Knowledge Exchange in Inter-O rganizational Networks
An Evaluation of the Knowledge Sharing Processes in the SAPSA Network

Bachelor Thesis within Business Administration

Author: Josef BRENGESJÖ
Karin FRÖJDH
Kirsten WENDERHOLM

Tutor: Börje BOERS

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Abstract

This paper is aiming to discover the conditions and processes that facilitate and influence an efficient knowledge transfer in knowledge networks such as the inter-organizational SAP network SAPSA. Knowledge is a strategically important source for companies, not only because it fosters internal growth, but also because it leads to competitive advantage. In the last years the importance of knowledge networking has considerably increased and especially inter-organizational learning is considered to present a factor having critical influence on the success of a company. Through the participation in networks individuals are able to trade their knowledge and information with others experiences, ideas and expertise. Knowledge sharing and networking should hence be considered a highly social process, which is influenced by various factors and conditions.

Through interviews with the different members and participative observation in the focus groups of the SAPSA network the importance and effect, these facilitating conditions were evaluated, drawing valuable conclusions on how to enhance the knowledge sharing process.

It was found that the main problem of SAPSA was the low activity in the focus groups, which had a negative influence on the knowledge sharing processes. The problem however was not that the members did not consider knowledge networking per se as useful, in contrast almost all respondents regarded knowledge networking as highly beneficial stressed the advantages of knowledge sharing. This led to the assumption that the problem had to lie in the implementation of the knowledge sharing process.

It furthermore was detected that for sharing different kinds of knowledge such as tacit and explicit knowledge, different forms of meeting proved to be more efficient than others and that form of knowledge and the conversion mode should be taken into consideration when deciding on the type of meeting. Various conditions were found to have impact on the efficiency of the knowledge sharing process, such as an optimal group size, the level of trust and commitment and the composition of a group and knowledge base. Furthermore communication was regarded to present an important issue having a big impact on the quality of the knowledge exchange. Management support from SAPSA and the respective user companies proved to be essential in order to increase motivation and commitment in the focus groups.

Some strategic changes were considered to have a positive influence on the knowledge networking processes within SAPSA. The establishment of a clear consistent vision captur-
ing all the different groups within the network would provide benefits in order to be able to motivate members to participate. Here the focus should lie on the decision makers, since those were the ones to have the ability to set incentives and provide resources for the users. In this process the difficulties to measure the positive outcomes of knowledge networking and the subsequent danger of an underinvestment into knowledge networking should be taken into consideration. SAPSA should increase their influence on the focus groups and provide more guidance, in order to assure the quality of the knowledge exchange in the meetings. A new communication strategy should be developed with focus on an Internet based forum, where users and management could interact with each other.

Further research in other knowledge networks is necessary in order to increase the transferability of the gained results.
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1 Introduction

In this chapter an introduction to the topic of the following thesis will be presented. First background information to SAP will be given, then the problem will be introduced and it will be elaborated why this matter is of importance. In the end the purpose of the paper will be stated.

In recent years the importance of networking related to improving organizational learning and knowledge management has significantly increased (Cross & Cummings, 2004; Gargiulo, Ertug & Galunic, 2009). By participating in knowledge networks individuals get access to valuable knowledge and information, providing the participants with the possibility to learn and cooperate with and from others. This implies that knowledge networking is a social on-going process, through which the involved individuals share information, experiences, ideas and expertise with each other (Cross & Cummings, 2004). Research indicates that there is a strong connection between individual work performance and being part of a social network (Cross, Rice & Parker, 2001).

The following paper is going to look into knowledge networking, its benefits and obstacles in the SAP knowledge network SAPSA. In the introduction, background information about SAP will be given to demonstrate the importance of SAP among businesses all around the world. Then the benefits of knowledge networking will be pointed out in order to show the significance of the research, the problem will be described, concluded by a statement of the purpose of this paper. In the second chapter the theoretical framework that provided the perspectives through which the empirical material was analysed is presented, followed by a description of the methods used in order to produce the research material. As a fourth chapter the findings of the empirical data collection will be illustrated. The last two chapters are a presentation of the analysis of the empirical findings through the theoretical perspectives and the conclusion that was drawn from these findings, complemented with practical solutions for an improvement of the knowledge sharing processes in the focus groups within SAPSA.

1.1 Background

The SAP AG, named after the abbreviation of the original name ‘Systemanalyse und Programmmentwicklung’ was founded 1971 by five former IBM employees as a small German company. Today after 40 years of innovation and growth, creating an annual revenue of €14,23 billion, SAP is the world leader in enterprise applications in terms of software and software-related service revenue. Based on market capitalization, they are the world’s third largest independent software manufacturer and have a customer base of 197,000 in more than 120 different countries (SAP.com, 2012; Anderson, 2011). In the Nordic countries more than 2100 companies use SAP, 500 of them being based in Sweden, making SAP the number one Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)- system among Swedish companies, according to a study conducted by the Radar Group (E. Hemming, personal communication, 2012-11-01). Swedish companies that use SAP are, for example Dafgård and Ericsson, demonstrating that SAP is suitable for smaller businesses, as well as large enterprises, merely with adjusted solutions to the size of the company (SAP.com, 2012-11-02).

The leading position of SAP in Sweden can be accounted for the fact that no direct competition exists, due to the size of their offered portfolio. SAP covers so many different industries, spanning software and services, providing a whole series of different applications such as ERP, Business Intelligence, Mobility, Database, Cloud, and Technology, that only in single specific areas other firms are able to compete with them.
All companies that have SAP as their main business application software use it for almost everything: “SAP is nearly all things to nearly all businesses” (Anderson, 2011, p. 9). Every software component or application in the SAP family serves as specific need (Anderson, 2011). Since SAP spans the whole company with all its departments it is very complex and critical to businesses all around the world. Due to its complexity it requires a lot of technical knowledge and trained business users in order to guarantee an efficient use of the system. Acquiring the system presents a big investment for a firm, costing millions of dollars and thousands of hours to implement, which emphasizes the need to fully realize the potential of the system in order to absorb its full value (Anderson, 2011).

SAP’s standard licensing model includes two core elements: software licenses and associated maintenance and support service. With this approach the company can start off with establishing a solid base for operations by purchasing core functionality for a certain department and then extend the software with licensing additional packages in order to support further areas of operation (SAP.com).

Due to its complexity users often have problems using the software efficiently and thus experience performance issues. According to a study carried out 2009 at the Sapphire user group conference in Florida, U.S. this poses a problem for nine out of ten SAP professionals. Fifty-seven percent of the 695 respondents encounter three or more monthly performance issues and 62 percent stressed their dissatisfaction with the current action to deal with performance issues with their system (computing.co.uk, 2009).

1.2 Problem discussion

Knowledge presents a strategically important resource in an organization (Barney, 1991). The ability to share and create knowledge is considered to be beneficial to support the internal growth capabilities of an organization and to create a competitive advantage (von Krogh & Venzin, 1995).

Knowledge is a multifaceted concept and is due to its different multi-layered meanings difficult to define. This can be seen in the literature regarding this topic. On one hand Davenport and Prusak (1998, p. 43) for example explains that knowledge can be seen as “information combined with experience, context, interpretation, and reflection” and that “-it is a high-value form of information that is ready to apply to decisions and actions”. On the other hand Nonaka (1994) describes knowledge as a ‘justified belief’, emphasizing the personal aspect and the justification of knowledge. While Davenport and Pursak (1998) focus more on the informative aspect of knowledge, Nonaka (1994) interpreting knowledge as a personal ‘belief’ emphasizes the human processes behind this term. Both the informative and personal nature is important in the knowledge sharing process.

Not only is there a vivid discussion about how to define the term ‘knowledge’, it also can be viewed from several different perspectives. While for example Schubert, Lincke, and Schmid (1998) describes knowledge as a state of mind; created by the sum of understanding a person has gained through experiences and study, McQueen (1998) and Zack (1998a) state that knowledge can be seen as an object, or a process. Defining knowledge as an object implies that it can be seen as a thing that for example can be stored or changed. However the perspective that serves the purpose of this paper best is to see knowledge as a process, implying the knowledge management focus is on the processes of creation and distribution of knowledge, as well as sharing knowledge with others (Carlsson, El Sawy, Erikssson & Raven, 1996).
Knowledge sharing in this case can be defined as the “provision or receipt of task information, know-how, feedback and other pertinent issues” (Hansen, 1999, p. 83). It can be seen as an exchange of valuable information and experience between individuals, through social interaction processes (Cross & Cummings, 2004).

In former research a more intra-organizational focus is apparent, when it comes to organizational learning, however many researchers suggest that inter-organizational learning is a critical factor when it comes to the success of a company. Inter-organizational learning not only happens when different companies collaborate with each other, but also when they observe and import the practices of others (Powel, Koput & Smith-Doerr, 1996). The most well-known example is probably the research done by Anna Lee Saxenian that states the open relationships in the inter-organizational relationships of the Silicon Valley to be the most prominent success factor of the area (Saxenian, 1996). Yet despite the benefits of knowledge networking, the high failure rate of knowledge management programs shows that there is a need for a deeper analysis of the matter and the possible causes for such failures (Beerli, Falk & Diemers, 2003).

The non-profit organization SAPSA offers an inter-organizational knowledge network for companies that use SAP as their software system. The network consists of 22 focus groups, all responsible for a certain area within SAP, with two leaders each, one representative from a user company and one consultant. These groups can be considered to be the core of the SAPSA-network. In the focus groups the different departments of SAP-user firms meet in order to discuss their problems with the software and together with consultants they find solutions that specifically address the needs of their department. A focus group is a subgroup of the whole network. Subsequently not every member involved in the SAPSA networking is a participant of a focus group; however every member in a focus group is involved in the network. The term user firm refers to firms using SAP as their core ERP system (SAPSA, 2012). Yet the actual active participation in the focus groups shows significantly lower numbers than the number of members in the network and is stated by many as a big problem in the network (P. Högberg, personal communication, 2012-09-06). This raises the question why not more SAP user firms take part in the focus groups if they benefit from working together.

In the course of this paper we are going to inquire the reasons why it is beneficial to share knowledge and the reasons why for example competing firms choose to work together in the focus groups. Furthermore we are going to look into the processes of knowledge sharing in the focus groups and the problems that may arise when knowledge is shared in such a context.

Besides two events per year and other small activities the knowledge sharing takes place exclusively within in the focus groups. The analysis of the quality of the network is thus mainly going to focus on the processes within these groups, but characteristics such as common activities, communication throughout the entire network are also going to be taken into consideration.

1.3 Purpose

Through an analysis of the focus groups in the SAPSA network, it will be evaluated how the knowledge sharing process in knowledge networks such as SAPSA can be improved in order to facilitate a more efficient knowledge transfer.
2 Theoretical Framework

This chapter will provide an overview of the existing concepts and theories within knowledge networking. First the different dimensions of knowledge and the knowledge conversion processes are going to be discussed and then five important facilitating conditions for knowledge networking are being presented. Based on these perspectives the collected empirical material will be analyzed.

