

Improving project performance through tacit knowledge sharing in a multimedia project ¹

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Abstract

This paper is using a case study to analyse how a project team can improve their performance through tacit knowledge sharing. The project owner is a network trying to promote collaboration between media industry students, professors and professionals as well as cross-media collaboration. The project team consisted of students and professors from different universities' media degrees. The project scope was to report (in form of articles and video interviews) from a festival that brings together high profile professionals working in the media industry of Germany. Through performance appraisal, a knowledge gap between the team members' actual and optimal performance was identified. The need for performance improvement was thereby established, for which the team had about three weeks to accomplish. The approach of the project team was to train members through workshops, practice runs and a group trip. The topic of knowledge management is explored in order to understand how it impacts on performance improvement. By analysing different types of knowledge (i.e. explicit and tacit knowledge) and knowledge creation it is established that creating and transferring tacit knowledge was a top priority for this project. Tacit knowledge being internal, hard to articulate and therefore hard to transfer is analysed in regards to enabling factors. It is found that interpersonal interaction and trust are crucial factors for tacit knowledge sharing. Trust being enabled by common goals, information sharing, frequent social interaction and emotional bonds is explored. During the analysis, it is demonstrated how the project's approach was providing these enabling factors of tacit knowledge sharing and trust, and thereby improved the team's performance.

Keywords: performance improvement, tacit knowledge, knowledge management, trust, project management

Introduction

This academic paper reflects on a multimedia project called project X for confidentiality reasons. The reflection focuses on how the project team managed to improve their performance through enabling tacit knowledge sharing.

The project: Stakeholders & Strategic objectives

Project X is part of a program sponsored by a film and media academy that will be further referred to as Academy Y. Its goal is to create a network and foster collaboration between students and professors of media related degrees of regional

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German universities and industry professionals. Furthermore, they aim to enhance cross-media practice as well as film and media education.

The program encompasses reporting about important media events and film festivals in form of blog posts and video interviews. Project teams are formed for covering big events, often with approximately 90% new team members. For coverage of small events, the team is usually put together from the pool of alumni team members.

The project discussed in this paper was to report from a festival held by a professional association (Association Z) for leading creatives from the areas of advertising, design, digital media, editorial, event, scenography, photography, illustration, film and music. The goal is to combine the creative elite of the communications industry in Germany and promote the development of young creatives. A competition is held yearly, combined with an exhibition, which we will call Festival Z. Two days of the festival are reserved for a jury to assess submissions and choose the winners. Followed by celebrations and a three day opening for public visitors.

Facilitating Project X and taking on the role of the sponsor was a professor of communications design and member of Academy Y. A professional film production specialist was brought on to assist with project management activities and provide technical support. Further support was provided by lecturers of film, cutting and media technology. For the main project team about twenty students from the media degrees part of the Academy Y network were casted. Almost half of them were communications design students, three interior design students and the rest had a media technology background. The project team had a little over three weeks to prepare, and then five days of covering the festival. The goal of the project was to produce interviews with high profile industry professionals and capture impressions of the festival, both in form of videos and written articles. These were then to be released on their Blog to report "live" from the festival.

Thereby, supporting the Academy's strategic goals of creating connections between professionals and university staff and students, as well as enabling collaboration between different media areas.

In a first meeting, the team figured out which roles and tasks were needed. Updating the corporate design (equipment branding, signage, business cards, video intro and credits, etc.) was the responsibility of the communications design students. Designing and building an on-scene film studio and a mobile unit was done by the interior design students. The team also had to come up with topics for interviews and blog posts and ideas for capturing impressions. A designated photographer was needed for tasks like documenting Project X behind the scenes and the arrival of the jury. All communications design students are trained in photography so one of them committed to this role, with the reassurance of others being able to fill in case of overlaps in the schedule. Several people needed to fill reporter roles, preparing and conducting the interviews, which only one student had previous experience in. A similar situation was encountered with people operating video cameras, lights and audio recording as well as video post-production, which is the area of expertise of media technology students. There were not enough skilled students to cover all the filming and cutting required. Therefore, other students had to develop abilities to fill

these roles. In general, members needed to take on several roles to create redundancy and flexibility. Furthermore, the team needed to learn how to work together and figure out efficient processes. Consequently, all members had to acquire new skills of some sort, meaning the team had to improve their performance.

Apart from the team meetings, two workshops were held by the supporting lecturers, regarding camera equipment, filming techniques and interview skills. Additionally, three practice runs were conducted, by covering small local design events and taking a trip to Berlin. They went to the Association Z headquarters to interview the ones responsible for the festival. They further visited a film studio, had a Q&A session with a talk show host and sat in the audience for the recording of the show. Through this approach, they got insights from professionals and the chances to run through preparation, production and post-production phases several times. By the time Festival Z started their performance had improved significantly.

Performance improvement

The first step to analyse in detail how this approach leads to performance improvement is to define management of performance improvement. Its purpose is to manage people and organisations to ensure that goals and objectives are being reached efficiently and effectively (Investopedia 2017). It is essential to define what effective performance looks like and create a way to measure it.

