

**Individual Assignment**

**Subject: 15356 Project Performance Improvements**

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## Contents

Abstract:.....	3
Introduction:.....	4
Project Overview: .....	5
Project Approach: .....	6
Lessons Learnt through reflection .....	7
Conclusion:.....	11
References: .....	12

## **Abstract:**

Key words: Reflective practice, SAP, SECI Model, Learning, collaboration.

This reflective report explores the topics of 'reflection' and 'learning through reflection' within the context of the project environment within one of the major worldwide rail (brake system) manufacturer companies in Australia (hereby referred to as 'The Rail Company'). Due to company development and changes in business strategy, implementing new processes, new modules in SAP and some minor changes in hierarchy organization structure were required. Therefore executive management has decided to define a project named 'Operation Performance Improvement' (hereby referred to as just 'The Project') to manage the requirements successfully. The project manager, to achieve continuous performance improvement and benefits in the project and organization level, has picked and implemented the reflective practice approach similar to Theory-in-practice (Winter et al, 2006) and SECI model (Kujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, 2000). These approach and model have been implemented through the meetings named 'Service Center improvement' (hereby referred to as just 'The weekly meeting'). The highlighted benefits that have been achieved through this project were increasing efficiencies in different department, increasing team member's competencies and changing team members from trainers to reflective practitioner, increasing the level of trust through deferent departments by sharing knowledge and experiences in not judgmental environment and at the end adding knowledge Asset to the organization by creating processes of dynamic converting knowledge (from tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge). At the end this paper will focus on specified lessons learnt that have been achieved through this project and the works which team members and project manager will do differently in future projects.

## Introduction:

Reflective practice has grown and developed over the last few decades throughout different fields of professional practice and education.

Bound, Keogh and walker in 1985 has described Reflection as “those intellectual and affective activities in which individuals engage to explore their experiences in order to lead to new understandings and appreciations.” Reflection is also defined as ‘the action of turning (back) or fixing the thoughts on some subject...’ in order to learn (OED, 1993: 2521).

This is while ‘Reflection practice’ is the “habitual and judicious use of communication, knowledge, technical skill, reasoning, emotions, values and reflect in daily practice for the benefit of individuals and communities is being served” (Epstein and Hundert, 2002). Reflection is a vital learning tool for both individuals and organisations, and yet it is an area, which gains little formal focus within many organisations (Argyris 1992, p.84).

This reflective report explores the topics of ‘reflection’ and ‘learning through reflection’ within the context of the project environment within one of the major worldwide rail (brake system) manufacturer companies in Australia. Due to company policies the company name cannot be used and instead, it will be referred to as ‘The Rail Company’ throughout the report.

In first section of this report, there is a brief description of project and it’s requirements; later on the taken project approach will be outlined and finally the tool or model that have been used through the reflective practice will be described and at the end will explore how ‘learning through reflection’ could have improvement on the outcome of this project.

## Project Overview:

The rail company recently has developed their business in Australia and has many customers. To increase customer satisfaction the Rail Company has planned and aimed to improve the operation processes through implementing an integrated tool to achieve the worldwide benchmarks and implement the best practices. The tool that they aimed to implement was new Modules of SAP that suit new requirements of business. Along with implementing this module some changes in current processes and hierarchy of the organization should happen.

To align the requirements with changes, the Rail Company has defined an internal project named 'Operation Performance Improvement' (hereby referred to as just 'The Project').

The main expected organization benefits from this project were as follow:

- 1- Improving processes in supply change management, procurement, booking and releasing the goods and production.
- 2- Improving customer satisfaction
- 3- Improving product qualities
- 4- Improving overall branch performances
- 5- Staff trainings and increasing competencies
- 6- Implementing the worldwide best practices through reflection practices

The scope of the project was wide and included involvement of different departments and team members. Many of these changes were new to people and adapting to the new situation and processes were not easy for all the people, especially those that were working for a long time for the Rail Company. In this project STAFF were the key resource of the project success.

To achieve expected outcomes and benefits in this project, the project manager required identifying the concerns of project practitioners and worked out how he can change people from trained to reflective practitioners so that the business can get the continuous performance improvement through reflective practices.

## Project Approach:

This section explores the approach was taken for this project with a special focus on reflective practice methodology.

The main requirements for implementing the project within the Rail Company were as follow:

- Involvement of Executive management and key stakeholders and applying for their Support through the project life.
- Training of staff from different departments and defining expert matters as instructors.
- Creating and implementing metrics to measure project progress and improvement to confirm project validation and reflect on project deviations.

The reasons behind above requirements in the project can be described as follow:

In the early stage of the project due to requirements of restructuring for implementing the new processes through SAP, obviously there was a lot resistance to changes from different departments. Then after notifying this, first action from the executive director was organizing the ‘communication session’ with all staff in the organization; he described the reasons and benefits behind all these changes. This ‘communication session’ helped the organization to understand the major issues that define and shape the new processes, reflecting for a long-term and being strategic focus. Reflective practice is not without its ‘dark side’. There are cultural and personal risks involved, and not everyone ends up feeling empowered. (Brookfield, 1994, 1995).

