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Chapter 3 Organising for knowledge and learning – a balancing act between divergent forces

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Investment in knowledge management and knowledge systems are seen as key factors for today's business' development, innovation potential, and general competitiveness. A strategic question for HR departments is how a number of different divergent forces within an organisation can be dealt with so as to best support knowledge and learning within the organisation. The discussion of the divergent forces, or oppositions, which are examined in this chapter are taken from a study of the organisation of knowledge and learning in the context of product development. When such oppositions and issues are made visible and highlighted, then they can actually contribute to an organisation's development work instead of hindering such development (Engström, 2014). In this chapter we examine a number of different oppositions which have been previously identified (at a technology firm) and discuss what they mean, and how they can be dealt with, so as to facilitate the transfer of knowledge between different projects and between departments. Finally, we ask a critical question: *What is the HR department's role in this work?*

Knowledge transfer

Many organisations wish to secure the knowledge that exists within the organisation because such knowledge is often key to the organisation's competitiveness, irrespective of which area the organisation operates in. Management is constantly in search for new ways to collect and use knowledge resources more efficiently, but such efforts only become meaningful if the knowledge that is collected is shared and integrated into the organisation through practical applications (Rozenfeld et al., 2009; Zahra et al., 2007). The mere identification and storage of knowledge is not sufficient to support the company's strategic work; such knowledge needs to be *put to use* if any effect is to be realised. There are many different definitions, perspectives, and theoretical models that describe knowledge and knowledge management (Small & Sage, 2006; Alavi & Leidner, 2001), but here we use the concept 'knowledge transfer' to emphasise the practice of knowledge collection, knowledge development, and the application of knowledge in an organisation.

Knowledge transfer is one method by which organisations can secure the knowledge and experience which exists in the organisation's employees. Interest in knowledge transfer has increased because there is a need to be part of the development of knowledge in many different areas. If this is not taken advantage of, then organisations run the risk of making the same mistakes over and over again. However, by transferring information and knowledge between different projects, departments, and generations of employees, this problem can be solved. Knowledge- and learning processes need to be supported, and once this happens, the question arises: *Which systems and which organisational support exist so as to enable the success of these processes?* In the area of product development, there is a need to go beyond existing information- and knowledge systems, by working with new methods and tools so that the organisation can function successfully in a world that is culturally-diverse, digitalised, and socially responsible (Bertoni m.fl. 2011). There is no easy trick to achieving effective knowledge transfer, since the sharing of knowledge demands a great deal of forethought if the desired effect is to be achieved. We also note that this is an area where work is organised in response to a number of oppositions, something which we will return to later.

Another reason why we refer to the concept of 'knowledge transfer' is to establish a link between two related areas, namely *knowledge management* and *organisational learning*. *Knowledge management* addresses how an organisation deals with and shares its knowledge, and tends to adopt a management perspective on this phenomenon. *Organisational learning* emphasises the learning processes between people who work together, as they develop their skills and abilities, in an organisational context. Thus they constitute two related, but not completely overlapping, areas of research and practice, which have grown independently of each other. The development of these two areas has however started to overlap (Jonsson, 2012); a welcome development because a combination of the two perspectives provides us with a better starting point in our understanding of the modern organisation (Bennet & Tomblin, 2006). This is the case because it is necessary to adopt a holistic perspective, if we are to further develop our insights into what knowledge and learning in organisations actually means and entails. The major point, which we take with us from the area of knowledge management, is that management has the ultimate responsibility for knowledge as a point of strategic focus. Organisational learning, on the other hand, informs us that people and relationships are central to achieving the desired result(s).

A strategic perspective on knowledge transfer primarily entails adopting suitable and effective ways of supporting the flow of knowledge within an organisation. This includes adapting general ideas and solutions to specific situations. In our earlier study of how a technology firm managed its knowledge transfer processes (Raudberget & Bjursell, 2014), it became clear that there were several divergent forces at work within the organisation which had to be dealt with so as to facilitate the transfer of knowledge across projects and departments. The case study company and method of investigation are summarised below, and are followed by a description of the divergent forces (pairs of oppositions) which were identified during the study.

