



Learning and knowledge transfer processes in a mega-events context: The case of the 2011 Rugby World Cup



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HIGHLIGHTS

- We analyse the impact of the 2011 Rugby World Cup on knowledge transfer processes.
- Firm-level knowledge transfer channels were used most frequently.
- The level of knowledge transfer was higher intra-regionally than inter-regionally.
- A model illustrates the knowledge transfer channels used in a mega-events' context.

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ABSTRACT

The study explores the impact of the 2011 Rugby World Cup on knowledge transfer processes among organisations in two regional tourism networks in New Zealand. The first network comprises organisations within the Auckland region (intra-regionally); the second comprises regional tourism organisations across New Zealand (inter-regionally). Interviews and documentary evidence are gathered before and after the event, from 35 representative organisations. Findings indicate organisations in both networks acquired valuable knowledge that may facilitate the attraction and organisation of future events, and enhance operational processes. The most common channels of knowledge transfer operated at the firm level and included imitation/demonstration/observation, inter-firm collaboration, and document exchange. Levels of knowledge transfer were higher intra-regionally than inter-regionally. A model is developed that explains the knowledge transfer channels utilized in a mega-events context. The study highlights the value of knowledge-sharing in tourism networks, and the role that a mega-event can play in fostering knowledge-sharing.

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1. Introduction

Most tourism research on mega-events analyses short-term and visitation-related impacts, rather than long-term outcomes such as strategic development and knowledge management and transfer (Singh & Hu, 2008). However, individuals and organisations involved in organising mega-events at a destination accumulate an extensive amount of tacit and explicit knowledge, such as

knowledge in event planning and execution, and expertise in destination marketing, that could be transferred and reapplied for future benefits (Singh & Hu, 2008; Stokes, 2004). Knowledge management and transfer among organisations involved in organising mega-events have attracted little research attention (Beesley & Chalip, 2011; Singh & Hu, 2008). The specific forms of knowledge acquired in the context of hosting a mega-event, as well as the transfer channels through which knowledge flows, remain unclear. As such, one could expect the knowledge acquired in the context of a mega-event to be different compared to knowledge gained during normal, operational processes among tourism companies. Singh and Hu (2008) note, "Given the huge public and private investments involved in these large-scale events, the need to fill this gap in the extant literature seems surprisingly obvious and necessary" (p. 937).

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This research explores the impact of a mega-event on knowledge transfer processes within regional tourism networks. It examines the 2011 Rugby World Cup (RWC 2011) in New Zealand (NZ) and analyses the knowledge transfer processes between Tourism Auckland and other public and private sector organisations. The focal organisation for this research is Tourism Auckland (TA), a regional tourism organisation (RTO). Consultation with TA executives identified two TA-centric networks. The intra-regional network (AKL network) comprises organisations within the Auckland region such as the Auckland Council and Auckland Transport. The inter-regional network (RTO network) is comprised of other RTOs throughout New Zealand. The study compares the impact of RWC 2011 on knowledge transfer processes within these networks.

The study addresses three research questions: In a mega-events context, 1) how do participant organisations learn?, 2) what kind of knowledge is gained?, and 3) how is knowledge transferred between the participant organisations? The study provides a comparative case study of two networks, both centered around the same focal organisation. Semi-structured interviews and documents are the focal sources of evidence in this research. Conceptually, the study focuses on information and knowledge management and knowledge transfer. In doing so, we bring together the fields of tourism management, destination management and sport event management.

2. Theoretical background

This section explores key literature on organisational learning, information and knowledge management (IKM) and knowledge transfer (KT). IKM and KT research in the tourism and events contexts are considered. The significance of networks as facilitators of KT is discussed.

2.1. Organisational learning as a foundation for knowledge

Individuals are the key repositories of knowledge and it is through them that organisations learn (Grant, 1997). Senge (1990) notes: “Organizations learn only through individuals who learn. Individual learning does not guarantee organizational learning. But without it no organizational learning occurs” (p. 139). Through organisational routines, the learned individual knowledge is converted into organisational knowledge. Hence, these organisational routines form the basis of collective learning within an organisation (Eisenhardt & Santos, 2002). However, a learning culture must be embedded within the organisation in order to achieve successful learning. This culture encourages learning as a way to grow the organisation’s capacity (Senge, 1990). In this context, the literature uses the term *learning organisation*, which refers to an “organization skilled at creating, acquiring, and at transferring knowledge, and at modifying its behaviour to reflect new knowledge and insights” (Garvin, 1993, p. 80).