A major element of defining this project was to train staff about new integrated tools in SAP software and involving team members in being self-aware about their current visions, knowledge and evaluating their responses in real situations and reflect on organization level. As Seeley Brown & Duguid (1991) states “the integrated implementation of collaborative tools is reflected in the emerging change management initiatives, information communities, knowledge management and communities of practice across the organization “.

An interview was arranged with Jorge Martin the project manager and he pointed out that this project was defined by organization due to development of the business and lack of efficiencies in different department processes. In first step the project team was deployed and developed; then required material such as instructors, instructions and training were defined and provided. The picked training approach by the Rail Company was ‘work embedded ‘ or ‘on-job learning’. It happened in the real work place very closely with the rollout of the project. This approach offers an easier, more effective method to make sure that education is constantly improving. This approach also allowed engaging practitioners continually during the implementation of the processes; it improved the level of the knowledge and skill of practitioners significantly.

For understanding the project progress and level of success in reflection of new processes, the project manager with the help of project teams defined some metrics measurement for each area of the project. To facilitate the reflection measurement, project teams decided to use current available KPIs in SAP for measuring reworking, number of deliveries, efficiencies and product turnaround times. These KPIs successes are linked to the project teams’ ability to conceptualize projects from different point of views, understand the situations, establish the problem, deal with ambiguity and uncertainties and relate to wider issues.

From reflective practice perspective, the project team has implemented similar approach to what Winter et al (2006) stated as Theory in Practice “ Learning and development approach which facilitates, the development of reflective practitioners who can learn, operate and adapt effectively in project environments, through experience, intuition and the pragmatic application of theory in practice”.

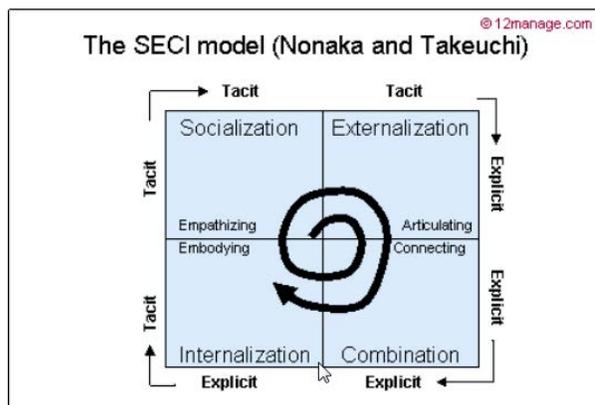
In the following section will explain the tool that project team implemented for this purpose.

## Lessons Learnt through reflection

This section describes the ‘lessons learnt through reflective practice’ for this project within the Rail Company. For this purpose, below will be discussed in this section:

- Introducing SECI as the picked tool by project manager and team members to utilize Reflection practice through lesson learnt.
- Describing how project was managed through the SECI model/tool
- Evaluating advantages of this Tool for project teams and in the organization level

In distributed cognition theory, learning is said to take place through interaction with individuals, the environment and cultural artifacts, facilitated by tools (Dede, 1996). The tool that has been chosen by project manager and project team is what Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi (2000) refer as SECI model of creating dynamic and evolving knowledge processes. For SECI model, there is a spiral of knowledge engaged, where the explicit and tacit knowledge interact with each other in a continuous evolving and dynamic process. This dynamic process happens between tacit and explicit knowledge through Socialization, Externalization, Combination and Internalization.



The SECI model in this project was implemented through weekly meetings that were taken place every week by coordination and conducting of project manager. The meeting was subjected as ‘ Service Center improvement’ (hereby referred to as just ‘The weekly meeting’). To facilitate controlling of these meeting following rules were defined by project teams and project manager.

- All team members should attend to the meeting.
- Criticism is prohibited under any circumstances and people are free to share their ideas without any judgment from other participants.
- All people are encouraged to share their ideas and experiences.

- The more ideas, the better. Quantity is better than quality in these meetings.
- All the ideas has the same values and will be considering
- Minutes of meeting will be providing in each meeting and a copy of it will be distributing among participants.
- All participant need to have at least 2 ideas every week for improving current processes.
- Emphasize on both weaknesses and strengths in order to have a holistic picture of reflection.

These meetings were structured and guided according Quinn suggestions which states:

- **“Retrospection:** i.e. thinking back about a situation or experience;
- **Self-evaluation:** i.e. critically analyzing and evaluating the actions and feelings associated with the experience, using theoretical perspectives;
- **Reorientation:** i.e. using the results of self-evaluation to influence future approaches to similar situations or experiences.” (Quinn, 2000, p.82).

The technic that project team and project manager had developed and controlled these meetings with; have been described below through following SECI model (kujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, 2000).

### **Socialization:**

This process is about sharing tacit knowledge through face-to-face communication and shared experiences in ‘Communities of Practice’. Groff & Jones (2003) describes Tacit Knowledge as “Personal knowledge embedded in individual experience and involving intangible factors such as personal belief, perspective, and values”.

