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Effective knowledge transfer in successful partnering projects

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to determine whether there is a link between partnering and effective knowledge transfer. Analyzing the key factors that enable partnering, there are reasons to believe that partnering may help to promote effective knowledge transfer in projects. Collaboration, open communication, and trust are some partnering elements that imply effective knowledge transfer and, consequently, lead to successful outcome. The findings will drive practitioners to a greater awareness of partnering practices and assist in promoting effective knowledge transfer in partnering projects.

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1. Introduction

Partnering, as a collaborative managerial approach [25], is considered as a potential tool for enhancing the efficiency of the construction industry, introducing collaboration and, consequently, tangible benefits in projects [17]. At the same time, other authors claimed for the adoption of a knowledge-based project management approach that could support the achievement of higher project performance [30].

Naturally, the awareness towards these topics has become increasingly important, especially within the construction sector that is generally characterized by adversarial relationships and conflicting goals between the project participants [25]. The adoption of collaborative relationships between the project participants along with the implementation of an effective knowledge transfer process could be the formula for the achievement of successful

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projects outcomes. In addition to this, an inducement for improvement could emerge when the link between effective knowledge transfer and successful partnering projects is understood.

Despite the presence of several studies concerning both the topic of partnering and knowledge transfer separately, there is a limited number of academic contributions that actually investigate the link between the two. Considering the practical relevance of these research areas, this study represents an attempt to narrow the knowledge gap, analyzing how knowledge transfer and partnering influence each other.

The broadest research question of the study was “does a link exist between knowledge transfer and partnering?” (RQ1). Additionally, in order to narrow the focus of the research, two sub-questions were formulated, specifically: “which partnering key elements enhance effective knowledge transfer?” (RQ2) and “how knowledge transfer and partnering in projects influence each other?” (RQ3).

In order to answer these research questions a comprehensive analysis of the literature and a set of expert interviews was conducted. First, the literature review will provide a brief insight into the topics, highlighting the key elements respectively of partnering and knowledge transfer. If similarities of the key elements appear, a connection between the two topics can be assumed. Afterwards, the findings from a set of ten qualitative interviews will show how the experts (from the academic and construction context) perceive the link between partnering and knowledge transfer in projects. Finally, the results were compared and discussed in order to answer the research questions and clarify how an effective knowledge transfer process could bring success in partnering projects and vice versa.

2. Theory

The concept of knowledge is considered as a driver of innovation and competitive advantage within the construction industry [35]. Authors, like Carrillo and Chinowsky [12], attempted to define the concept of knowledge, starting from the distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge, that was introduced by Polanyi [30]. Tacit knowledge, defined as intangible and subjective, is embedded in individuals’ experiences, beliefs and know-how, and is therefore hard to formalize and express in words [12,15,23,24]. On the other side, explicit knowledge is systematic and formal and can be transferred through standardized procedures [23,36].

As knowledge constitutes the “mind” of an organization [18], an effective knowledge transfer process becomes essential for the creation of successful outcomes in projects [4]. Specifically, knowledge can be transferred among individuals, teams, or organizations [19,22] and is defined as the process of learning from previous projects through an interactive exchange of experiences [3,23]. According to Ayas [4], the capability of accessing experience can indeed guarantee continuous improvement over time and the creation of business benefits [12]. Some definitions of knowledge transfer are reported in table 1.

The temporary and fragmented nature of each project, especially within the construction industry, makes effective knowledge transfer more challenging [6,12,16]. In this scenario, an innovative attitude is required that considers a project as an occasion for learning [4]. Furthermore, a greater awareness towards the key elements could help in achieving an effective knowledge transfer in projects [36].

The expression “key elements” refers to specific factors that are necessary in a project in order to reach a goal [2]. In this case, several authors, like Hajidimitriou et al. [23] and Chen et al. [14], considered trust as an important key element for effective knowledge transfer. According to Yew Wong [35], mutual trust between the project participants fosters the creation of an open knowledge-sharing environment. In addition, the level of trust directly affects the collaborative culture and the cooperation between the parties [23], which in turn are considered prerequisites for effective knowledge transfer. Moreover, team work [35], meeting and workshops [16], open communication [14], a supportive organizational culture [36], and co-location of project participants [35,4] are necessary key elements that enable effective knowledge transfer.

As projects becomes more complex and uncertain [5], the adoption of collaborative forms of project delivery, (e.g. *partnering*), increases. This is particularly true in the construction industry [25]. Consequently, several studies have been conducted concerning the definition of partnering (table 2) and its implementation in practice. Despite this, many authors affirmed that there is still no univocal consensus on partnering definition [9,11,20,26,28]. For example,

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