Often the actual performance of teams is not yet the optimal best case performance. Through performance appraisals, the actual performance can be measured against the best practice scenario defined previously. Different levels of competency are defined so that improvement can be measured in terms of levels accomplished. Identifying the gap between best practice and actual practice helps planning for team members' development. (Luoma & Voltero n.d.)

A communications design student could, for example, be assessed in terms of performing as a camera operator. First, best practice performance would need to be defined, which could encompass aspects like this (Creative Skillset n.d.):

- know how to operate the camera expertly
- have good working knowledge of all camera systems, lenses, support equipment and accessories
- provide creative input
- have artistic ability
- be patient
- have a good sense of visual composition, perspective and movement
- have physical co-ordination and strength
- combine creativity with technical skills
- pay precise attention to detail
- communicate effectively
- be able to collaborate and work as part of a team
- be diplomatic and sensitive when working with artists and crew
- know about health and safety legislation and procedures

Afterwards, different levels could be created according to how many of these aspects an individual performs how well. Starting with none, continuing with some on the beginner level, through intermediate and advanced, ending with all according to best practice standards. Assessing communications design students accordingly, it turns out that they would rank high on some abilities that are transferable from their background, such as artistic ability and providing creative input. They would rank low however in the knowledge of video camera systems, lenses and supportive equipment and ability to operate the camera expertly. Consequently, a need for technical and practical training is identified. Overall they would rank in the beginner to intermediate levels in terms of performing as camera operators. The goal can then be set to elevate them to an advanced level through training. Setting the goal to elevate them to best practice levels in less than a month would be unrealistic.

Each individual could be assessed on the whole range of roles required. In an informal way, this assessment took place through comparing members' skill sets with the roles that needed filling. It led to the identification of a knowledge gap that needed to be bridged in order for the team to perform efficiently at the ADC-festival.

Knowledge management

After identifying a knowledge gap, it is important to understand what type of knowledge is needed and where to attain it from. It may be held internally within project team members or needs to be gathered from outside the organisation (Koskinen 2004).

Knowledge management is important for today's economy because creating new knowledge through projects and working in teams, is key to staying competitive (Marquardt, Seng & Goodson 2010).

Koskinen (2004) distinguishes between codification and personalisation as types of knowledge management processes. Codification requires making knowledge explicit and storing it for example in databases. Personalisation was the process adopted for Project X because when knowledge is not easily made explicit, it requires people interacting with each other.

To better understand these knowledge management processes explicit and tacit knowledge has to be understood.

Defining explicit and tacit knowledge

Explicit or codified knowledge refers to what can be expressed in a code, symbols or language and therefore be transmitted or communicated easily (Edmondson et al. 2003; Koskinen 2004). Required camera settings, for example, were easily summarised on a spreadsheet and distributed to the team.

Tacit knowledge is typically hard to articulate, context specific and acquired through experience, observation, imitation and informal face to face interaction, equalling practical know-how (Edmondson et al. 2003; Koskinen 2004). In case of Project X, most of the knowledge gap consisted of exactly that practical know-how i.e. tacit knowledge.

Explicit and tacit knowledge find themselves on two ends of a spectrum, they are not mutually exclusive (Edmondson et al. 2003; Koskinen 2004). Tacit is rather about what works and explicit about why it works (Koskinen 2004).

Often explicit knowledge receives a lot more attention in knowledge management processes because it is easily shared. However, social knowledge, as in behaviour, coordination and intuitive assessments of whom to trust and who knows what are mostly tacit and very important for a team in order to function (Edmondson et al. 2003). Projects like Project X underline the importance of tacit knowledge sharing for successful project delivery.

Creating knowledge

Koskinen (2004) analysed how organisations and project teams know. He compares cognitive and autopoietic epistemology, which differ in the way they categorise knowledge. Cognitive epistemology views knowledge as universal and objective, therefore transferable and a representation of a pre-established reality. Learning consequently means relating knowledge from the environment to facts and experiences, adding them to a cognitive map.

Autopoietic epistemology views the external input as data, which is only knowledge when it is put into context by an individual. This means that knowledge cannot be directly transferred, as two students can produce different knowledge from data provided by the same teacher. Knowledge, in this case, needs to be created utilising existing knowledge through distinction-making and observation. (Koskinen 2004)

This epistemology relates more to the situation of Project X because it explains why members cannot simply provide knowledge but have to enable situations for others to create new knowledge for themselves.

Nonaka, Toyama & Konno (2000) describe knowledge creation as the interaction between tacit and explicit knowledge. They identify four knowledge conversion modes.

The externalisation mode is turning tacit into explicit knowledge. For example, the experience in video post-production gives some team members tacit knowledge on equipment set up requirements. Making this knowledge explicit through describing lessons learned from encountering problems in the past, the sponsor realised that the computers allocated to the project would not be sufficient. He then was able to arrange a deal with a film production company close to the festival location. Without that knowledge transfer, the team would have run into serious problems during the festival.