This process has taken place in the early stage of the project through ‘Service center improvement’ meetings. An instructor from Head office of the Rail Company and project manager were coordinating these meetings. The instructor had a worldwide responsibility for implementing the best practices around the world. In these meeting he was introducing the new tools in the SAP to the team members and was asking for their understanding and people previous experiences. He was also explaining the benefits of these new modules and processes and was sharing his worldwide experiences with team members. Participant were encouraging to share they ideas and in this way amount of knowledge was transferring.

### **Externalization:**

This process describes and focuses on transferring tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge. Groff & Jones (2003) stated “explicit knowledge has been documented or articulated into formal language in order to be more easily transferred among individuals”. In this phase tacit knowledge is transferred to more understandable and interpretable form, so others can also use it.

As mentioned earlier within the weekly meetings, Project manager that was acting as coordinator; was consolidating all the data through one structured excel sheet and he was recording and maintaining all the available data in the shared folder so every one can have access to it and can review their required action for the next meetings. Also in the same shared-folder all the instructions and material in regards to the new process and modules were available.

**Combination:**

This is the process of transferring explicit knowledge to explicit knowledge. When knowledge is in explicit form it can be combined and integrated with the knowledge that has been captured earlier. In this phase knowledge will be analyzed and organized.

In the project, after training new tools and explaining how new processes work in the collaboration environment, the access to the new modules in SAP for responsible team members have been defined by IT and now these people needed to implement those instructions that earlier were discussed in the weekly meetings in real situations. This is when the challenge will really start and people can start feeling how new processes will make the differences. To evaluate new processes and understand if the planned benefits are achieving, project manager started generating report against the earlier defined KPIs. In the weekly meeting those reports were getting review and people could talk about their issues and discuss how the improvement can be achieved.

**Internalization:**

This is the process of internalizing the explicit knowledge that was created earlier through the tacit knowledge. Again this explicit knowledge transfers to tacit knowledge and becomes part of individual's basic information. The transformation cycle continues in the spiral of knowledge back to socialization when individual shares his/her tacit knowledge sedately. This is how amount of knowledge creates/grows and the previous conceptions might change. The spiral becomes larger in scale as it moves up through organizational levels, and can trigger new spirals of knowledge creation (kujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi, 2000).

In the project, after people kept trying to implement the new modules in SAP. After a while they didn't need to read and follow the instructions anymore. This explicit knowledge now was part of their basic information and knowledge. However team members were still continuing to participate on the weekly meeting and review the progress and share the new experiences with each other.

These collaborations between team members even changed the new processes that were defined in early stage of the project and in some cases new concepts were added to the initial scope.

According project manager the rail Company realized the changes after running the project for 6 months and below were the significant benefits that were achieved in the organization level:

- Valuing critically and creativity thinking in individuals, groups and organization level.
- Improvement in processes and efficiencies
- Having integrated level of understanding of new processes in group levels
- Increasing the level of trust along organization. A Watson Wyatt Worldwide study found that organizations in which front-line employees trusted their senior leaders had a 42 percent higher return on shareholder investment than organizations in which distrust was the norm (Reina and Reina, 2007).
- Cost saving due to increasing the efficiencies in organization level.
- Alignment of teams through building relationships in weekly meetings.
- Increasing individual's competencies through collaboration reflection.
- Increasing Personal confidence and critical reflection on decision-making

- Improvement of strategic learning in different organization level
- Creating Knowledge Asset that can be used by others and future projects. As Wankel and DeFillippi (2005, p. 95) state “reflection is fundamental to learning and provides a basis for future action”.
- Increasing people understanding and learning through Double-loop learning. In double-loop learning, the whole activity is part of a larger cycle, in which the reflection takes place on the fact of engaging in the activity and the assumptions implicit in it (Boud, Keogh and Walker ,1985)

At the end of the interview I asked the project manager is there any thing that you are going to do it differently if you want to mange these reflective practices from start and his expression was a follow:

“We have achieved 95% what we have aimed from the initial plan and benefits. However according the experiences that I have achieved if I got a chance to run these practice one more time I would like to involve the department managers more and more in the process of reflection as some of them were thinking that this process is just time consuming and they may sometimes need more clarification and explanation about reflection benefits also I would liked to review the stakeholder list one more time to avoid issue of power and control between the participants. We need to keep in mind that these sorts of practices are time-consuming and managers should understand this and assigned enough time, support, resources and sufficient tool for team members to reflect”.

## **Conclusion:**

The Rail Company, despite its history, has since successfully changed its future by implementing reflective practices through project contexts. It has achieved a lot of tangible benefits in projects and organization level.

According the research that have been done to accomplish this paper, there are different models, approaches and tools &technics to implement the reflective practices through the projects and organizations but not all of them suit with any organization. This should be picked wisely and strategically for each organization. And another key to success is how well - how effectively reflective practices have been implemented. Bland, mechanical, routinized and unthinking methods of doing reflective practice are barriers that let the reflective practice approaches down.

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