Case study company: Husqvarna AB

This chapter is based on material gathered in a study of professional development work at a research and development department at Husqvarna AB. This company employs more than 14 000 people globally, in 40 countries. The company has undergone many changes since its establishment in 1689. Originally it was a weapons factory and has since manufactured a variety of goods, including sewing machines, kitchen equipment, bicycles, motorcycles, lawnmowers, and chainsaws. Today, the company is a world-leading manufacturer of chainsaws, garden trimmers, robot lawnmowers, and garden tractors. Husqvarna traditionally produces such products for professional use. For example, in the chainsaw department professional use criteria demand that the chainsaws that they produce are of a light weight because they are carried around the forest all day by loggers. Consequently, a great deal of product development work is directed at product weight reduction. Notwithstanding this, the machines also have to be durable and operate for a long time before being re-fuelled. Furthermore, each country where these products are manufactured or distributed has legislation concerning the operation of these machines which has to be satisfied. These legal criteria are also taken into account during the development and testing of prototype machines and in the end products.

As the product portfolio of the company changes (including an increasing use of their products by non-professional users), the product development process is influenced. Note that a range of products are offered to both private consumers and professional users. Since the company finds itself in a mature market, demand for their products is primarily driven

by the economic growth of the target market: “The activity of single-family homes, their buying power, and consumer trust are important drivers of demand” (Husqvarna, 2016). Private consumption is very important for business and is one of the factors which influence professional development work, something which we will return to below.

The department that was studied is engaged in product development and consists of 250 employees. The material used in this chapter consists of 26 interviews which we conducted with engineers who held different positions in the department. Increasing competition on a global level increased the need for knowledge from different areas and the need to re-use the knowledge that had been developed in the organisation. This, in turn, has consequences for how knowledge transfer takes place within the organisation. In the study that was conducted, it was apparent that the organisation did not follow one specific way in its arrangements to organise knowledge and learning. Instead a balance was found between dualities. In this chapter, these dualities are termed *pairs of oppositions*, so as to highlight the fact that they belong together and that they represent different dimensions of a single question.

The balance between pairs of opposition

In this section, we present a number of pairs of opposition which were identified during the Husqvarna study. These pairs of opposition enable us to discuss how different areas can be dealt with so as to facilitate knowledge transfer between projects and between departments. In this context, the HR department is a partner in this process, as it offers up new knowledge, experience, and alternative perspectives. With respect to the different pairs of opposition, no unambiguous answer is provided; instead, it is up to each group or organisation to make the choices which suit the particular organisation best. These may change over time. Note too that the nature of the company’s operations, in terms of their content, ways of working, and competitive conditions and strategies determines what choices an organisation might make.

Table 3.1 Pairs of oppositions that organise knowledge and learning

Written knowledge transfer	Verbal knowledge transfer
Meetings take up time	Meetings save time

'Front-loading'	'Back-loading'
Space to make mistakes	Minimise repetition of the same mistake
Mastering a task	'Good enough'
Action	Reflection
One's own interests	The organisation's interests
Technical knowledge	Administrative knowledge
Global perspective	Local perspective

Written knowledge transfer – verbal knowledge transfer

Written v. verbal knowledge transfer illustrates an opposition between two ways of sharing knowledge. Written knowledge transfer entails the use of documentation, whilst verbal knowledge transfer takes place during conversations. Written knowledge transfer has its advantages in that which is written down persists though time and can be used to reach large numbers of recipients. The disadvantages with this type of transfer are that it might be difficult to express certain knowledge in writing and that documents might not be archived properly and re-used. Verbal knowledge transfer can be used to share complex ideas in a short time and stimulate the development of new ideas. The social dimension associated with verbal communication is both an advantage and a disadvantage. Social contact with others is something fundamentally good, but if such contact is problematic, then knowledge transfer becomes problematic too.

At the case study company, they use a so-called 'design advice form' where knowledge about how specific parts of their machines should be designed is summarised in writing. The production of these documents is supported by the company's management team and is stored in a database. The problem is that it can be sometimes difficult to find these documents, and, furthermore, there exists an oral tradition concerning solving problems and transferring knowledge between the fabricators. Consequently, the design advice forms are not used to any great extent, despite the good intentions that lie behind them.