2.1 Knowledge

In order to be able to understand and reflect on the knowledge sharing process in networks it is important to first have a look at the basic concepts of knowledge and which factors that are playing a role in its creation.

2.1.1 Explicit and Tacit Knowledge

While the definitions of knowledge differ, most researchers agree that two dimensions can be distinguished regarding the type of knowledge. The first epistemological dimension deals with the distinction between two different kinds of knowledge – ‘explicit knowledge’ and ‘tacit knowledge’ (Spender, 1996; Grant, 1996). Nonaka (1994) defines ‘explicit’ or also called ‘codified knowledge’ as “knowledge that is transmittable in formal, systematic language” (p. 16). It has a universal character and can be accessed through consciousness (Nonaka, Takeuchi & Umemoto, 1996). Furthermore, it can be described as “discrete and digital” (Nonaka, 1994, p. 17) that is, it is expressed in numbers and words, and therefore can be transported, represented, distributed and recorded for example in archives or databases (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

On the other hand ‘tacit knowledge’, also referred to as ‘implicit knowledge’ is described by personal experiences and perception, intuition, emotions and unarticulated models. It is highly subjective and thus difficult to formalize and make available to others (Szulanski, 1996). Tacit knowledge involves technical and cognitive elements. Technical elements can be defined as “concrete know-how, crafts and skills that apply to specific contexts” (Nonaka, 1994, p. 16), while the cognitive part refers to how individuals perceive reality and how they envision the future by forming working models of the world in their minds (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Communication in relation to tacit knowledge can be considered an analogue process, which is concerned with not only sharing knowledge, but also problem solving and understanding each other. In this context the problem solving process can be seen as simultaneous, that is to say that the different dimensions of an issue, are being discussed parallel to each other, in contrast to explicit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994).

2.1.2 Level of Social Interaction in the Knowledge Creating Process

The second ontological dimension addresses the level of social interaction, when building knowledge. Four different levels can be identified, in regard of the level at which knowledge may be shared: the individual, the group, the organizational, and the inter-organizational level. According to Nonaka (1994) the individual per se creates knowledge and develops an idea at a fundamental level. However in order to be able to develop the initial idea further, exchange with other individuals in so called ‘communities of interaction’ is considered to play a crucial role. That is to say that social interaction and exchange of ideas with peers contributes significantly to the creation of knowledge. In the process of developing and legitimizing knowledge several different levels of social interaction can be identified. When knowledge is created within the company it often happens in more informal ways. This might not only include people within the organization, but shareholders such as customers and suppliers can also be involved in the process. For a firm it is then
important to integrate this knowledge into strategic processes in order to be able to absorb the benefits of emerging knowledge. These “informal communities of interaction” (Nonaka, 1994, p. 17) can be transformed into more formal provisions by putting the informal community on a more formal basis, for example by forming an alliance or outsourcing. Knowledge building will then happen at an inter-organizational level and might even include competitors next to customers, suppliers and distributors (Nonaka, 1994).

### 2.2 Transformation of knowledge

The transformation of knowledge is important in order to share and expand knowledge beyond the mind of an individual (Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009). Nonaka (1991; 1994) identifies four processes of knowledge transformation, viewed in the following model.

![Figure 1.1 Modes of the Knowledge Creation](image)

Adapted from Nonaka, 1994.

(1) Socialization - From tacit knowledge to tacit knowledge
(2) Combination - From explicit knowledge to explicit knowledge
(3) Externalization - From tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge
(4) Internalization - From explicit knowledge to tacit knowledge

The first process of knowledge conversion ‘socialization’ enables individuals to exchange tacit knowledge through joint experiences. These shared experiences build the base for sharing tacit knowledge and make it possible to transfer tacit knowledge without the use of language (Nonaka, 1994).

‘Combination’ as the second mode of conversion refers to transforming explicit knowledge into more complex and systematized explicit knowledge through the use of social processes. Here knowledge is shared and combined through social interaction e.g. via a phone conversation or a meeting. Systematizing and refining the knowledge makes it easier to transfer and increases the practical value of existing knowledge (Nonaka, 1991; 1994). ‘Externalization’ and ‘internalization’ present the two last processes, involving both the conversion of tacit and explicit knowledge. These transformation processes are based on the idea that tacit and explicit knowledge complement each other and grow with time and mutual interaction (Nonaka, 1994).
Through the process of externalization, which describes the process of converting tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, knowledge loses some of its ‘tacitness’ and is thus easier and less costly to share. Internalization on the other hand deals with the conversion of explicit knowledge into tacit knowledge, making knowledge less explicit and hence easier for the individual to act on (Nonaka 1994; Nonaka & von Krogh, 2009).

2.3 Facilitating Conditions in the Knowledge Sharing Process

The environment of the network is determined by facilitating conditions, that is to say both structural and cultural dimensions, influencing the processes, which take place within the network and can either be supportive, or counterproductive (von Krogh & Grand, 1999). Supportive facilitating conditions, also called enablers provide a positive climate for networking activities such as knowledge sharing, while counterproductive conditions have a negative effect. These conditions can be divided in several categories and define the supporting or restricting environmental factors such as the network’s culture (i.e., norms and values or communication), but also the organizational structure and management system (Beerli, et al., 2003). The next section deals with the most important facilitating conditions that influence the knowledge sharing process within a network or as it happens in our case in the focus groups.

2.3.1 Group Size

The composition and the time to build a group is a critical matter for the organization and attention should be paid to the aspect of self-organization. The size of the group also has influence on the knowledge sharing process (Nonaka, 1994). Wenger, McDermott, and Snyder (2002) argues that in order to develop intimacy and feelings of mutuality the number of participants in a community of practice is limited. Kochen (1989) also states that even if a person might know a 1000 people he/she would only be able to maintain a certain amount of close relationships.

According to Nonaka (1994) the appropriate group size lies in the range from 10 to 30 people and should not exceed an upper limit due to decreasing interaction between group members as size increases. Within a team four to five ‘core members’ can usually be identified that play an important role and guarantee an appropriate ‘redundancy’ of information within the group. Other factors that play a role in influencing the performance of a group are for example formal position, age, or gender (Nonaka, 1994).

2.3.2 The Knowledge Base

The individual plays the most significant part in the process of organizational knowledge creation. Through experiences it collects tacit knowledge over time. In this process two factors that determine the quality of the accumulated tacit knowledge play an important role. The first factor is the ‘variety’ of the experiences an individual makes. If not being challenged and only facing monotonous, repetitive tasks, the level of tacit knowledge of the individual decreases over time. However also a high variation in tasks and experiences might not necessarily have a positive influence on knowledge creation, if the individual is not able to connect the experiences and integrate them into a new perspective. That is to say a high quality, of the experiences made, is essential in order for the individual being able to create new perspectives and maybe even completely redefine the nature of a ‘job’ (Nonaka, 1994).

‘Knowledge of experience’ can be seen as the second factor playing a role in the determination of quality of tacit knowledge. This term describes how deeply the individual is in-
volved in the object and situation and the process of embodying the knowledge through a deep personal commitment into bodily experience (Nonaka, 1994). In the process of creating organizational knowledge the constant interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge plays a significant role. It can be said that tacit knowledge provides a background necessary for developing and interpreting explicit knowledge (Polanyi, 1975). If tacit knowledge is requisite for the understanding of explicit knowledge, then subsequently two individuals willing to exchange knowledge require some sort of overlap in their knowledge bases (Ivari & Linger, 1999; Tuomi, 1999).

Teigland (2003) shows that the relationship between participation and increasing individual performance is not only dependent on the strength of the social tie, but also on the redundancy of the knowledge in the network. As a member of a network of practice the individual has to be willing to share knowledge in order to access knowledge in return. Although the presence of many participants that share the same functional expertise may actually lead to a lower degree of creative performance.

2.3.3 Trust

Davenport (2002) points out that with an increasing level of trust in a community the willingness to share knowledge rises, which subsequently has a positive effect on the knowledge level. Generally trust, defined as the “positive psychological expectation that another will not act opportunistically when an individual agrees to make himself or herself vulnerable to another” (Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt & Camerer, 1998, p. 395) presents the essential component of a social exchange relationship. While information sharing, that is to say explicit knowledge, can be accomplished through so called ‘weak ties’, the sharing of tacit knowledge requires denser ties with other members of the network (Dyer & Nobeoka, 1998).

Mutual trust builds the base for concept creation, which involves converting tacit knowledge into an explicit concept through a difficult process of externalization. This type of collaboration requires repeated and time-consuming interaction between members. Sharing one’s experience offers one way to build trust - the basic source for tacit knowledge (Nonaka, 1994; Schrader, 1991). This is important since know-how or tacit knowledge is more likely to have sustainable advantages compared to just information. Consequently it can be said that a smaller network or group size holds advantages over a larger network (Dyer & Nobeoka, 1998).

2.3.4 Communication

The main purpose of a network of practice is to increase the level of shared knowledge among the participating individuals. Communication in a network hence plays an important role by facilitating the knowledge sharing process (Rosengren, 2000).

A lot of problems hindering the communication process can be traced back to so call ‘noise’. According to Fiske “Noise is anything that is added to the signal between its transmission and reception that is not intended by the source” (1990, p. 8). This noise or interference may have a negative impact on the quality of the communicated signal, which may lead to unwanted changes in the message perceived by the receiver (McQuail & Windahl, 1993).

Dimbleby and Burton (2007) state three kinds of noise or as they call it barriers: mechanical, semantic, and psychological. Deafness, a lisp, and breakdowns in equipment involved in communication are all examples of mechanical barriers. Semantics refers to how different individuals interpret different words and phrases. The most common noise of commu-
communication is the psychological barriers. These refer to individual’s different values and beliefs, “communication may be filtered or blocked by attitudes, beliefs and values” (Dimbleby & Burton, 2007, p. 81).

The use of information and communication tools can improve and should build the foundation for the processes and knowledge network building. These tools can be used within social interaction and can be described as an architectural design combining Information and Communication Technology, as well as organizational tools and methods. These especially show potential in the area of management support; an IT-supported environment with computer-oriented rather than person-oriented knowledge processing. IT should not be the main driver of knowledge sharing processes, but technology should always be considered to be one of the enablers of knowledge sharing processes. Beerli et al. (2003) suggest that an organization should always provide a common technology platform in order to facilitate efficient knowledge sharing. This is especially important for organizations where the units are not geographically centralized and that have a wider business scope. How effective these tools are depends on the knowledge processes and their perception as continuously expanding and changing configurations weighted against the structural background of the network (Beerli et al., 2003).

