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Case study insights to the impact of knowledge transfer in high-tech small firms and perspective on how entrepreneurial practitioners learn

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Abstract

Knowledge transfer, as the term suggests, is about the exchange of knowledge between associates in a partnership. The ambition of such knowledge transfer is the pursuit and exploitation of new, innovative opportunities and the facilitation of learning. The theatre for such activity is, largely, within high technology small to medium sized firms. The partnership commonly includes those within a business venture, an academic or team of academics from a Higher Education Institute, (HEI), and government agencies. It is essentially about the transfer of tangible and intellectual property, expertise, learning and skills between academia and the non-academic community, particularly the business community. The 'knowledge' transferred can be formal and clearly expressed, for example, from published research, informal in terms of individual experiences and tacit as in residing in the individual without being stated and therefore difficult to articulate in direct communication. Transferring knowledge, particularly tacit knowledge, and facilitating learning, is a complex undertaking. The entrepreneurial business venturer, for example, busy with developing an enterprise, may not be fully aware of, or have thought critically about, the wealth of knowledge that resides within him/her as a consequence of years of business experience. The specific challenge to transfer 'knowledge' is therefore to capture, organize, create, and distribute such knowledge from one part of an enterprise to another or indeed throughout an enterprise in ways that effect a step-change in the progress of the business venture and to ensure its legacy remains valid for those within the enterprise into the future though the development of appropriate applied learning.

The Knowledge Transfer Partnership, (KTP), scheme in the UK, is specifically designed to help those within entrepreneurial firms to acquire the knowledge they need to pursue growth through a greater commitment to, and development of, competencies in innovation practice and opportunity focus. The link between the entrepreneurial business venturer, the academic in the HEI and the graduate, the Associate, recruited by the HEI and lodged within the firm, are the key players in determining the potential of the scheme to facilitate learning that will have a positive impact on the future of the business. The Associate, as an agent for positive, innovative change in the business, brings with him/her new knowledge to be introduced into the business, challenging established practices and processes and supporting innovative step-changes in the business. The placements are temporary but potentially can be a 'long-interview'. In a recent independent report, (*The Knowledge Transfer Partnership programme: an impact review, From: [Innovate UK](#), First published: 13 October 2015*), it was noted, for example, that for every £1 of KTP grant invested up to £8 of net extra GVA was generated, that 94% of associates said KTP had had a positive impact on their personal/career development, that over a third said the impact had actually been transformational for their development and career, that 99% of knowledge base organisations would recommend the KTP programme and that 95% of KTP associates would recommend it to other graduates/post graduates.

Knowledge transfer is, therefore, clearly both potentially valuable and challenging for those engaged in it. Many high-technology small to medium sized firms emerge as a consequence of the creativity and innovativeness of a founding entrepreneur and his or her team and the early development of such enterprises can often be characterised by organic development and considerable adhocism. Innovation in terms of new product or process development lie at the core of what founders and their teams do although not always formally recognised and supported. Early practices that are seen to work become established. That key focus of knowledge-transfer is on supporting appropriate and sustainable learning, where the Entrepreneurial Practitioner acquires and learns to implement new knowledge of best practice in business development, where the Associate gains experience of business practice and an opportunity to apply learned theory and where the academic learns the value of their research in an applied context. The focus of this research is on the Entrepreneurial Practitioner's learning. Cope (2003) suggests however that the entrepreneurship discipline does not currently possess sufficient conceptual frameworks to explain how entrepreneurs learn. He concluded '...entrepreneurial learning is not characterised by the notions of stability, consistency or predictability. Rather, evidence suggests that the concepts of metamorphosis, discontinuity and change more appropriately encapsulate the dynamics of this phenomenon', (p. 26). When it comes to working, learning and innovation, Brown and Duguid (1991) argue that 'Work practice is generally viewed as conservative and resistant to change, learning is generally viewed as distinct from working and problematic in the face of change and innovation is generally viewed as the disruptive but necessary imposition of change on the other two', (p40), highlighting the tensions that often accompany the learning process within the developing HTSF.

In this exploratory, ethnographic report, two of the authors were each embedded in a high-tech small firm as part of a knowledge transfer partnership, (KTP), and in the research key decision-makers in each firm are observed and interviewed over a two-year period in order to gain insights to practitioner learning over that period. In response to Cope's suggestion, and reflecting those of Brown and Duguid, the authors' aim is to provide perspectives on how Entrepreneurial Practitioners, owners of high-tech small firms, (HTSF), and engaged with knowledge transfer, learn.

References

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