern?). Thus, before thinking on a tune, they strive to understand what are client's profile and expectations, what is the intent of the campaign and of the specific advertising piece. Knowing the business, the client, the ad agency and the work processes within it comes in hand here, it helps producers to analyze demand, since they can picture what is behind the ad agency request. Experienced producers are able even to identify possible mistakes or misguidance in the briefing. In that case, they talk back to ad agency's professionals, clarifying what they are expected to deliver and adjusting or correcting the briefing.

After analyzing and understanding demand, producers start using their musical skills to identify elements that produce the desired outcome. They think of how they can produce the sort of feeling that is expected, what the ad piece needs, e.g., which lyrics, which musical style, which rhythm is best suited for it. Here, besides musical talent, producers also rely on their perception of audience preferences. They are constantly following which are the songs that are popular at the moment, why people like them, what they feel while listening to them. One producer told that the keeps asking his sons, the employees on the firm, people he knows at his building what they are listening at the moment. He also follows the most hit parades, listings of the most performed tunes on the radio. Another producer frequently watches movies and pays close attention to movie trailers, striving to grasp how film and movie trailer makers use music and sound effects to create mood, atmosphere, and how they connect music to image in their pieces. Movie trailers are

particularly interesting since they, as advertising pieces, need to convey emotion and creates atmosphere in a short time span.

Fron demand analysis, producers identify the elemental parts that need to be present in the tune: words, rhythm and style. Here the producer relies on his musical skills, his knowledge of music theory and his experience as a musician. There might be, according to the client and the ad piece, particular words that must be used, or some that must be avoided. In the same way, there might be a particular rhythm or style that should be avoided. Within those constraints, producers start choosing music style and wording. In some cases, music style may be defined by the ad agency briefing (for instance, a national campaign that aimed to promote how a company's flexibility to understands the Brazilian cultural diversity was composed by a number of ad pieces, and the soundtrack of each one had to use a regional style that characterizes that geographic region). Here music knowledge of music theory is an essential tool: each music style is characterized by particular rhythm, metric and harmony.

At the end of the process, producers end up with a set of elements: words, rhythm, and style. They use their music skills to assemble those elements. Music style elements became a melody, scattered words became phrases within it. IT tools are important here: software provides samples of instruments, and producers can compose a tune played by several different instruments without leaving their desks. When the producers leaves his desk, there is an almost completed tune or soundtrack. He then may send it to the ad agency for approval. The ad agency may send it to the client, to be approved, or there may be a meeting to discuss the ad piece.

The final stage is to finish the song, adding voice tracks, instruments, and working on details such as adding particular instruments or changing the pitch. When the soundtrack is finished, the producers leaves it with the sound technician, who "cleans" it from undesired sounds, hiss and hum, adds sound effects and masterizes it. Table 2 summarizes the stages on the creative process.

Table 2: Creative process stages

Stage	Examples
Demand analysis	Understanding what is demanded What is the intent? How can I produce the feeling that is needed? Which rhythm?
Identifying elements	Which lyrics is best suited? What wording should be used or avoided? What characterizes that rhythm? What instruments must be played?
Elements assembling	How to assemble the elements within a tune
Finishing	Working on details

8   LEARNING FROM MUSIC: ABILITIES AND PROCESSES TO CREATE KNOWLEDGE

Ad Sound Producers way of creating tunes may be generalized, within the restrictions of this study, to how knowledge can be created within organizations. Knowledge creation depends on individual abilities, which blend both technical knowledge and business knowledge, and a process that starts by understanding and deconstructing what is demanded, understanding the core of the demand, and from that, creating basic knowledge elements, to be assembled and finished.

The individual skills and creative processes can be extended to the general context of creating knowledge within organizations. As for individual skills, the creative process depends on specific technical skills, knowledge of the business and a good perception of the environment, of the external opportunities and restrictions. As for the process, the four stages can be also extended: demand analysis, element identification, assembling and finishing can be easily identified as stages of a process to create a new procedure, for instance.

9   CONCLUSIONS

Successful ad sound producers balance a sharp business feeling with creativity and musical skills. From the point of view of the creative process, blending business and art is considered by many artists as a tricky action, but it should be considered that ad sound producers work within a exploitation paradigm: they do not seek to create something innovative, since the average consumer do not like what sounds completely new, he tends to like what is only marginally different from what he already knows and enjoys listening. Thus, ad sound producers create "fast food" music, to be easily and quickly consumed by the audience, and to be forgotten in a couple of weeks, when a new ad and a new tune are released. That does not mean producers do not possess talent and skills to create something really creative and new, it just shows how a successful producer is deeply aware of his task and what is expected from his professional performance. Within the advertising sound production process, exploitation restricts music more than lyrics: the general audience may accept and enjoy very creative words but may be less tolerant to a different rhythm. Thus, working within an exploitation paradigm also simplifies the creative process. Since the ad sound producer does not look for a breakthrough creation, he can work within accepted conventions: rock n'roll relates to youth, transgression and revolution, bossa nova to modernity and sophistication, samba to summer, beach and soccer, and so on.

Hence, the exploitation behavior helps to solve the time restriction - creativity conundrum. There is however another aspect that should be added. As time constraints become harder, producers rely more and more on conventional approaches. Since there is a general trend to shorter lead times, there is a complaint that artistic quality and creativity are becoming less and less important, and the overall quality of the advertising production is decaying. Producers are not happy to create only "fast food" music, their musical skills and personal talent claim for more well crafted tunes, but they complain that ad agencies deadlines do not allow any attempt to create more sophisticated music. Successful and talented ad sound producers adapt to that situation, produce high quality work, but are not comfortable in that situation. They regret that poor planning from either the final client or the ad agency ends up cutting work time and the quality of their work as a consequence.

This paper proposed that ad sound producers rely on a specific set of skills and do follow a structured process to create their tunes, and that those skills and process allow them to meet conflicting requirements as time restriction and creativity. Although their work is focused on exploiting current knowledge, skills and process can be adapted or extended to other situations, giving some clues on how to manage creation of knowledge at the individual level.

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