2.3.5 Top Management Support

Knowledge sharing efforts require the vision and support of top management, in order to be successful. Managers should create incentives and provide the right resources, enabling employees to participate in knowledge networking. If the company is able to develop the right incentives for its employees to work with others and share knowledge they will be able to benefit from the results of successful knowledge transfer. It is important that top managers pay attention to clearly communicating the benefits of knowledge networking, in order to avoid a lack of understanding and motivate the employee (Beerli et al., 2003).

Clear definitions of intellectual capital and intellectual assets do not exist. This fact poses a problem, since it may be hard for the management of a company to calculate the return on investment for knowledge facilitating programmes, such as knowledge networking. Furthermore it is important to consider that the lack of nonfinancial measures might lead to the misconception that the program was a failure, although it actually improved performance. These facts lead to an underinvestment in programs, that improve employee performance and competencies, which is dangerous, since intellectual capital and intellectual assets gain more and more recognition as the drivers of a business’ future performance (Beerli et al., 2003).
3  Method

The following section describes how the secondary as well as the empirical data, which built the foundation for our thesis, were collected. It describes the chosen methods and motivates why this approach.

3.1  Trustworthiness of the Collected Material

In order to guarantee the trustworthiness of our collected data it was decided to use a concept of triangulation (Shenton, 2004), that is we made use of different methods to gather our empirical material for the main-study. The methods we used were individual informal interviews with participants and participative observation in Kista, phone interviews with SAPSA members and an online survey, complemented with phone contact with the focus group leaders. Doing our empirical research in this manner assured that we covered the opinions of different groups and compensated for potential limitations of individual methods, while gaining their respective benefits (Brewer & Hunter, 1989).

When choosing the potential respondents for our studies, we made it sure it was a random sample in order to avoid the distribution of unknown impacts on the sample and to be able to exclude any bias in the selection of the participants. Like this we hoped to achieve enough variety among the opinions within SAPSA. This method mainly applies to the phone interviews with the SAPSA members, since during the fair at Kista Mässan and the interviews with the focus group leaders the aim was to capture the opinion of at least one member of each present company and at least one leader of each focus group.

We made sure that our questions were based on, or at least related to, previous research findings. The empirical findings were analyzed through secondary data in order to be able to evaluate if our results were congruent with empirical findings other researchers had made in related areas (Shenton, 2000).

We always informed every respondent why we were doing this research and asked their permission to use their statements in our paper. In case of the interviews with the focus group leaders and the phone interviews we assured that they would feel able to speak freely by keeping them anonymous in both regards to names and gender. Transcripts of all empirical findings were produced and some of the interviews were recorded in order to assure the authenticity of the later created transcripts.

It has to be noted that all respondents, although they come from different companies, are all participating in one organization, which built the only base for our research. It might hence be a possibility that the findings of this research might not apply to other organizations and further research has to be done in order to be able to guarantee the transferability of our results.

3.2  Secondary Data Collection

Our secondary data collection was based on articles concerning knowledge and network theories, as well as data about communication theory. It was retrieved and collected from various data bases, like Google Scholar, Edward Elgar, Scopus, JSTOR, and DiVA as well as other internet based sources such as the SAP company website or other net-based articles. In addition to that we also gained knowledge by looking at textbooks addressing the matter and other course literature. The literature was chosen on suitable perspectives through which we were able to analyze our empirical material and draw conclusions. We are aware of the fact that a lot of literature related to our topic exists, but due to the constraints within the paper we chose only one perspective to view and analyze our problem.
3.3 Primary Data Collection

Our primary data collection consists of two main parts, a pre-study and a main-study. We decided to use this approach due to two reasons. Firstly we felt that since we had almost no pre-existing knowledge about SAPSA we were not able to create valuable and relevant questions for a main-study, just based on the information on the website and the project proposal by Per Högberg, a SAP-consultant in Skye and chairman of SAPSA. A pre-study therefore seemed appropriate in order to get a grasp on the research problem and gain a basic understanding of the topic (Creswell, 1998). Based on the information gathered through this method we then chose appropriate theories on which we based the questions for our further empirical study. Through the pre-study we were also able to identify different groups involved in the network and we decided to restrict our studies to topics related to the focus groups. The main-study took part in different steps, involving different groups from the network, in order to assure variety of the sample base and see if the opinions might differ between the respective groups. A qualitative, as well as quantitative approach was chosen due to different qualities of the groups. The methods of conduction also were adapted to the characteristics of the groups in order to get a high number of responses. In the following part the respective methods will be presented more in detail. No statistical methods were used to analyze the data, since we felt this was not going to contribute to the quality of the empirical findings. These findings were later analyzed through the perspectives chosen to built the theoretical framework.

3.3.1 Pre-Study with SAPSA Employees

In order to get an initial impression of the background of SAPSA and the problem we had a talk in Swedish with the two employees at SAPSA, Malin Kjellin and Ammi Gammal, at the SAPSA main office in Stockholm. They provided us with additional very broad information about the whole network and also gave us an impression about the existing problems they had and shared their opinions with us, so we were able to get an inside perspective. The interview was recorded but after experiencing some hesitation from the interviewees, we decided to stop recording and the conversation become more open. Directly after the interview, notes and thoughts from the last part of the conversation were added and we complemented the recorded material. The information we gained during this interview served as the base for the questions we prepared for the main-study. During the interview we also got the invitation to participate at SAPSA ‘IMPULS 2012’, a fair organized by SAPSA held at Kista Mässan in Kista, Stockholm. Parts of this interview were used in the analysis, however since we felt that this information could be biased, we tried to focus as much as possible on the results of the main study. The interview was conducted in Swedish, however when preparing a transcript, the notes were written down in English in order to be able to use them in our paper. We then went through the transcript and thought about theoretical framework that was related to the topics they mentioned and that we could base our main-study questions on.

3.3.2 Main-Study: IMPULS 2012

The invitation to participate at Kista Mässan presented a good possibility to gather first material for our main-study, interviewing the participants at ‘IMPULS 2012’. Without taking their professional position into regard we conducted informal interviews with members of all the firms that were present and other consultants and SAP users. Through participative observation we were able to gain insight into the processes in the focus groups. However using this technique it has to be taken into consideration that it only offers a subjective
perspective and is dependent on the researcher's interpretation in comparison to other data collection methods (Savage, 2000).

We decided on qualitative questions, in order to get a fuller understanding of the dilemma and determine how our new insights could be used (Cooper & Schinder, 2011). For two days we took part in activities and talked to people at the fair in order to get a better picture of the network and its participants. Another important aspect for us was to get contacts in order to obtain access to information about possible respondents for our main empirical study. The interviews were held individually and informal, although we had seven theoretical questions prepared (see appendix 3); however the process of interviewing was rather unstructured and the participants talked openly and widely about the topic without getting too much direction from us (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). Like this the topics often deviated from SAPSA, but we were able to get a very broad picture, many opinions and also an overview of the environment in which the SAPSA network takes place. An issue we noticed was that people often talked a lot more when they were able to speak Swedish, so in some cases we decided to switch from English in order to get a more open and relaxed talk. After each interview we took notes of the gathered information.

During the fair in Kista 27 face-to-face interviews with all exhibitor companies were made, also some focus group leaders and other attendants where approached. Thus, respondents consisted mostly of exhibitors and consultants. Besides the interviews we participate in various events at the fair and two focus group meetings, in order to be able to compare how possibly from each other deviating processes and actions could influence the quality of the knowledge exchange. Our observations in these meetings are going to be described in detail in the presentation of the empirical material.

After the fair, the decision to collect more data from two other groups were taken, the focus group leaders and another subsample consisting of active SAP users registered as SAPSA members.

3.3.3 Main- Study: Online Survey with Focus Group Leaders

We decided to focus our attention towards the leaders of the 22 focus groups, since we believed them to be the most active participants involved in the knowledge sharing process. By doing so we collected our data using a self-administered questionnaire in English, which we sent out online, since according to Fink (2003a) this kind of data collection is one of the most efficient and we were also provided with the necessary contact details. Another reason for choosing this method was the fact that an online survey in our case was superior to other methods due to its speed, convenience, low cost and ease of handing and following up the data sets (Evans & Mathur, 2005). We started by calling the leaders and asked them if they would like to participate in the online survey, hoping a personal approach would increase the participation rate. Some were more positive than others but a large number agreed and we sent them a link to the online survey that we prepared. Next to the questions, the online survey included clear instructions and another introduction to the topic, as well as informing them, that answers could be given as well in Swedish if preferred. Since they were more committed to the network than other members, we decided to have more questions and to include more qualitative questions in this study, to get more in depth answers and an insight in the internal processes (McGrath, Martin & Kukla, 1982). In the end we were able to retrieve ten answers from the focus groups leaders. The survey was anonymous and the only ‘private’ question the authors asked was which focus group they were active in, in order to be able to compare between prior answers and the views of focus group leaders possible. The main reasons why the survey was conducted anonymously
was the belief that the focus-group leaders would tend to answer more honestly if they could not be identified. All the questions are listed in appendix 5.

3.3.4 Main Study: Quantitative Interviews with Members of the Network

For our quantitative study, directed at members of the network, we decided to use a questionnaire, consistent of questions in Swedish, since that would allow us to reach a large number of respondents, in order to get a broader picture (Saunders & Lewis, 2012). The subjects for this study were chosen randomly from a SAPSA membership list. One thing we learnt at Kista Mässan was that the professionals involved in the network received a very large number of emails every day, and did not nearly find enough time to answer them all. We anticipated this was going to have a negative effect on the number of answers for our interview, if we sent it out online. In order to avoid a large number of non-responses we decided to create seven standardized, partly dichotomous (Yes/No) questions and in case we wanted to get a little more information we offered five-point-scale rating questions, ranging from ‘1’ ‘I do not agree at all’ to ‘5’ ‘I totally agree’ to capture the respondents perception about various parts of the network. We also included two follow up open questions, to obtain information about their suggestions for improvement and why they participated, since we wanted to know their reasons. However we tried to keep the structured interview as little time-consuming for the interviewees as possible. Since other mediums of distribution e.g. by hand, by post, or face-to-face (Saunders & Lewis, 2012) could be excluded due to the large number of our sample we decided to conduct the study via telephone, this were done in collaboration with SAPSA and Skye. After one and a half week of calling approximately 40 people per day, a total of 367 calls were made, we were able to get responses from 80 people from various companies. Access to information about the members i.e. phone numbers, email addresses, company names, member status in the network was granted from SAPSA.
4 Empirical Study

This section focuses only on the presentation of the collected empirical data. Information about the data collection and the conducted interviews is given in the method section. The objective of the empirical study was to gain a deeper knowledge of the structure and the knowledge sharing processes of the focus groups.