Written knowledge transfer – verbal knowledge transfer

The task here is to find a balance between effective forms of written and verbal knowledge transfer in an organisation. To understand how they can complement each other, we must

know the advantages and disadvantages associated with different modes of knowledge transfer.

Meetings take up time – meetings save time

The purpose of a meeting can be to coordinate, inform, discuss and develop issues, and/or make decisions. This is done to save time, since the employees receive the information that they need and decisions are made as a unified group. Despite this, many people think that meetings are a waste of time. Such meetings use up a significant number of working hours and so incur a significant cost to the organisation. Different forms of meetings can be used to make decisions, place decisions on record, share information, and engage in learning. The purpose of the meeting will determine the type of meeting and who will participate in the meeting. Consequently, one should avoid organising every meeting in the same way. If the meeting's purpose is just to announce company reports, it is perhaps best that only those people who are immediately concerned with this information need attend the meeting, instead of every employee at the company. For coordination and information-sharing meetings, it may be the case that every employee should attend. However, in the product development and manufacturing industries, problem-solving meetings are most common. These meetings can be improved if pre-prepared materials that provide rich and varied information to the meeting participants are distributed before the meeting. For example, pictorial information in the form of images, videos, and physical details or a study visit can provide a holistic presentation of when, where, and how a certain problem arises. In the case study, it seemed that many of the meetings that were held had the same form, irrespective of their purpose. This resulted in ineffective meetings. On occasion, the engineers avoided attending meetings so that they could catch up on their work.

Meetings take up time – meetings save time

Consideration must be made as to where a meeting needs to be called or not, and what the meeting should result in. This entails that careful thought should be given to the meeting's purpose, its form, and its execution.

'Front-loading' – 'Back-loading'

Front-loading entails acting proactively by committing additional resources for analysis and evaluation in the beginning of a project, so as to capture the lessons learnt from previous projects. *Back-loading* refers to solving problems as they emerge during the course of the project. Both of these alternatives are costly, even if there exist indications that front-loading can be significantly more efficient (Morgan & Liker, 2006). The difficulty with front-loading lies with the fact that not all problems are known at the start of a project. Some important differences in these approaches are the time period during the project when the associated costs are incurred, and how they influence the time-planning during a development project. Whilst there will may be certain advantages to be gained by incorporating previously learnt lessons early on in a project, there will always be areas where this is not possible or even preferable to plan for in advance because of the nature of development work. The case study company tended to use back-loading in this regard more frequently, because it was deemed important to show that activity was taking place and they were moving forward quickly with the project planning work. Because of this, there was a sense of continually starting afresh with certain questions, instead of applying previous knowledge and experience.

'Front-loading' – 'back-loading'

The balance to be found here is to commit sufficient resources, early on in the project so as to avoid common mistakes, but also allowing the project to move forward. It is not possible to prepare oneself for all possible scenarios and contingencies that will appear along the way.

Space to make mistakes – minimise repetition of the same mistake

In discussions of business enterprise and innovation, it is often emphasised how important it is that there exists space for people to make mistakes, because if one is not allowed to make a mistake, then one runs the risk of never producing anything. At a product development department, permission to experiment is very important. There thus must be space for mistakes to be made during the development process – it is part of the learning process during development, and cannot be completely determined or controlled. However, frustration may result if the same mistakes are repeated over and over again, and it is noted that the development process could be improved by a more efficient system of

recycling previously won knowledge, but that such a system may be lacking. To this, we must consider the financial aspects; mistakes that are made early on in a development process are often simpler and cheaper to correct than mistakes that are made in the later phases of a development project. The reason for this is that the later that a change is made, the more the value chain is influenced in the form of changes in production equipment, sales, and distribution. In the case study, a genuine interest in product development and becoming the best in their area was observed, so, in this context, a failure of some sort can provide important clues as to how one should proceed in product development in general. What was missing at the company were proper procedures to transfer what others had learnt during the process and procedures to other departments and projects.

