

## RESEARCH PAPER

### Communities of management knowledge diffusion

Joanne Roberts\*

Newcastle University Business School, Newcastle University, Newcastle upon Tyne, UK

*A Communities of Practice approach is used to unravel the actions and activities that facilitate the diffusion of management knowledge among organizations. In so doing, the local embedded nature of knowledge is recognized, as is the manner in which interactions between the general and the specific provide a creative dynamic that facilitates the widespread diffusion and a multiple creation of knowledge. Knowledge interactions are explored in terms of boundary processes involving interactions between management gurus, management consultants, business schools/management academics, managers and business media. Moreover, by making a clear distinction between implicit management knowledge and management ideas and techniques, important differences between the communities engaged in the diffusion of management knowledge are revealed.*

#### Introduction

The dissemination of management knowledge has attracted much attention from scholars in recent years (e.g. Abrahamson, 1996; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Kipping and Engwall, 2002; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002a; Engwall and Kipping, 2004; Thrift, 2005). This paper seeks to add to this growing body of research through an analysis of the diffusion of management knowledge from a Communities of Practice (CoPs) perspective. Identified as a mechanism through which knowledge is held, transferred and created within and between organizations (Brown and Duguid, 1991; Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al.*, 2002), the CoPs approach provides a valuable lens through which to analyze the actions and interactions that facilitate the diffusion of management knowledge. This analysis seeks to unravel the actions and activities that facilitate the transfer of management knowledge between organizations. In so doing, the local embedded nature of knowledge is recognized, as is the manner in which interactions between the general and the specific provide a creative dynamic that facilitates the widespread diffusion and a multiple creation of knowledge. By shedding light on the mechanisms that facilitate the diffusion of management knowledge this paper will contribute to the promotion of successful knowledge-intensive business activity. It will, therefore, be of interest to managers, academics and policymakers seeking to promote knowledge creation and diffusion.

The paper begins with an overview of the management knowledge field. This is followed by a critical examination of the CoPs approach. The concept of boundary processes is then considered as a mechanism that facilitates the diffusion of knowledge between communities and constellations of practice. The CoPs framework

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\*Email: Joanne.Roberts@ncl.ac.uk

is then applied to the management knowledge field with consideration given to the interactions between various communities identified within the field. A discussion of the analysis and suggestions for further research are followed by brief concluding comments.

### **Management knowledge field**

Before elaborating on the management knowledge field it is useful to begin by exploring the notion of knowledge in general. Knowledge involves an awareness or understanding gained through experience, familiarity or learning; it entails cognitive structures that can assimilate information and put it into a wider context, allowing actions to be undertaken from it (Howells and Roberts, 2000). In discussions of knowledge a distinction is often made between tacit and codified, or implicit and explicit knowledge. Knowledge is codified or explicit if it is recorded or transmitted in the form of symbols (e.g. writing or drawings) or embodied in a tangible form (e.g. machinery or tools). Through the process of codification, knowledge is reduced to information that can be transformed into knowledge by those individuals who have access to the appropriate code or framework of analysis. Tacit or implicit knowledge is non-codified knowledge that is acquired via the informal take-up of learning behaviour and procedures (Howells, 1996); it is often referred to as know-how. Importantly, tacit knowledge is not easily codifiable; indeed elements of tacit knowledge remain beyond the reach of any codification process (Polanyi, 1966; Roberts, 2000).

In their study of organizational knowledge, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) identify two dimensions of tacit knowledge: the technical dimension encompassing skills or crafts; and, the cognitive dimension consisting of schemata, mental models, and beliefs that shape the way individuals perceive the world around them. Elaborating on their idea of knowledge conversion in the context of the organization, they stress the mutual complementary nature of tacit and explicit knowledge, arguing that they 'interact with and interchange into each other in the creative activities of human beings'. Their dynamic model of knowledge creation 'is anchored to a critical assumption that human knowledge is created and expanded through social interaction between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge' (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, p. 61).

For the purposes of analyzing the management knowledge field, this paper builds on these insights into the nature of knowledge by proposing a clear distinction between two types of management knowledge. First, implicit management knowledge (which refers to tacit knowledge) is embedded into the everyday practice of management. For example, the way that spoken language is used in a specific context so that it is meaningful only for those who are familiar with the language and the antecedents of the context. Secondly, management ideas and techniques refer to knowledge that is codified or explicit. Ideas denote knowledge that is disembedded from practice and embodied in abstract representations or characterized in general terms as concepts or theories; techniques are practical methods and tools, which, though emerging from practice, may be applied to a particular task across a range of contexts. An example of the former is Maslow's (1943) theory of human motivation that can be captured in the idea of a hierarchy of needs, whereas the latter is exemplified by the Balanced Scorecard, which is a strategic performance management tool (Kaplan and Norton,

1992). The distinction between ideas and techniques is somewhat blurred, yet taken together they are expressions of explicit or codified management knowledge.