As mentioned in the method, the empirical study was conducted in two major steps, pre-study and main-study. The pre-study is summarized briefly and ended with a discussion. This part gives us the opportunity to discuss the impact these findings will have on the following empirical gathering. The content of the main-study is divided into three major parts; ‘qualitative study at ‘IMPULS 2012’’, ‘online survey with focus group leaders’ and finally ‘quantitative study with SAPSA members’. The empirical data is summarized under different topics in order to make it easier to connect the answers to the theoretical framework. However it has to be mentioned that the chosen topics do not align with the headings in the theoretical framework and may overlap with each other.

The focus group leaders were not asked for their names in the conducted survey, thus their identities, as well as their gender stayed anonymous. Therefore the object is expressed as he/she, when referring to a leader.

4.1 Pre-Study: Qualitative Interview with SAPSA Employees

We started the interview with Kjellin and Gammal by asking them if they could see any direct benefits with knowledge networking. Gammal replied that they viewed networking as a beneficial activity; “Networking is what we believe in and strive to accomplish. We can see companies turning around just because they are willing to share knowledge” (A. Gammal, personal communication, 2012-09-20). Gammal and Kjellin saw that SAP users entered the focus groups with the intention of gaining valid SAP-knowledge in order to find solutions related to personal user problems.

According to Kjellin and Gammal the focus groups can be considered the core practice of the SAPSA-network. The subscriptions to the focus groups are being done online. When subscribing, the members get assigned to a certain focus group, covering their field of expertise. The SAPSA-network consists of 22 focus groups, of which two are not active at the moment, with two leaders per group, one representing the user-companies and the other one being a consultant. The sizes of the focus groups vary a lot, ranging from ten to 200 subscribed members.

The numbers of meetings per year differ depending on the group. Kjellin stated she considered continuity to be important, since it created many positive attributes. When addressing the type and whereabouts of the meetings, Gammal explained that meetings were usually conducted both face-to-face and through telephone conferences, depending on the group. Two meetings per year with regular telephone conferences in between, were considered to be the minimum in order to guarantee efficient work in the groups. This however was not the reality for all groups and each group could decide internally what worked best for them. She explained that the PLM group for example, had met once every month but only in telephone conferences.

Gammal addressed a big problem related to phone meetings. She said that the telephone conferences differed a lot in quality, even though SAPSA educated the focus group leaders in this matter. Gammal explained that in many user firms the restrictions regarding access to websites were set very high. This created a problem when trying to share digital presentation materials during the meetings. Therefore many participants had to access the meet-
ing from home. This issue could also explain the absence of videoconferences. She kept on explaining that there had been attempts to combine face-to-face meetings with phone conferences, having only a part of the people at site in a conference room and the rest on the phone. This approach however created problems with integrating the people on the phone into the discussion (A. Gammal, personal communication, 2012-09-20).

When asking Gammal and Kjellin if they could identify any obstacles for users in order to participate in a focus group, they both pointed out that user firm employees and consultants suffer significantly from a lack of time. Kjellin also mentioned the danger that first time participants might perceive discussed topic as irrelevant, or felt that the meeting was being conducted in a poor manner, which could hinder them from further participation “You are not better than your last gig”. Kjellin continued the explanation (M. Kjellin, personal communication, 2012-09-20).

Gammal and Kjellin did not consider membership fees to be an obstacle, hindering firms of participating due to the fairly low amount every company had to pay. The fee is an administrative cost and ranges from 4 000 SEK p.a., (up to 100 employees) to 16 000 SEK p.a., at the highest level. The companies are then free to participate with as many employees in the focus group as they prefer. The largest cost however is seen as the time being allocated for focus group activities. This should not be identified as a problem, but should rather be perceived as a way to get ‘free’ knowledge in exchange for time spent in focus groups, instead of hiring an expensive consultant. When asking about the pricing of the SAP-consultants and if this might pose an obstacle to participation, Gammal confirmed that the cost of an SAP-consultant was high, but was a cost that had been taken into consideration by the company when purchasing their SAP-system. Competition between participating companies was not seen as an obstacle within the focus groups.

We asked Kjellin and Gammal if they could identify the biggest problem within the SAPSA-network. Kjellin directly addressed the fact that so few of the registered SAPSA-members were active in a focus group as one of the biggest problems. Many registered members saw SAPSA only as a newsletter and something that ‘you should be a part of’. There were a lot of members that signed up for a focus group and then never participated.

The employees further explained that when a SAP-related problem was being identified this most often happened in the lower levels of an organization. The low level workers that experienced the problem had a hard time motivating their managers to attend a knowledge sharing activity in order to solve the problems more efficiently. If these parties did not participate in a focus group they tended to miss out on important features in the SAP-application they had invested in. Gammal identified this as a problem, not for SAPSA but for SAP “Why are they not able to communicate this? Many do not know what they are purchasing. SAPSA is no educational program, the motivation to participate is knowledge sharing” (A. Gammal, personal communication, 2012-09-20).

In the interview Gammal articulated the wish for a clear communication strategy for SAPSA. Both Gammal and Kjellin agreed that it would be very useful to have some material they could present to users and user-firms in order to motivate them to become more active in the network, as well as in the focus groups. In general a clearer communication strategy was requested (M. Kjellin, personal communication, 2012-09-20).
4.2 Pre-Study Discussion

Our pre-study with Malin Kjellin and Ammi Gammal generated a large knowledge base of the SAPSA-network and especially the focus groups. Many questions regarding the structure and characteristics of the focus groups were answered and new questions arose. The knowledge we gained during this interview built the foundation for the preparation of the main empirical study and influenced our choice of conduction. Through the pre-study we understood that, due to time restraints by the potential interviewees, the empirical gathering had to be done through mail and phone conversation. When talking to SAPSA about this we got the invite to attend ‘IMPULS 2012’, the annual conference held every autumn. This gave us the opportunity to meet members face-to-face, get a deeper knowledge about SAP, SAPSA and the products being distributed by the consultants, and get to know about the knowledge sharing processes through attending two focus group meetings.

4.3 Main Study

This chapter starts with a summary of the data that was collected through the interviews and participative observation of focus group meetings at Kista Mässan between the 2nd and 3rd of October, 2012. Then the findings from the online survey with the focus group leaders and in the final chapter the data collected through a quantitative study of SAPSA-members will be presented.

4.3.1 Qualitative Study at ‘IMPULS 2012’, Kista Mässan.

During the two days in Kista the question regarding benefits of the networking were almost exclusively answered with ‘knowledge sharing’. The people asked, explained their answer in different ways.

Many mentioned that the network and focus groups presented a good way to meet the need for knowledge and often offered quick solutions for work related problems. The demand for knowledge sharing enabled skilled specialized consultants to find customers with specific needs and help them with tailored solutions. Participants at Kista furthermore said that for the user firm perspective the ability to acquire ‘free’ consulting and the advice given from other users should be seen as a big benefit. Through this interaction many focus groups would be able to establish best practice, which can be proven very helpful when returning back to the everyday working life.

Per Högberg, manager of SAPSA said that participating in the focus groups gave consultants, as well as the user firms the ability to stay up to date regarding new updates, editions and the newly released SAP-solutions. Missing out on a new release or an update of software, could cause severe problems for a firm and would be very expensive: “it is never a good thing to visit a SAP-user firm, having to inform them that against their knowledge they use an outdated SAP-edition” (P. Högberg, personal communication, 2012-10-03).

Scott Enerson, one of the focus group leaders, stated that many members of the SAPSA network would not see the value of participating, which he regarded unfortunate. He saw the knowledge sharing activity in the focus groups as a big resource and wished that the participation rate would be higher. When talking about benefits and problems Enerson said; “meeting others that have stumbled on the same type of problems as you have and then be able to share knowledge and find solutions together is very beneficial” (S. Enerson, personal communication, 2012-10-02).
Pontus Borgström and Mats Möller also confirmed networking as being positive and Borgström said that he “believed in a better outcome through networking within focus groups” (P. Borgström, personal communication, 2012-10-03). Möller stated, “I do not see any problems at all with participating in a network. Of course there is bits and pieces that can be developed and managed better, but sharing knowledge in our line of work is always profitable” (M. Möller, personal communication, 2012-10-03).

When asked about the obstacles with knowledge sharing and participating in a focus group, Enerson and many others said that time always is an issue for consultants and employees at a user firm. “I used to think that I didn’t have the time to be part of a focus group, I had too many other things I had to solve. I realize today that it was wrong of me to think that way” (G. Svantesson, personal communication, 2012-10-03).

Another problem that was addressed by several interviewees was the view that they, in the context of the focus group, did not have anything to contribute. This problem can be connected to the perceived lack of information regarding the vision and the goals of the focus group. The incentives for consultants to join a group were given, such as meeting existing and potential customers and selling solutions. Although for the employees of a user firm the incentives to participate sometimes seems unclear. “When participating in a focus group it feels like we are spying on others, what could we have to offer them” (M. Hoirt, personal communication, 2012-10-02). Many of the companies that were interviewed explained that they invested a lot of money into networking. They explained that at some point they had to evaluate how much the networking activity had contributed to the organization. In relation to this evaluation, an additional issue were addressed, namely the difficulties with measuring outcomes and return on investment when participating in a focus group. Even though many of these firms paid a high membership fee it was not these expenses that were considered to be the critical factor, again it was more about the time they invested.

When talking about problems within the SAPSA network and the focus groups the opinions circled around the same frame of topics. The most common issue to address was the lack of participants and the poor ratio of users to consultants, “people will drop out and new members do not come and take their place” (F. Sandell, personal communication, 2012-10-03). As a focus group leader for the PI-group (Process Integration) and active in the international group Borgström can be seen as an active member of the SAPSA network. After a focus group meeting at IMPULS 2012 Borgström identified the low participation rate as the biggest problem in the focus groups. He further explained how this was not only a challenge in the Swedish network, but that many other SAP-networks experienced the same problems; “lack of motivation is a universal problem” (P. Borgström, personal communication, 2012-10-03). He suggested that hiring a motivator in the network to inspire action, as they did in Holland might work in Sweden as well. As a reason for the lack of motivation he also mentioned problems with inefficient communication channels. Borgström wanted the communication flow towards the members of the focus groups to be short, informative, correct and easy accessible, due to the lack of time that many members experienced.

Some said they had bad experiences from focus groups where the majority consisted of consultants. The reason for this was that in some cases consultants were perceived as bragging about their solutions, creating the atmosphere of a marketplace within the focus groups, which led to less effective knowledge sharing. Vedin addressed this problem from an opposing point of view. He considered a restriction mechanism regarding the amount of consultants in a focus group as a contra productive restraint “It should not matter – the more the merrier” (H. Vedin, personal communication, 2012-10-03). He furthermore explained that
when a group got too small, there was no meaning to keeping it alive and that smaller groups maybe should be dispersed.

As mentioned above a higher participation and activity rate was strongly desired. This especially concerns the presence in the focus group and the face-to-face meetings such as ‘hemma hos besök’ (company home visits), an activity that some focus groups attend when visiting a user firm in order to learn from their solutions. The higher amount of attendants was desired in order to be able to split a big focus group and create more geographically concentrated groups.