The combination of explicit knowledge such as planning strategies and operations can be done by assembling internal and external data. Collecting data in preparation for interviews could be considered as such a process.

The third mode, called internalisation, is achieved by converting explicit into tacit knowledge through practice. For example tips from the talk show host for how to

conduct good interviews is the explicit knowledge that was internalised through practice runs by the students.

The last mode of socialisation, where tacit knowledge is converted to new tacit knowledge, was especially important for Project X. The workshops, practice runs, and time spend on the Berlin trip, created chances for discussions and the sharing of different views and experiences. Thereby, giving a platform to socialise with each other creating mutual trust and unlock tacit knowledge.

Internalising knowledge is comparatively easy, you get told how to operate the camera, and you go over it until you remember what each button does. However, the knowledge of paying attention to several details at once like background noises, recording footage that will seamlessly fit together in post-production and all those nuances that just come with experience and are hard to express, were crucial to transfer to the team. This way they could operate independently without relying on the guidance of experts, who could not be with all teams at all times and still end up with quality interviews. This is why it was so important for team members to create that tacit knowledge for themselves.

Factors enabling tacit knowledge sharing

Creating or transferring knowledge becomes complex when it comes to know-how or tasks that involve groups requiring reciprocal coordination (Edmondson et al. 2003). Such is the case with Project X. The combination of technical and social knowledge needed for the task is hard to specify (Edmondson et al. 2003). Even though exchanging tacit knowledge is challenging, the path to attaining and sharing it is important for project performance (Edmondson et al. 2003; Kucharska & Kowalczyk 2016). Consequently, it makes sense to analyse what factors enabled this project team to successfully transfer tacit knowledge.

Since the project relies on a collective know how, knowing what other group members know, which is crucial for coordinating action, is an important aspect (Edmondson et al. 2003). Relationships are a resource for enhancing knowledge transfer (Kucharska & Kowalczyk 2016). When it comes to tacit knowledge sharing proximity, interpersonal interaction and practice over time are crucial and often best taken through a learning-by-doing approach (Edmondson et al. 2003).

Kucharska & Kowalczyk (2016) identified a growing awareness of the significance of tacit knowledge sharing in today's economy. They also realised the importance of trust as an enabling factor in combination with a collaborative culture. Team building, therefore, is a vital aspect for projects which depend on tacit knowledge sharing. As they found that tacit knowledge sharing is fundamental for creativity in projects, which is known to be crucial for innovation and problem solving, it could be argued that all projects should pay close attention to tacit knowledge sharing in their knowledge management processes.

Generating trust to enable tacit knowledge sharing

Lianying & Jing (2016) also put emphasis on the importance of trust for tacit knowledge sharing and concluded its positive impact on improving team

performance. They point out that many studies stress the importance of trust in regards to tacit knowledge sharing, however, lack further explanation on how it is built.

A study by Zhikun & Fungfai (2010) revealed that ability and personality do not elicit trust from others, it is attitude and social interaction, which positively influence team members to trust each other.

Linying & Jing (2016) describe three types of trust and how they are generated. They argue that by entering a contractual relationship, an obligation to work towards a common goal is established. Together with the effect of roles giving people specific responsibilities, swift trust is developed. In such a relationships one collaborating party might rely on the other ones too much, assuming their slack will be picked up because of the others' interest in project success. That first party would be lacking interest in sharing their tacit knowledge. This is a phenomenon called collaboration risk.

Information sharing and establishing reciprocal relationships will create information-based trust. Through frequent interactions members create emotional bonds and a sense of belonging, which in turn creates identification-based trust, which mitigates collaboration risk.

These types of trust are interrelated even though they are developed under different conditions. The first two are based on personal benefits such as self-esteem and improvement of skills and knowledge. Identification-based trust, because of its need for emotional bonds, takes longer to develop, and therefore gets easily neglected by temporary teams. Identification-based trust, however, enables tacit-knowledge sharing because members do not fear social backlashes for providing information that might be useless or wrong. This improves team performance because misunderstandings can be uncovered and a mutual understanding of a matter can be established. Therefore information sharing and social interactions together with a no-blame atmosphere should be promoted in projects, especially those relying on tacit-knowledge transfer. (Lianying & Jing 2016)

In Project X swift trust was built through members committing to the project, agreeing on common goals and distributing specific roles. Through the workshops team members were encouraged to share information with each other, building information-based trust. The social time in between filming during practice runs and the Berlin trip gave the opportunity for social interaction and the creation of emotional bonds. Thereby, the trust needed to enable members to share tacit-knowledge, was formed.

Conclusion

It can be concluded that the approach taken by Project X managed to improve performance because the social interaction was promoted, creating trust and enabling tacit knowledge sharing. Tacit knowledge sharing was crucial to improve team members' performance, to enable them to function flexible, as independent individuals as well as a coordinated unit. Considering that the project team had less than one month to prepare and that most members were inexperienced in at least

one role they had to fill for this project, the knowledge transfer was vast and successful, as they managed to follow through on a quality delivery of news coverage from Festival Z.

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