Space to make mistakes – minimise repetition of the same mistake

The balance to be found between this pair of oppositions lies in the creation of an environment where making mistakes is accepted, because this is fundamental to the dynamic ability to innovate. At the same time, there should be structures and systems in place to record knowledge and experiences from previous learning contexts.

Mastering a task – ‘Good enough’

The goals for development work can be different, depending on who the target group is for the product. This should always be the basic starting point, but how much can the final touches to the product cost? When new target groups are included, then this may entail new ways of thinking about the product. If the product is solely aimed at professional users, then a single feature of the machine might be a deciding factor, and just this feature might become the subject of the product development department’s attention. If a new target group consisting of private users is identified, then other features might play a bigger role in their decision to buy the product in comparison with professional users. For a technical company who works with product development, it can be tempting to set standards as high as possible; to always find the absolutely best solution to a problem from a technical perspective. In such cases, it might be difficult to stop at a point where the product is just ‘good enough’ or includes other criteria or values besides solely technical criteria. For consumer products, this may involve creating products that are not too expensive or that have nice design, for example. Other features or properties that may differentiate products include their performance, weight, and durability.

Different types of competencies are involved in product development, and the choice of competencies that are deployed in the product development department is dependent on which features of the product are subject to development. One way of considering the pair of oppositions, *mastering a task* v. *'good enough'*, is to imagine that they represent two different perspectives towards product development. The one perspective aims to optimise development work with a professional end-user in mind; that is to say, to make the product as light-weight as possible, with an efficient use of fuel, and a high level of durability. The other perspective aims to develop a product which satisfies the expectations and needs of the private user, where other features are more relevant, such as design and price.

Mastering a task – 'good enough'

Use the target group's expectations and needs to find a balance between which features the product needs, and use this to inform the amount of product development work that needs to be done, including the competencies that are needed for this work.

Action – Reflection

The ability to take positive action differentiates successful companies from companies who are less successful. Those companies who wish to be successful must also spend some time with reflection. Reflection allows one to evaluate and analyse previous actions and may also be a moment when creative ideas are let loose. The tension between this pair of oppositions lies in the fact that action and reflection have different internal time frames. Action can identify with a particular forward movement, whilst reflection demands one to pause and absorb that which has taken place, that what is taking place, and that which will come to pass. From the company's perspective, the results of the project and the employee's efforts in developing the product are evaluated against the project's delivery. The project leader has thus the incentive to prioritise visible deliveries over personal reflection and learning. Consequently, reflection only takes place when there is time to do so, and on many occasions experiences which could have been added to the design advice database, and the like, remain undocumented and unavailable for use for future projects. In the case study, there was a lack of time, from a project management perspective and a high work tempo. One way of introducing learning and reflection into project development could be to make these activities more visible by scheduling time in the department's work

calendar, for example, “every Tuesday, 15:00-17:00 learning and reflection concerning [insert project area]”.

Action – Reflection

Consider how individuals are supported as they move between moments of activity and moments of reflection, and whether there is time in the project plan to include the setup time that is needed for the changeover between these two activities.

One’s own interests – The organisation’s interests

In all companies, many different interests co-exist together. A common motivational factor at the product development department is the drive to develop good products, but this may agree with other driving forces too, including focus on cost reduction and global organisation. Product development, when all is said and done, is a fundamentally creative process. Designers are experts in their areas, and the whole development process is built on the desire to develop and master the designs. Organisational concerns, for example, demands for standardisation, can be seen as obstacles to development and innovation. It is possible for standardisation work to stifle product development if it goes too far. Each component in a machine needs to be integrated with other components during its production, in addition to demands made by the rest of the world, many of which are concerned with standardisation. Standardisation criteria can seem to be a hindrance to the development process, but they can be necessary to follow so as to reduce costs. However, note that certain standardised features or details may actually incur greater costs. The profit that one might gain from using a cheaper feature or detail can be lost to costs that may arise because of sub-standard performance or low quality.

Standardisation can also be understood as a way of working with knowledge transfer between projects and products by exploiting previous lessons and experiences which are ‘built into’ the standard.