Communication was an issue that came up in most interviews and was regarded as very important to all users. Högberg, a SAPSA board member, identifies communication as very important, he stated, “90 percent of what we do, should be about communication” (P. Högberg, personal communication, 2012-11-02).

4.3.1.1 Participative Observation of Focus Group 1

The meeting was conducted face-to-face in a larger conference room at Kista Mässan. Five members and one group leader were attending. The participants arrived at the scheduled time and the last person to arrive was the group leader. The tables in the room were placed in a big U-formation with approximately ten chairs at every outer side, giving the room the ability of hosting a party of at least 30 people. With such a big group everybody would have been facing each other, however with only five people attending the way the participants were sitting became inefficient and impersonal. No action was taken in order to change this arrangement, therefore the participants were not able to have eye contact and the ability to communicate with each other was limited.

The handshakes that were exchanged by the participants prior to the leaders arrival indicated that the participants did not know each other. Despite this fact the members did not get introduced to each other. Neither the leader, nor the members themselves took any action regarding that matter.

When starting the presentation the leader presented the agenda for the meeting. There was no digital presentation prepared and the picture posted on the wall by the projector was displaying a word-document with the agenda and later an Excel-sheet with figures. Initially the group-leader started with what could be explained as a briefing of what had happened since the last time. The first topic of the meeting addressed the ability this particular group had to affect development decisions of new SAP releases. Due to the leader’s position in the international SAP network, the opinions of this group could have a great impact. His speech could have been perceived as a motivational speech in order to increase focus group participation. Before leaving this topic, the ongoing lobbying for new and different features in the upcoming SAP-releases was discussed.

Future meetings and upcoming activities were also addressed. It was decided to have two telephone meetings per year and the annually face-to-face meeting at IMPULS. As an extra activity two participants wished for an all-day-event one time per year to visit a user-firm and talk about their specific solutions. The wish for a more international integrated knowledge exchange was also posted.

As a last discussion a participating member mentioned the problem with the low participation in the group. It was seen as a fact that the group could be including representatives from so many more companies. The importance of the focus group as a neutral zone, not
driven by consultants selling solutions, was mentioned to be of great importance. The request of the focus group leader coming from a user company was therefore expressed.

The duration of the meeting was approximately one hour. Regarding the activity level of members, two individuals besides the group leader could be described as actively taking part in the discussion.

### 4.3.1.2 Participative Observation of Focus Group 2

This meeting was held at the same location as the previous one and the seating arrangements had not been changed prior to the arrival of the participants. One of the first to arrive was one of the focus group leaders. While setting up the computer connection and checking that everything technical was working he/she recognized the problem with the seating. After ten people had arrived, the leader had the chairs and tables rearranged and put closer together. When all the 15 attending members had arrived the meeting started.

The focus group leaders started with introducing themselves and after that quickly moved on to talk about the purpose of the meeting. Stated on the agenda was a quick evaluation of the previous year’s activities and collecting suggestions for the coming year. With the help of a simple but prepared presentation and agenda, the schedule for the upcoming activities was presented. The mentioned booked activities were: a bigger upcoming event, one ‘hemma hos besök’ during the spring of 2013, one ‘hemma hos besök’ during the autumn of 2013, and six prepared topics for webinars/seminars/meetings.

After presenting this outline the discussion was opened. The question was what topics to address for topics those members would like to address. No clear suggestions were being made, but the informal discussion regarding the ‘hemma hos besök’ continued. One of the members directed a question to the other participants of the group regarding their problem solving routine. He got a fast and clear response from a few of the participants.

The discussion led to more general topics and the problems with the social media forum INSAJT were mentioned. The wish for a new social media site and more active information flow through this channel was something that everybody in the group felt. The group felt that the employees Gammal and Kjellin should try to find a solution for this problem. Furthermore the participants asked for a clear goal and vision regarding the work.

Wishes for a higher degree of participation of consultants in the group were seen as essential. Focus groups still had to be driven and the majority of participants should be represented by user firms, but in order to guarantee efficient knowledge sharing the consultants are highly needed.

### 4.3.2 Results from Online Survey with Focus Group Leaders

As mentioned in the pre-study discussion the main data collection from the focus group leaders would preferably be done through a questionnaire or by phone. Therefore we started with contacting the interviewees via phone, asking them if they were able to answer a short set of questions regarding the activities in their focus group. After doing so we sent them a link to our online survey. The data from this empirical gathering is not presented in a chronological order, but the findings are summarized according to the topics addressed in the study. The questions are presented in appendix 5.

Direct quotes of focus group leaders are presented in italics without giving a personal source in order to keep the focus group leaders anonymous, the interviews were all collected during the empirical study between October 12\textsuperscript{nd} and November 14\textsuperscript{th}, 2012.
4.3.2.1 Benefits of Networking

As a qualitative question we asked the focus group leaders ‘why is it beneficial for SAP users and consultants to participate in a focus group?’ They saw the benefits in the exchange of experience and information, in the acquirement of new knowledge, the possibility of influencing SAP through communicating problems and requests. Attending a focus group is, a way of acquiring free consultant advice and meeting people that had already solved problems, ergo a way of finding best practices through benchmarking.

One of the leaders mentioned a problem that there was currently no more value for the being of his/her focus group. This was due to a substitute activity arranged by SAP covering the same focus area as the interviewee’s focus group. There was therefore no more demand for knowledge sharing in this field.

Another qualitative question was ‘how can you see a connection between performance improvement in using the SAP system and participation in a focus group?’ Answers we got were from three leaders of different focus groups. The leader of the first focus group answered “in our group we have direct influence towards SAP, regarding the product development within our field and this is directly affecting the users in a positive way.” The leader of the second group said “I believe the members in our focus group, through their participation, becomes the front when it comes to taking advantages of the possibilities within the SAP-software in our focus area.” The third group leader stated that he/she saw significant value in seeing already developed solutions being used in a real life situation and through witnessing this experience best practice being fulfilled.

4.3.2.2 Problems with the Network

When asking the focus group leaders what they would change they could address whatever issue he/she felt was most important. One of the leaders addressed motivation. Furthermore the interviewee explained the lacking incentives for taking on the mission of being a focus group leader. He/she said, “I believe that we have to find a model for some form of compensation to focus group leaders. It is, at least, for some groups a very hard work to do this voluntarily.” Another leader spoke of his/her wish for more people giving presentations at group meetings. However he/she acknowledged the time issue and the impact this had when trying to motivate members to contribute.

4.3.2.3 Group Size

The following questions aimed to determine the active group size and to acquire the perceived optimal size of the group. Thirty percent of the group leaders identified six to ten active members in their current focus group. These groups all wished for a bigger active group. Group leaders that had the biggest groups (51-100 active members) were either happy with the size or actually preferred a smaller group. No interviewee desired to have less than eleven people in their group.

When the leaders of group with 11-20 active participants were asked what they thought of the group size and if they thought that a bigger group would create a more active core the answer was: “sometime it feels like the group is too small, but if the group was to be twice as big it would probably create a core of active people and the size would in reality be unbayed”.

Furthermore the question if it was the same people attending every time was asked. Seventy percent answered with a ‘Yes’ and only thirty percent answered with a ‘No’. It was possible to see a pattern that in the larger focus groups the answers were mainly ‘No’ and in the groups with fewer participants the answers were exclusively ‘Yes’.
When the focus group leaders were being asked if a large size of the group might hinder an active knowledge exchange for everyone, 60 percent said that it should not effect a group’s performance, however 40 percent offered the concern that this might indeed have a negative effect. There was one focus group leader that answered with a clear statement expressing the opinion that a smaller, consistent group was more effective due to stronger relations and trust.

4.3.2.4 The Variety of the Knowledge Base

An open question was posted regarding the topics in the focus groups and if the leaders thought that the level of expertise was relevant for all active members of the group. The question aimed to distinguish if the topics sometimes were seen as too specific or unspecific. The nature of the question also gave the leaders the ability to elaborate on the topic. One focus group leader said, “The questions we have raised during our meetings have ranged over a large area. It is both, so-called, simple questions and more expert questions. The consequences of this are that some topics are important for some but not for all”. Another leader provided his members with the possibility to bring up their own issues they considered relevant at the end of every meeting. Overall most leaders thought that the topics discussed were relevant for their group members.

The next question addressed the issue if the same people attending every time would lead to a problems in the exchange of knowledge within the group. One leader said, “One problem is that there are many participants that are newcomers, this is a problem even though there are many members attending every meeting”. Another leaders negated this question saying; “No I don’t see a problem with inconsistent groups. One of the key values with the focus groups is to share knowledge. So it is natural that people join when they start working in the focus area and by then their knowledge might be less then others. Also our group does share information, so I do not see any problem in this perspective”.

A leader in one of the largest active groups did not perceive this as a problem but considered it a challenge instead. He/she explained it like this; “In our field we have a big variety of technical topics to cover and all people are not working in all areas. This of course presents a challenge but we try to cover many topics, in order to attract more people. A limited group size is of course a big show-stopper, as many participants tend to wait and see for a few meetings before they start to contribute”.

The overall opinion among the recipients was that it was not a serious problem, but that it was notable and that there were issues related to this subject. The core activity within the focus group, namely knowledge sharing, demanded a great number of participants and in order to create the big groups, that the leaders wished for, new members had to be included and could therefore not to be seen as an obstacle but more of a challenge.

4.3.2.5 Communication

The focus group leaders stated that their most common channels of communication were: phone conferences, face-to-face meetings, and a combination of these two. Another way to communicate that was mentioned was WebEx, a tool providing on-demand collaboration, online meetings and web-conferences.

They explained that phone conferences were often used due to the geographical distance between members and to stay in touch between events, but agreed that it often was good to have face-to-face meetings, such as the once at ‘IMPULS 2012’. Others regarded face-to-face communication as the most efficient way for their group. The general trend leaned more towards meetings via the web, using tools such as WebEx, or phone due to above mentioned problem with geographical distance.
The respondents were also asked if they perceived problems with the communication and in what way. Only one person mentioned that it would be ‘more fun’ to meet more often and if more members attended the events, while the others seemed to not experience problems in this area.

When the focus group leaders where asked if they felt that the participants were well informed regarding the SAPSA network the exclusive answer was ‘Yes’. When in the follow up question being asked if they considered an insufficient level of information to be an obstacle for users to participate in the focus groups, 60 percent of the respondents answered with ‘Yes’.

The leaders were then asked if they saw any development abilities regarding the structure and execution of the meetings. The wish for more ‘hemma hos besök’, workshops in order to explore practical solutions, seminars in order to find new suppliers and customers, and focus groups in the areas of ‘Mobility’ and ‘Business Technology Solutions’ were mentioned. A wish for these new focus group activities, seminars, ‘hemma hos besök’ and workshops to be mandated and run by SAPSA was expressed. Many of the focus group leaders would like to promote the social media INSAJT better, in order to make it more user-friendly and increase the use of the site. They also expressed a wish for a more direct access to the survey system and all WebEx sessions in order to “gain more user participants and make the use of the SAPSA mail system easier from external Outlook systems.”

