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The theory and practice of knowledge management and transfer: The case of the Olympic Games

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper was to examine the theory and practice of knowledge management processes, using the Olympic Games as the empirical setting and the Olympic Games Organizing Committee and its stakeholders as participants. The case study of the 2010 Vancouver Olympic Winter Games was inductively and deductively content analyzed, resulting in the development of a knowledge management and transfer process model for Olympic Games organizing committees and their stakeholders. Moreover, we found that the information and knowledge concepts should be placed on a continuum from explicit to tacit (with experience); practitioners do not distinguish between knowledge management activities as researchers do; socialization, externalization, combination, and internalization mechanisms can be found when tailoring knowledge for a stakeholder; and knowledge sources, reasons, organizational culture, and especially individuals are important when implementing knowledge management/transfer processes.

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1. Introduction

One of the most valuable and distinguishing assets an organization can have is its knowledge (Jasimuddin, 2012). Organizational growth and survival, increased and more effective performance, sustained competitive advantage, and improved quality of service, are some of the benefits that successful handling of knowledge may bring, while the utilization of knowledge is key to production, power, and advancement (Jasimuddin, 2012). These benefits demonstrate that knowledge management is a crucial function for organizations. However, not all organizations engage in a fully developed knowledge management process.

Uncertainty regarding knowledge management is both a managerial and theoretical issue. Understanding in knowledge management has not yet reached a consensus, for example regarding the relationship between knowledge concepts, the activities involved, or a general framework to utilize. This may make it challenging for organizations or stakeholder networks to engage in knowledge management and transfer processes. A field that has seen recent use of knowledge management practices is major sports events. Given the usual one-off nature of major and mega-sports events, recurring costly mistakes (e.g., transportation, security) can and do occur; knowledge management processes are thought to help mitigate these potential problems and help the event be successful (cf. Parent & Smith-Swan, 2012).

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The International Olympic Committee (IOC) is a world leader in sport event management with its Olympic Games, Olympic Winter Games, Youth Olympic Games, and Winter Youth Olympic Games. Although Halbwirth and Toohey (2001) introduced the concept of knowledge management in major sport events associated with the 2000 Sydney Olympic Games, gaps in our understanding remain, including how knowledge is currently managed and transferred within the organizing committee and also the involvement of the network of stakeholders in the staging of the Games, especially given the technological changes the world has seen since 2000. Moreover, how appropriate is the implementation of knowledge management by sport event practitioners when compared to the existing literature?

The purpose of this paper was therefore to examine the theory and practice of knowledge management processes, using an Organizing Committee of Olympic Games (OCOG) and its stakeholders as the empirical setting. Findings contribute to the literature by critiquing the extent of knowledge management activities found in the literature as compared to managerial perceptions and practices, and suggesting a general knowledge management and transfer process applicable to the sport event stakeholder network. We highlight the importance of both internal and external knowledge transfer as well as knowledge tailoring. We also suggest areas of improvement for the Olympic knowledge management system to ultimately ensure efficient and effective Games operations. The paper is structured as follows. We first describe our theoretical framework and knowledge management within the Olympic Games; this is followed by the methodology, presentation of results, and discussion. We conclude with implications, limitations, and future directions.

2. Theoretical framework

We based our theoretical framework around the debates surrounding information versus knowledge, and the various knowledge management activities and frameworks.

2.1. Information and knowledge

Knowledge may be understood as experiences, contextual comprehension, value-added information, or insights based on frameworks of understanding that reside in the minds of individuals or groups (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). The knowledge to be managed may itself be present in the form of explicit or tacit knowledge. While explicit knowledge is more easily articulated, written or codified, tacit knowledge is rather inarticulate, developed with experience, and deepened through problem solving activities (Polanyi, 1967). Tacit knowledge is seen as particularly useful due to its nature and the degree to which it is complex, (non)codifiable, (non)teachable, system dependent, and results in observable products (Winter, 1987; Zander & Kogut, 1995). The handling of these two types of knowledge may be associated to both information and knowledge. Davenport and Prusak (1998) considered a knowledge hierarchy that includes data, information, and knowledge, while Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) only differentiated between information and knowledge in the consideration of their framework. Alavi and Leidner (2001) distinguished information from knowledge with the argument that knowledge is information personalized. Rowley (2007) examined the knowledge hierarchy offered by Ackhoff and found that the associated concepts of data, information, knowledge, and wisdom, built upon each other and so knowledge was at a higher, more complex level than information. Rowley added that if knowledge is defined in terms of being a part of an individual then explicit knowledge (e.g., documents) can only be a form of information. An additional connection between information and knowledge that should be noted is the acknowledgement of the influence of the information management field as a contributor to the development of the knowledge management field (Halbwirth & Toohey, 2005; Jasimuddin, 2012).

Moreover, the concept of learning is increasingly used in connection with the knowledge management process in the broader management literature (Pun & Nathai-Balkissoon, 2011). Van Grinsven and Visser (2011) identified knowledge transfer as an antecedent of organizational learning. Organizations that promote and support the learning of new knowledge encourage the creation of knowledge that may result from connecting existing knowledge, and can occur, or is aided, as a result of an active agent operating in that environment that supports learning (Freiling & Fichtner, 2010).

2.2. Different knowledge management frameworks

The handling of both tacit and explicit knowledge may involve a variety of activities in a variety of frameworks offered by researchers. Knowledge management researchers have yet to agree on a framework that can be systematically suitable, although there are some, such as Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) SECI model that have received much attention. The SECI model is concerned with knowledge creation, and involves the transfer of both tacit and explicit knowledge between individual, group, and organization levels, which interact in a "knowledge spiral" resulting in knowledge creation. SECI represents the knowledge transfer activities of socialization (tacit to tacit knowledge transfer), externalization (tacit to explicit knowledge transfer), combination (explicit to explicit knowledge transfer), and internalization (explicit to tacit knowledge transfer). In a review of 160 knowledge management frameworks worldwide, Heisig (2009) compiled a list of the six most frequently discussed knowledge activities, which included similar terms being grouped together, for example share and transfer, use and application, or create and generate. These activities were knowledge transfer, creation, application, storage, identification, and acquisition (see Table 1 for descriptions). Although the knowledge activities are described separately, the integration of the activities is seen as more beneficial to the organization than each separate activity (Kraaijenbrink, 2012).

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