The development department has the duty to maintain and develop specialist knowledge about product features which are unique. The individual employee’s interest may lie with obtaining a good salary and self-development in a chosen career. In the case study, it was clear that most engineers wanted a variety of work assignments, which entailed that many

individuals preferred to be involved in innovative work rather than standardization work. One way to encourage this desire for development might be to allow an engineer who has made a plastic handle to make a metal engine part next time. Note that such variation in work tasks demands different competencies, something which attention must be paid to when such work assignments are distributed to the employees.

One's own interests – The organisation's interests

A balance has to be found between the individual's interests and the organisation's interests. By allowing individuals to develop their critical specialist knowledge further, and by creating good conditions for them so that they choose to remain with the company, then it is possible to combine the individual employee's interests with the organisation's interests.

Technical knowledge – Administrative knowledge¹

In any project, it is important that the levels of both technical- and administrative knowledge domains are high. Technical knowledge directly concerns the product; its details and features and its fabrication. Administrative knowledge is primarily concerned with project management. The most common career path in the case study went from taking responsibility for technical matters to moving on to an administrative management position. Such management functions lead to higher salaries. A comparable salary increase was not available for those who merely developed specialist technical knowledge. For some, the career path from being responsible for certain details or features of a product to a more general responsibility for whole projects was a natural development and worked well in satisfying different wishes about the content of the work to be done during different phases of the individual's career. For other employees, they wished to continue with their specialisation in the technical field instead of taking on administrative roles, because, they felt, this involved a different type of work assignment and different competencies. At the same time, individuals might wish to advance their career both in terms of salary and in terms of knowledge. (Cf. Chapter 4 and the different perspectives on career paths presented there.)

¹ Since the conclusion of the study, the salary- and career model at the company has changed. The description above remains however, because it demonstrates an important dimension of HR work.

Technical knowledge – Administrative knowledge

A balance should be found so that career paths which support either a technical- or administrative careers can be implemented. Companies need technical expertise which develops over time, whilst project managers must be of a high level of competency so that they do not get bogged down by isolated details in the technical development without taking into consideration market demands.

Global perspective – Local perspective

In a company which has factories and offices across the world, things can look quite different from different vantage points. At one location, there might be a team who has a holistic perspective and is good at dealing with everyday problems. If this self-directed project group is to transfer knowledge to a manufacturing unit which is managed by a traditional top-down hierarchy in a different country, then various difficulties may arise. Beyond these cultural differences, language barriers can hinder transfer of knowledge. Another obstacle may be caused by a factory which has a high level of employee turnover because the factory considers employees to be interchangeable. This may cause the factory to lose production speed and competence, and may be forced to start operations over and over again. A high level of employee turnover causes increased demands on documentation, but if one does not know *why* work is performed in a certain way, then it is difficult to produce the proper documentation. Problems on a global level may include different standards for measurements (metric v. imperial), different methods and material properties, different legislative requirements, and different perspectives on knowledge transfer. Furthermore, development processes often take place in close cooperation with suppliers, irrespective of their geographical location.

Global perspective – Local perspective

The balance to be found here is to determine whether it is profitable to integrate one's operations on a global level, or whether it is more efficient to preserve local strengths and differences.

The responsibility for finding a balance between oppositions

The challenges which exist at Husqvarna AB with respect to supporting knowledge transfer in the organisation, as described above, demand that one finds a balance between a number of different pairs of opposition. These oppositions have the potential to contribute to the company, but, at the same time, they create tension because they can be seen to pull the company or its operations in different directions. It is easy to want to manage processes which pull in different directions, but the creative dimension demands a great deal of freedom so that innovation can take place. This is especially relevant for a product development department. This results in a lack of interest in drawing sharp distinctions between the oppositions. More important questions which should be addressed is how one relates to these oppositions and how will one continually evaluate and up-date one's activities in relation to the goals that one wishes to achieve.

We now ask: *How can the HR department contribute to a product development department?* The core HR assignment is related to issues about careers and the development of the employees. In the case study, the line managers were responsible for these issues and drove knowledge development forward. In the area of 'knowledge management' there is a certain apprehension that, as the HR department takes on responsibility for knowledge and learning, one runs the risk of ending up on a far too abstract system level which slows down the work rate and creates obstacles for the development and preservation of expert knowledge. HR probably does not have insight into which type of knowledge is needed. Those who oppose HR's engagement in this work claim, instead, that the responsibility for knowledge- and learning processes should be with the line managers, who, in turn, should drive development forward on several different fronts.