4.3.3 Quantitative Study with SAPSA-members

In addition to the previous data collection made from the focus groups leaders the opinion of the average SAPSA member will now be addressed. This quantitative study was conducted between the 12th October and the 14th of November 2012. After making 367 calls we got 80 respondents answering the questions. The empirical study is being presented in topics and is therefore not presented in chronological order. This structure is being used in order to enable an easier analysis and comparison to the theoretical framework. The questions asked can be seen in appendix 4.

4.3.3.1 Benefits of Networking

The positive opinion in regards to networking was confirmed in our quantitative study with SAPSA members. When the interviewees where asked if the perceived knowledge networking as meaningful 75 percent of the participants answered with a ‘4’ or ‘5’, indicating that they perceived the value in networking as high or very high. Fourteen percent of the respondents perceived the value of networks as neutral, answering with a ‘3’, while the remaining eleven percent answered with a ‘1’ or ‘2’, stating that they did not consider networks meaningful.

The following question was aimed to find out where the SAPSA members perceived the value in the network and the focus groups. The exchange of knowledge was the quality that nearly all participants valued highly. Further answers were: getting valuable contacts for future collaboration, helping each other finding best practice solutions, avoiding mistakes others had already made, benchmarking with no secrets, keeping up to date with new SAP-releases, enabling influence on SAP-product development, and getting consultant advice for free.
4.3.3.2 Problems with the Network

In order to determine the participation and the interviewee’s activity status in the network, two questions regarding this were asked in the beginning of our quantitative study. The question how active the members were, was being answered on a scale from ‘1’ to ‘5’, where ‘1’ can be seen as ‘not being active at all’ and ‘5’ being seen as ‘fully committed’. Fifty-eight percent saw themselves as not active and therefore answered with a ‘1’ or a ‘2’; while 24 percent identified themselves as neutral by answering with a ‘3’, the remaining 18 percent saw themselves as active, by answering the question with a ‘4’ or a ‘5’. Worth mentioning is that less then four percent out of the entire group of interviewees identified themselves as fully committed, answering with a ‘5’.

After getting an impression of their activity status in the network as a whole, the next question that followed referred to their activity in a focus group. Forty-four percent perceived themselves as active in a group, answering with a ‘Yes’. The remaining 56 percent, answered with a ‘No’, stating their non-activity.

When comparing the two questions, 20 percent identified themselves as non-active SAPSA participants (answering with ‘1’ or ‘2’ in the first question), but considered themselves active in a focus group (answering with a ‘Yes’ in the second questions). Forty-two percent identifying themselves as active to very active SAPSA participants (answering with ‘4’ or ‘5’ in the first question) meanwhile also seeing themselves as non-active in a focus group (answering ‘No’ in the second question).

4.3.3.3 How SAPSA Convey Their Message to the Users

Another question in relation to SAPSA as network was if the members thought SAPSA delivered their information in a effective way. Only nine percent viewed SAPSA’s communication ability as poor (answering with a ‘1’ or a ‘2’) and 23 percent answered with a rather neutral ‘3’. Whilst the remaining 68 percent answered with a ‘4’ or a ‘5’, stating that they considered SAPSA to communicate in an effective to very effective way.

4.3.3.4 Room for Improvement

Only four percent of the interviewees considered SAPSA to not have any possibilities to improve their network, while the remaining 96 percent thought that SAPSA could improve in different ways. They expressed the desire for more detailed and relevant information throughout the network and activities within SAPSA. The users also proposed some development abilities regarding the use of technical tools in order to communicate with each other. The request of a more efficient forum, in comparison to INSAJT, SAPSA’s collaboration site and a better homepage was mentioned.
5 Analysis

The following section is going to connect the theoretical framework with the results of the empirical studies in order to be able to draw conclusions about important influencing factors and problems within the focus groups.

5.1 Benefits of Knowledge Networking

All respondents, participating in the empirical data collection, shared a throughout positive opinion about knowledge networks. The participants viewed knowledge networking almost exclusively as beneficial and the quantitative study with the SAPSA-members also confirmed that 75 percent perceived the value of knowledge sharing as high or very high. Only one group leader did not regard his focus group to be useful anymore, this however can be explained by the fact that SAP was offering a very successful substitute in his field of expertise. This only contributes to the picture that knowledge networks are useful and also exist outside SAPSA.

People believed in better outcomes through knowledge networking and considered individuals, participating in the focus groups to have a significant advantage over others. Knowledge sharing was the factor that most respondents identified as their main motivational factor, when participating in SAPSA. The responding individuals were all of the opinion that the focus groups offered access to very important information and knowledge. Here the experience of other SAP users that had already solved problems was regarded as a very valuable resource. SAPSA was seen as a possibility to learn from the mistakes others had already made. The value was perceived in seeing already developed solutions in real life and following best practice from other companies. This kind of knowledge is exclusively accessible in networks like SAPSA. Also working together within the focus groups, solving problems, and helping each other to find best practice solutions were regarded benefits of SAPSA.

Besides knowledge, all the groups considered sharing with other members working together with usually very expensive consultants that participated in the focus groups a positive attribute. The members of the focus groups regarded the advice and the tailored solutions the consultants provided as very valuable. Through the in this case ‘free’ collaboration with skilled and experienced SAP consultants many focus groups would be able to establish best practice, by addressing specific needs and problems, which positively affected their work performance.

The members of the network also regarded staying up to date highly important. Missing out on new releases and updates can cause a firm severe problem and presents a financial risk as Högberg explained it. Staying up to date with SAP is hence really important. Many respondents noted therefore that SAPSA also was beneficial because it kept their members informed about SAP, if it was in the focus groups, the yearly events or their magazine. Due to this information, purchasing functions from third party developers, the firm already possessed or could acquire from SAP directly can be avoided. Staying up to date was also considered to be a benefit for the consultants in the network. In the quantitative study it was also mentioned that the network offered benchmarking with competitors and offered the possibility to get valuable contacts for future collaboration.

The focus groups also give the SAP users the possibility to influence SAP product development. Through combining their voices and making them explicit they are able to directly give SAP feedback and therefore have a say in the development of future releases. While
the articulation of problems and requests by single SAP user experiences most likely is not regarded as very important by SAP, the combined opinion by whole focus groups has more significance. This is a factor that is not only considered important for the users, but especially for SAP, that should value customer feedback in a form like this and support networks like SAPSA, next to their own user networks.

5.2 The Paradox of Low Activity

Active participation of all members and a quorum of members in the focus groups was something that was strongly desired and seen as a condition for effective knowledge sharing. However, this is not reflected in the activity rate of members. While everybody sees the participation in the focus groups as beneficial, in the interview with the SAPSA employees it became obvious that the lack of activity of members can be seen as one of the biggest problems of SAPSA. People might be signed up, but do not participate in the network as active members. This problem is visible at both the events and the focus groups. The problem was confirmed in the quantitative study with all members. More than half of the respondents identified themselves as not being active in the network and only four percent considered themselves to be very active. The share of members being active in a focus group was also found to be less than 50 percent. Due to the fact that most members stated knowledge sharing as the biggest benefit of the network, this number is surprising, since the main exchange of knowledge takes place in the meetings of the focus groups. When investigating further it was found that the respondents did not necessarily see a connection between being a member in SAPSA and participating in a focus group. Since SAPSA considers the focus groups as their core activity, this brings up the question why so many members do not see the focus group as their core.

The general positive attitude towards knowledge networks has to be seen in the context that all the respondents were actually members in such a network and thus saw some kind of benefit in their participation; otherwise, they would not participate in some way or another. It could be argued that due to this fact the study of attitude towards knowledge networking in this case therefore only provides a biased opinion and the sample group should be extended to other individuals not being members of a knowledge network. This however does not explain why the activity of members in the focus groups is so low, when they all see knowledge sharing as beneficial. They say one thing, but act differently. Since in theory knowledge networking is beneficial and everybody seemed motivated, but in reality, the activity rate is low, the problem is likely to lie in the implementation of the knowledge networking processes.

5.3 Knowledge

In order to be able to analyse and determine supporting and counterproductive factors in the knowledge sharing process in the focus groups, the two different dimensions and the different knowledge conversion modes are going to be introduced.

5.3.1 Explicit and Tacit Knowledge

The first dimension deals with the nature of the knowledge that is shared in the focus groups. Tacit knowledge as being subjective is significantly harder to share than explicit knowledge. If the knowledge shared in the focus groups was mainly consisting of tacit knowledge, more attention should be paid to the process in order to facilitate a more efficient knowledge exchange. By participating in two different focus groups, it was found that both tacit and explicit knowledge was shared. Graphs and diagrams that were presented to
visualise problem solving facts about SAP, can be seen as an example for the transfer of explicit knowledge while sharing the know-how how to interpret such a graph is transferred tacit knowledge. In this process however mainly the technical elements of tacit knowledge were transferred, while it was being found that the transfer of cognitive elements was almost completely absent, which can be traced back to the technical nature of SAP.

Also to mention is the fact that in the tacit knowledge sharing process, the different dimensions of a problem are being discussed simultaneously (Nonaka, 1994) and thus the need for efficient communication, in this case being an analogue process, is increased. The communication processes in the network are going to be evaluated in greater detail, when analysing the structure of the network in the next chapter.

5.3.2 The Level of Social Interaction

The second dimension of knowledge deals with the level of social interaction in knowledge creating processes (Nonaka, 1994). Regarding the social level on which knowledge is shared in the SAPSA network it can be stated without doubt, that this happens on all four different levels. In the focus groups of the network the different individuals meet and socially interact with each other. It can be argued that in this context, if there is more than one employee of the same firm participating, that knowledge is also shared on an organizational level. However knowledge is shared also on the inter-organizational level. Different companies come together and share knowledge and solve problems together.

As already mentioned in the definition of the network, SAPSA goes beyond just being an ‘informal community of interaction’. It is an intentionally created inter-organizational network on a formal basis. This leads to the fact that within the network that next to customers, suppliers and distributors even competitors meet and work together.

5.3.3 Knowledge Conversion in the Focus Groups

Socialization is an important conversion mode that is most common in the face-to-face meetings of the focus groups, since the participating members are able to share experiences and interact closely with each other. One characteristic of socialization is that it is possible to share tacit knowledge without the use of language (Nonaka, 1994), which is almost exclusively possible in face-to-face meetings, such as ‘hemma hos besök’. That leads to the conclusion, that if the focus mainly lies on the transfer of for example specific know-how a face-to-face meeting is going to be the most efficient way.