2.2. Information and knowledge management

The concept of knowledge is fragmented, with no universally-accepted definition (Assundani, 2005; Nonaka, 1994). This article utilises the definition from Beesley and Chalip (2011), who define knowledge as “information with meaning that exists within the individual” (p. 328). Knowledge is different from data and information. Data are unrelated, not yet interpreted facts (Brauner & Becker, 2006). When data are used in the context of relevance for a certain system, they become information (Schlegelmilch & Penz, 2002; Willke, 1998). Thus, information is data used “in a context to which meaning has been attributed” (Standards Australia International, 2003, p. 1). Knowledge accumulates within

individuals and is only shared if the individual is willing to do so (Beesley & Chalip, 2011). Knowledge is a company’s most valuable resource (Scott & Laws, 2006) and an essential source of lasting competitive advantage (Nonaka, 1991).

Knowledge management (KM) “involves the design, review and implementation of both social and technological processes to improve the application of knowledge” (Standards Australia International, 2003, p. 1). An organisation needs to ensure that its ‘data’ becomes ‘information’ and then ‘knowledge’ (Halbwirth & Toohey, 2001). Specific KM activities focus on acquiring, storing and using knowledge for problem solving, dynamic learning, strategic planning and decision making (Geisler & Wickramasinghe, 2009). Information and Knowledge Management (IKM) describes the combined application of both information and knowledge (Skyrme, 2011). Information facilitates the development of knowledge, which then creates more information, which in turn deepens knowledge (Swan, Langford, Watson, & Varey, 2000). There is no correct way to implement IKM. Rather, best practice must reflect the organisation, and its cultural, national, regulatory, political and legislative environments (Halbwirth & Toohey, 2001).

2.3. The knowledge creation process

Within the (I)KM literature, two types of knowledge are usually defined: *tacit knowledge* (i.e., know how) and *explicit knowledge* (i.e., know what) (Polanyi, 1967). *Explicit knowledge* is codifiable, formal, and systematic (Scott & Laws, 2006); it can be translated into words or symbols, and thus be transformed into books or manuals (Inkpen, 1996). In contrast, *tacit knowledge* is more difficult to translate and to explain to outsiders. Tacit knowledge can sometimes only be learned through practice and direct immersion with the person who possesses it (Lei, Slocum, & Pitts, 1997). Knowledge is created and transferred in a dynamic interaction between four different modes of knowledge conversion (Nonaka, 1991, 1994, 1996; Nonaka, Toyama, & Konno, 2000). *Socialisation* is the conversion of new tacit knowledge into the existing base of tacit knowledge. *Externalisation* is the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge through verbalisation. *Combination* refers to the process of converting explicit knowledge into even more systematic and complex forms of explicit knowledge. Finally, *internalisation* occurs when explicit knowledge is converted into tacit knowledge.

2.4. Knowledge transfer

There is no single best method for KT (Awad & Ghaziri, 2004). KT depends on many different factors, such as knowledge type and transfer barriers. KT can be informal, spontaneous and unstructured. However, due to its value, KT is often purposeful. KT can occur through peer-to-peer exchanges, interactive knowledge sharing, team learning, electronic discussion spaces, inter-firm linkages and partnerships, knowledge-creating bodies (e.g., universities and government agencies), and exchanges of work-related gossip (Bathelt, Malmberg, & Maskell, 2004; Scott, Baggio, & Cooper, 2008). The core concept is to ensure the effective application of intellectual capital within the company or network to achieve certain objectives. However, for effective transfer to occur within a network, all partners must participate, as each partner controls access to certain knowledge (Scott et al., 2008). Knowledge that is expressed becomes information to others. For knowledge to be successfully transferred, receivers must apply thought or reasoning to it and incorporate it into their individual knowledge networks (Beesley & Chalip, 2011). The degree to which it has been transferred largely depends on the communication processes (Davila, Epstein, & Shelton, 2006). Knowledge may be transferred

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