What does a situation where knowledge transfer is a line manager's responsibility entail for the HR department? In the area of HR research, there are opinions that the more traditional HR work – administrative and operational work – should be assigned to line managers or some form of HR service centre, whilst the HR department proper is responsible for the organisation's strategic assignment (Becton & Schraeder, 2009). To be assigned with only the strategic assignment is very rare in practice, not least in small- and medium sized companies which may find it difficult to justify a purely strategic function

for the HR department. In this context, the question of how the responsibility for strategic planning should be distributed between top management and the HR department also raises its head. The strategies that are developed in the HR area of operations must be tightly connected to the over-arching company strategies. If questions about knowledge and learning are to be considered as strategic in an organisation, then the management should support this. In the next section, we provide a recommendation for how HR can operate in large organisations where the management considers knowledge development as a strategic area and where the line managers have an overarching responsibility for the content and development of knowledge and learning.

Support and strategies from HR

The HR department's role has changed over time. From being responsible for traditional personnel work, including salaries, business travel, time- and personnel administration, HR has more and more began to be involved in the strategic dimension. Nowadays, HR focuses on developing systems and strategies which support the organisation's long-term development. The case study shows, however, that there is a need for HR to combine long-term strategies with work that supports the day-to-day operations of the organisation (as informed by these strategies).

In Figure 3.1, we provide examples of strategies which the HR department can identify. These strategies are, in turn, linked to the management's overarching strategies for the company. When the strategies are identified, they are then handed over to the line managers, who take responsibility for them. The figure also illustrates how HR should provide operative support to the line managers, as they work with these strategies. The operative support can consist of ongoing work with salaries, business travel, and time- and personnel administration; but it may also include providing knowledge and competence for issues to do with the organisation, structures, and culture. Using the Husqvarna study and the pairs of oppositions presented in this chapter, we identify three possible strategic areas of interest: (i) knowledge transfer, (ii) knowledge development, and (iii) career paths.

Insert figure

Figure 3.1 Strategic areas and operational support provided by HR

In Table 3.2, a summary of the pairs of opposition, as they are present in the three strategic areas, is provided. These are also associated with example areas where HR can contribute with insights which should promote the work done in each strategic area. What the HR department thus contributes, irrespective of who is ultimately responsible, are insights into how work with knowledge and learning can be supported and systematised in an organisation.

Table 3.2. Strategic areas where HR can provide support (from the case study)

Strategic area	Oppositions that need to be balanced within each area	Areas where the HR department may have insight into
Knowledge transfer	Written knowledge transfer – Verbal knowledge transfer Meetings take time – Meetings save time ‘Front-loading’ – ‘Back’loading’	Organising projects
Knowledge development	Space to make mistakes – Minimise repetition of the same mistake Action – Reflection Mastering a task – ‘Good enough’	Culture and attitudes
Career paths	One’s own interests – The organisation’s interests Technical knowledge – Administrative knowledge Global perspective – Local perspective	Career structure

The HR department can thus offer support and strategies with respect to the pairs of oppositions identified above. The strategic approach highlights a number of different areas which should be prioritised and then HR can provide operational support when this is

needed on the line. This way of working also enables one to find a balance between another pair of oppositions (not mentioned previously in this chapter); namely, the opposition between *Freedom – Control*. To be subject to ‘organisation’, to be organised, entails that one sacrifices a certain amount of freedom, for the sake of control. However, it is not immediately clear where the border lies between Freedom and Control in this context. *Organisation* is sometimes interpreted as ‘standardisation’, ‘control’, and ‘conformity’, but *organisation* can equally be interpreted as providing the conditions and space for ‘self-determination’, ‘the possibility of choice’, and ‘taking the initiative’. In response to the needs of the product development department, the HR department’s operational support should include features of the second interpretation; then the conditions that enable development and learning will be created.

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