Social interaction also plays an important role in the combination mode (Nonaka, 1994), however this conversion process can also take place in a phone meeting. It is important for the focus groups to share knowledge in that way, since it makes it easier to transfer existing knowledge. The improved explicit knowledge could then help enhance intra-organizational performance after the employee went back to his/her company.

‘Externalization’ and ‘internalization’ also present important processes of knowledge conversion in the focus groups. Through externalization it will be easier to share and communicate knowledge to others (Nonaka, 1994). This could for example be achieved, by designing a handbook for certain problem solving processes, which then could be shared with others outside SAPSA as well. Internalization is important in a sense that sometimes explicit knowledge that SAP users have available might be hard to understand for them and then in the focus groups they can learn how to act on and understand this knowledge.
Due to the ambiguous nature of the knowledge that is being shared in the focus groups, it is hard to find what processes take place in which context. It can be said; that at some point probably all processes can be detected; yet for a deeper analysis of the matter, a more detailed study of the focus groups would be necessary. It however can be concluded that in order to share specific kinds of knowledge, such as tacit knowledge some forms of interaction serve the efficiency of the knowledge transfer better than others, as can be seen in the socialization process. This should be taken into consideration when deciding on how a meeting is going to be conducted. While phone meetings might work for some matters, in some cases face-to-face meetings might actually become necessary.

5.4 Facilitating Conditions for Knowledge Sharing in the Focus Groups

In the empirical study several factors were identified to have an impact on the knowledge sharing process and its quality. These characteristics are going to be presented and analysed. It should be noted that these factors often influence and emerge from each other.

5.4.1 Group Size

The sizes of the focus groups in SAPSA vary significantly from each other, ranging from ten to 200 subscribed members. Here it has to be noticed that many members that are subscribed in a focus group do not participate in the meetings and thus do not take part in the knowledge sharing process within the focus groups. Thirty percent of the focus group leaders stated in the survey that their group only consisted of six to ten active members, while two groups said they had groups with 51 to 100 active members. If all these numbers really describe active focus group members, it is hard to detect why the sizes of the active groups differ so much from each other. A study of the network in general was not sufficient to answer this question. In order to determine the influencing factors a further more detailed study of the processes in each individual focus group would be necessary, but was not possible in the course of this paper. Gammal and Kjellin stated that usually only about ten members participated in the meetings, regarding the HR group with 50 members actively participating an exception.

Comparing these numbers to Nonaka’s (1994) it becomes apparent that this number presents the lower range of an efficient group. The focus group leaders had different opinions about the size of a group they considered optimal. The leaders that had six to ten people in their active group wished for a bigger size and no one wanted to have less than eleven people in a group, confirming Nonaka’s (1994) theory that an efficient knowledge exchange starts from ten people up. Group leaders with big groups were either satisfied with their group or preferred a smaller size, which indicates that at some point the knowledge sharing process becomes less effective if the group gets too big. However the 60 percent negated a negative effect on a group’s performance connected to very large group size. It can be concluded that a group smaller than ten people has a negative effect on the knowledge sharing process and that it is likely that at some point the group gets to a size that has a negative impact, as stated in the research conducted by Wenger et al. (2002) and Kochen (1989).

As Nonaka (1994) describes the composition of the group, also has impact on the performance. The focus groups do optimally consist of SAP users and consultants in order to guarantee the most efficient knowledge gain for the users. That is also the reason why one of the leaders should be a user and the other one a consultant. Many SAPSA members mentioned the uneven distribution of users and consultants to be an issue. However the problem was on both ends. Some focus group members thought that the consultants were
‘overly present’ in the focus groups, while others said that they would like to have more consultants in the groups. This issue is subsequently regarded to differ from group to group and no statement can be made for the groups in general. It should rather be individually, from group to group, evaluated what user/consultants ratio would be considered best and most efficient and if there should be an upper limit for the number of consultants in a group. It is still worth mentioning that too many consultants ‘creating the feeling of a market place’ were considered annoying and could be seen as an obstacle to participate in a focus group.

5.4.2 The Knowledge Base

Nonaka (1994) states that the individual plays the most important part in the creation of knowledge. In the context of a focus group, next to the knowledge creation, the focus however has to be on the sharing of individually created knowledge. Since a group consists of more than one individual, it was assumed that factors influencing the quality of knowledge for one individual also would affect the quality of knowledge for a group.

Two factors were found to play a role on influencing tacit knowledge. The first one is the variety of different experiences an individual makes (Nonaka, 1994). In the SAPSA network it was not found that the lack of variety of experiences presented a problem in the focus groups. Due to the division of the network into different focus groups with special areas of expertise it can be said that too many different ‘experiences’, not being connected to each other do not pose an issue and that the participating individuals are able to integrate their newly gained knowledge into a work-related perspective.

Another form leading to ‘variety’ in the knowledge base is the level of expertise. Related to the question above one focus group leader stated that through the process of new members entering the group and other members gaining more experience through frequent attendance, different levels of expertise would always exist. Also the topics they covered in the focus group would range from more simple questions to very specific problems. This would sometimes lead to the fact that not all the topics covered where also relevant for everybody in the group. Overall the leaders however experienced that the topics in the focus groups still provided enough variance and were considered relevant by the members. One leader also offered his members to bring up the topics they wanted to discuss at the end of the meeting.

Assuming that variety is determined by the people that are attending the focus group meetings, it would be important to know if the there was a ‘core’ of people always attending the focus groups, or if the members in the group varied. The vast majority of the groups however stated that they it was the same people attending every time. The smaller groups exclusively say that they had no variety in their groups. Considering the average small group sizes the question was raised if at some point the same people attending every time would lead to problems in the exchange of knowledge within the group. Most focus group leaders did not seem to have experienced problems regarding that issue. The big variety of topics to cover or the fact that next to people who attended all meetings new members were coming and going, were mentioned as reasons that this problem did not occur in the focus groups. It was however said that it sometimes took new members a few meetings before they started to contribute, which also indicates that trust and relationships have a positive effect on knowledge sharing. The variety of topics and expertise and thus relevancy for members cannot be regarded to present a big issue in the focus groups. However to enable an efficient knowledge exchange stronger emphasis should be put on integration of new members.
and good social relations within the group, since that apparently keeps some members from actively contributing in the group.

The second factor influencing the quality of knowledge was the commitment individuals showed in the process of embodying knowledge. The lack of commitment was perceived as a negative factor, when attending focus group one. The leader was not well prepared and arrived last, people did not make an effort to get to know each other, the seating was inefficient and was not changed. This all led to a lower active participation in the group dialogue, than observed in group two, influencing the quality of the knowledge that was shared and created by the individuals in a negative way. Individual commitment thus seems to play a very significant role determining the quality of knowledge and the knowledge exchange. Especially the group leader seems to have a big impact and is able to increase the commitment level of a group by putting more effort and commitment into the group meetings him-/herself.

5.4.3 Trust

A factor that is strongly related to group size and has positive influence on the efficiency of the knowledge sharing process and group performance is trust (Nonaka, 1994). Only one focus group leader mentioned that within a smaller group he/she felt the efficiency of the knowledge sharing process rose because of the feeling of intimacy the smaller group created, while the others did not regard trust as important. Those members do not know each other however might be a factor having a negative impact on the groups. Better relationships within the group create a more open dialogue among the members and increase commitment in the long run.

As seen in focus group two little things like changing the seating arrangement can have a positive influence on group dynamics. Bringing the group closer together and introducing the members to each other strengthened social relations and the trust among members was increased. This resulted in a more active exchange among the members in focus group two, than in focus group one. More focus should thus be set in some focus groups on establishing a good atmosphere within the meeting, in order to increase mutual trust and thus also commitment of the members. If somebody integrated in the group and perceived the quality of a meeting as high, the likelihood to stay active and come back is assumed to increase.

On-going contact also has an effect on the building of trust. The more the members meet and interact with each other, the better their relationships are going to get. This was one of the points where the members saw the ability to improve the network, they wished for more common activities. Gammal and Kjellin also considered a regular contact within the focus groups to be important. The groups often kept contact via phone conferences, if the geographical distance was too big, but people also met in person. This was different from group to group and there were no guidelines on how to handle this issue in the groups. Two face-to-face meetings per year and regular phone conferences were considered to be a good solution, but some focus groups did almost have no contact at all. This can be regarded an issue that has a big influence on the motivation and on the quality of the knowledge sharing process. Common activity and on-going contact should be regarded as important in knowledge networks like SAPSA in order to keep members active and motivated.
5.4.4 Communication

Communication presents a very important and critical factor in a knowledge network and should therefore be implemented very carefully (Rosengren, 2000). Communication was identified to be very critical factor in SAPSA with much room for improvement. Throughout the whole investigation it was not discovered that there were any semantic or psychological hindering an effective communication. It is not excluded that these not exist, but they did not become apparent in any of the observed processes. However several mechanical barriers were detected to have a negative impact on the communication processes in the network. If the term ‘noise’ is used in the following analysis it hence refers to mechanical dimension of noise. The most commonly used communication channels in the focus groups were phone conferences, face-to-face meetings, and a combination of phone and face-to-face meetings, another way to communicate was WebEx.

Noise was especially found in the ‘mixed’ meetings and the phone conferences. That it was harder to share especially tacit knowledge under these kinds of circumstances might be the reason, why some leaders considered face-to-face meetings the most efficient way. The phone conferences were said to differ a lot in quality, although the focus group leaders had perceived some education. They often were not able to share presentations due to the Internet restrictions, which hindered an efficient knowledge transfer. It was also hard to integrate everyone in phone or mixed meetings, however these form of meetings were often preferred by the focus group leaders due to geographical distance between members. The distance was also the main reason that most leaders leaned towards electronic communication via diverse communicational tools.

SAPSA currently uses four tools in order to communicate with their members, however all of these tools were considered to not be satisfactory due to various reasons and offer room for more effective use and improvement.

Facebook is being used in order to communicate with members and send them information. The problem with Facebook is that it is more used for private networking and cannot be regarded a business network. SAPSA member might thus be hesitant to use Facebook due to two reasons. First they could be reluctant to integrate work and private life perspectives, hence not wanting to use Facebook for work related tasks. The second reason is that accessing social network sites during work hours is not allowed or seen as negative in many firms. Some firms even have strict Internet restrictions blocking the use of these sites. Not even the SAPSA employees were sure who could access the uploaded information. It was also criticized that non-members often had the same access to information as members, thus removing one incentive to join the network.

The homepage of the network was mentioned to be difficult to use. All three groups asked, agreed on that. A problem with the administration of members and non-members exists and the updating process is highly inefficient.

Another social network called INSAJT is used to stay in touch with members. It was not regarded as useful by the members and was perceived as just ‘another’ community to keep track of. Focus group leaders also stated that INSAJT should be improved and made user-friendlier to increase the use of the site. Lack of promotion of the site was also mentioned and could be a reason for low activity.

WebEx is a communication tool offering on-demand collaboration, online meetings, web-conferences and videoconference applications for business. However in this case the
members criticised that it was not efficiently used and that it offered room for improvement.

Many members wanted to have more detailed and relevant information about the things happening in the network. This is interesting to see in the context, that SAPSA actually uses four different tools to reach its members. The above-mentioned problems with the different tools how that quantity of communication channels is not necessarily a good thing connected to communication. It takes time to check and be active in all the different channels and the focus should be set on developing one forum, with concentrated, correct, high quality information for members.

It can be said that face-to-face communication is most likely the most efficient especially for tacit knowledge transfer, however this is often not an option for the leaders due to the distance. More attention should be paid to the conduction of phone meetings and other forms of communication in order to eliminate as much noise as possible.

Both Gammal and Kjellin and users responding the quantitative articulated the wish for a more efficient forum compared to INSAJT, which is mentioned to be important in knowledge networks by Beerli et al. (2003). The forum then could be used to chat with users, communicate events and news and offer the users the possibility to post questions on a bulletin board. However the effectiveness of the forum would strongly depend on the Internet restrictions some user firms might have. This provides an obstacle that should be addresses with more emphasis.

5.4.5 Management Support

The participation in the focus groups of the SAPSA network has to be supported from not only one, but two management teams, the SAPSA management and the management of the ‘home’ organization of the respective participating employee.

On their website SAPSA states that their aim is to facilitate knowledge and experience exchange among the members through networking. This is supposed to happen in the focus groups and the events, however there are no guidelines on how the knowledge exchange should be implemented. Furthermore a problem can be seen in the communication of a clear, consistent vision to their members. The incentives for the consultants to participate are clear, meeting (potential) customers and selling their solutions, but for the users the benefits of being an active member of SAPSA in the focus groups are harder to identify. The focus group leaders felt well informed by SAPSA, however the majority saw a relation between non-participation of members in a focus group and a lack of information. Most of the members also felt that SAPSA communicated ‘their’ message in an effective way. So it can be said that in theory the members see the benefits of knowledge networking, but they do not seem to see them in the focus groups. By developing a clear vision and informing the members about the benefits of the focus groups their motivation to become active could be increased. It should be tried to measure the positive impact of networking and back it up by data to become trustworthy. In order to increase motivation among group leaders it was suggested to introduce some sort of compensation system for the group leaders. Doing this work on a voluntary basis had a negative impact on the effort some group leaders put into their work. By receiving compensation for their time group leaders would be likely to invest more effort into SAPSA and prepare better for the meetings.

The vision should be communicated to the decision makers of a firm to make them realize of the positive impact knowledge networking can have on a firm’s performance. These could then provide their employees with the necessary resources (time, access to web based
forums) and incentives to participate and be active in SAPSA and increase their knowledge about SAP and skills. Many of the companies that were interviewed explained that they invested a lot of money into networking. They said that at some point they had to evaluate how much the networking activity had contributed to the organization. Even though many of these firms paid a lot of membership fees it was not these expenses that they considered to be the critical factor, it was more about the time they invested. Membership fees can hence be disregarded as to present an obstacle that is effecting participation in the network. The costs for joining the network can be seen as low for the firms and should thus not pose a reason to not become a member. Here the problem lies more in the difficulty of measuring the benefits and positive impacts of knowledge networking in the focus groups, which can be a reason for managers to underinvest and not support their employees enough to participate. If the benefits were clearer members would lose some of their hesitation to invest time into SAPSA, and would be more motivated to be active.
6 Conclusion

This part is focused on the presentation of the conclusions we were able to draw from the analysis. It shortly summarizes the most important findings of the analysis and then continues with practical suggestions for improvement and proposes topics and areas of further research.

SAPSA as a knowledge network is a very complex organization. When trying to enhance the efficiency of the knowledge transfer in the focus groups different aspects and problems have to be taken into consideration.

The main problem that was discovered and also the incentive for this investigation of the network, is the low participation and activity rate in the focus groups. It was clearly stated that the members considered knowledge networking to be positive and beneficial, but did not show the motivation to be active in the focus groups. This paradox led to the assumption that the problem had to lie somewhere in the implementation of the knowledge networking processes in the focus groups.

When analyzing the knowledge that is being shared it can be concluded, that depending on the form of knowledge certain types of meetings, such as face-to-face can be regarded more efficient than others. This should be taken into consideration, that in some cases for example phone meetings will lead to qualitative equal results as face-to-face meetings.

It was found that the most efficient knowledge transfer was considered to take place in focus groups ranging from ten to approximately 50 people. Also trust, commitment and the composition of the group, especially the consultant/user ratio, influenced the quality of the exchange. The communication between users, outside and inside the focus groups was not regarded to take place in an effective manner and could be improved, by focusing more on fewer but qualitative communication channels, rather than on quantity. Due to big differences in the composition and implementation of the focus group, no overall solutions for these problems can be given to the focus groups. In order to address the individual issues in every group a further deeper analysis of the processes in the different groups would be necessary.

It can however be said that it would be beneficial for SAPSA to commit to strategic change and to establish a clear, consistent vision capturing all the different groups in the network. Special emphasis should be set on the user firms, since they are the ones that show much lower activity and participation than the consultants. Since companies as a whole sign up for SAPSA, it is assumed that the managers of the ‘home’ organizations of the users have more influence on the motivation to participate in SAPSA (see Figure 1.2). The benefits should therefore be articulated to the decision makers of the company, so they are able to set incentives for their SAP users to participate and provide them with the necessary resources such as time and access to the communication channels. The difficulties to measure the positive outcomes of knowledge networking should be taken into consideration when communicating with the managers and further material to support the hypothesis that participation in knowledge networking in the specific context of SAP is beneficial should be collected.

The communicated quality of knowledge networking to the managers however has to be secured by the SAPSA management team in order to be successful and keep the members active. They have to establish guidelines for the implementation of their focus groups and increase the commitment of especially the focus group leaders, since it was found that they have a big influence on the quality of the knowledge transfer. Establishing some sort of
compensation system for the focus group leaders and keeping a closer relationship with them could achieve this. Further education to conduct focus group meetings should be addressed, informing the leaders about the importance of social relationships in the knowledge sharing process. In order to keep the users informed and to assure the quality of the focus groups, special attention should be paid to an on-going contact. This could be achieved by for example arranging a minimum number of meetings per year. Depending on the form of knowledge, explicit or tacit, which is to be a shared different form of meetings should be considered to guarantee the best possible knowledge transfer. While explicit knowledge can be easily shared via phone or other technical tools, processes such as socialization are most efficient, when being conducted face-to-face.

One of the most important things to address would be to develop a whole new communication strategy, eliminating unused channels and instead focusing on the maintenance of a few main channels. A new Internet based forum should be established, or the old one INSAJT should be dramatically improved and should be better promoted. The overall goal would be to gather users in only few channels, to give them the possibility to interact with each other, be able to effectively communicate with them and keep the users informed.

Figure 1.2  Normative Model for New Management Strategy
6.1 Limitations and Further Research

Within this study the focus was mainly set on the focus groups within SAPSA, since those present the core activity of the network. However in order to be able to improve the whole network, a further study of all the different groups and processes in the network would be necessary. A deeper assessment of the individual focus groups and interviews with the participating members to detect the particular problems every single focus group is experiencing would be suggested.

Furthermore it would be considered beneficial to look into other SAP networks, such as, the SAP Community Network (SCN) or the other to SAPSA equivalent networks in Europe, in order to learn from their experiences and solutions.

Besides that more research on other inter-organizational knowledge networks would be interesting to evaluate further obstacles and problems of the knowledge sharing process. It would also be helpful to view this topic from different perspectives such as arguing for the positive outcomes of knowledge networking from a social capital perspective. By examining this field of study further it could likely be argued for a more important role of inter-organizational knowledge networking within the knowledge management of a firm.
List of References


Appendix 1 - Complete list of all conducted empirical interviews

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Appendix 2 - Questions from qualitative interview with SAPSA employees

Topic: Focus groups
1. How do you sign up for membership?
2. How large are the groups?
3. Is there any appointed leader for the groups?
4. How often are there meetings?
5. How many focus groups are there?
6. How do you form a group?
7. What kind of meeting do you have? Phone/Face-to-face/Video

Topic: Networking
1. Can you see any benefits with networking?
2. What do you think is the reason to why all users do not participate in networking?
3. Do you feel that there is any hinder to networking? In that case, what are they?
4. How large part does the price of the consultants matter?
5. Are there any technological possibilities that could make thing easier?
6. Have you noticed that SAP-users turn to a third party instead of using the network to explore the potential of their ERP system?

Topic: SAPSA
1. What possibilities for developments do you see within SAPSA?
2. What is in Pipeline?
3. Do you see any problems for SAPSA?
4. How can you improve the system?
5. Are there any technological possibilities that could make thing easier?
Appendix 3 - Discussion points for qualitative study at IMPULS 2012

1. Are you an active member in the SAPSA Network?
2. How much time do you devote to the network? Work or private time?
3. Why are/aren’t you active in the network?
4. Benefits with networking?
5. What are the problems with the SAPSA network?
6. What do you think would hinder a firm from participating?
7. Would you be open to a more extensive interview?
8. How could we contact you?
Appendix 4 - Questions and Tables from Quantitative Interviews with SAPSA-Members

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3. SAPSA communicates their message well.
   
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4. A I perceive networking as profitable
   
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5. A There is development possibilities within SAPSA.
   
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Additional question asked in an open text manner:
4.8 If, 3-5. What do you see as profitable?
5.8 If, ‘yes’, what are the possibilities?
Appendix 5 - Questions from Online Survey with Focus Group Leaders

1. What focus group are you active in?
2. How large is your active group?
3. What do you think would be a good size for an active group?
4. Is it the same people attending every time?
5. Do you see any problem related to a consistent/inconsistent group? (E.g. limited knowledge sharing due to limited size).
6. Would you consider smaller, consistent group to be more effective due to stronger relation bonds and trust?
7. Might a large group size hinder an active reward exchange for everyone?
8. Do you feel that the topics and the level of the expertise are relevant for everyone in the group? Do you feel they are too specific/unspecific?
9. In what way are you communication with each other?
10. Why did you choose that channel of communication?
11. Do you experience any problems when communicating with each other? Elaborate. (Physical, psychological, semantic).
12. Do you think that there might be a problem with one-sided exchange in your group i.e. it is always the same people contributing, while other are passively listening?
13. Would you describe the process/interaction in the group as formal or informal?
   a. If informal, do you feel that is poses a problem?
14. Would you like to have a more guidance and a given structure on how to lead a focus group?
15. Do you feel that the members are well informed about SAPSA?
   a. If NO, do you think that lack of information could impede members form participating more actively in the network?
16. Why is it beneficial for SAP users and consultants to participate in a focus group?
17. How can you see a connection between performance improvement in using the SAP system and participation in a focus group?
18. What would you change?