The management knowledge field is the context within which management knowledge is produced and distributed. It is similar to the context within which Abrahamson (1996) sets the management fashion process. The ideas and techniques that emerge from the management knowledge field are widely considered to be fashionable in nature (Abrahamson, 1996; Kieser, 1997). These have included, for example, Total Quality Management, Business Process Re-engineering, Lean Production, Six Sigma and Balanced Scorecard. According to Gill and Whittle (1993), such ideas progress through a series of discrete stages from invention to diffusion, then on to acceptance before disenchantment sets in, and, finally, decline or abandonment occurs.

There have been various attempts to identify the producers and consumers active in the management knowledge field (Abrahamson, 1991, 1996; Suddaby and Greenwood, 2001; Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002b; Thrift, 2005). For instance, Abrahamson (1991, 1996) identifies a management fashion setting community consisting of management consultants, business schools, business press organizations, academic gurus, consultant gurus and hero managers. For Abrahamson, managers and business practitioners are users of management knowledge rather than producers. Yet, Barley *et al.* (1988) suggest that new managerial ideas emerge among practitioners before moving into business schools. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001, pp. 940–41) argue that the communities of business schools, gurus, consultants, the big five professional service firms (PSFs) and consumers all play a critical role in the production, commodification and consumption of management knowledge. They go on to elaborate on a four-stage cycle of knowledge production and consumption, arguing that management knowledge is colonized by PSFs. Although they note that ‘events most likely occur contemporaneously’ (p. 940), they do elaborate on a sequential movement of knowledge through a cycle commencing with the legitimization of knowledge by gurus before its commodification by consultants, colonization by PSFs, and, finally, analysis and refinement by business schools. The interactions between these various communities lead to the boundaries between them becoming blurred (Sahlin-Andersson and Engwall, 2002b).

Drawing on these earlier contributions, the management knowledge field is conceptualized as inhabited by management gurus, management consultancies, business schools and management scholars, managers and the business media. All these groups are actively concerned with the creation, commodification and diffusion of management knowledge, both within and between organizations. Importantly, knowledge diffuses across the management knowledge field as a result of the efforts of the various groups to disseminate knowledge for commercial purposes and to absorb new knowledge through, for instance, the mobility of individuals, interaction with professional organizations and the imitation of management practices. Before elaborating further on the connections between these groups, it is useful to consider briefly each in turn.

*Management gurus* are producers and promoters of management ideas through the writing of best-selling books, business magazine and journal papers, and the delivery of lectures and seminars. Although not entirely responsible for the management knowledge they publicize (Clark and Greatbatch, 2002; Greatbatch and Clark, 2005), they do have an important role in promoting and legitimizing certain ideas. Three types of management guru are commonly identified: ‘academic gurus’ (e.g. Charles

Handy, Gary Hamel); 'consultant gurus' (e.g. Peter Drucker, Tom Peters); and, 'hero managers' (e.g. Lee Iacocca, Jack Welch). Gurus draw on their experience working with organizations to produce easily accessible and broadly applicable ideas and techniques that can be disseminated across the management knowledge field.

*Management consultancies* are both consumers and producers of management knowledge. The larger consultancy firms have significant research capacities and systems of personal development through which they promote the development of in-house gurus. They also draw upon the individual experience of consultants with clients for the benefit of the whole firm (Hansen *et al.*, 1999; Werr, 2002). Knowledge is extracted from a number of sources of practice, codified and made portable in the form of management ideas and techniques so that it may be translated and reused in a broad range of situations. General principles are developed with sufficient ambiguity to ensure that they are highly adaptable and can therefore appeal to a wide range of clients.

*Business schools and management academics* are important consumers and producers of management knowledge. The works of, for example, Mintzberg (1991) and Hamel and Prahalad (1994) have been influential within the broad management community. Many successful management academics establish consultancy firms and some have attained guru status. Yet, the findings of a number of studies suggest that, possibly due to the lengthy peer review process and high rejection rates of academic journals, there is a tendency for many fashionable ideas to emerge initially in the business press (Barley *et al.*, 1988; Gibson and Tesone, 2001; Spell, 2001). Consequently, academic theory and studies are generally perceived as following, rather than leading, management progress.

*Managers* are primarily consumers of management knowledge. The consumption of management knowledge is viewed as necessary for managers to maintain both the competitiveness of their business and their individual position in the management community (Staw and Epstein, 2000). The growing complexity of business activity as globalization and new technologies intensify competition and uncertainty has given rise to an increasing demand from managers for the services of management gurus, consultants and business schools. Nevertheless, it is important to note that, through their engagement in managing in complex and rapidly evolving environments, managers also produce knowledge. The hero managers who become management gurus provide the most obvious example of managers as producers and disseminators of management knowledge. However, managers contribute to the diffusion of management knowledge more broadly through the development of and diffusion of the practices and procedures in the organizations they manage and through their active engagement with business schools through, for example, contributions to collaborative research, guest speaker programmes and advisory boards. Moreover, the mobility of managers between organizations facilitates the inter-organizational circulation of management knowledge. More generally, when purchasing services from management consultants, managers are often involved in a process of co-production (Den Hertog, 2000). This process can contribute to important developments in management knowledge that the consultancy firm may utilize when serving other clients.

*Business media* also has an important role facilitating the diffusion of management knowledge embedded in ideas and techniques (Furusten, 1999; Mazza and Alvarez, 2000; Clark and Greatbatch, 2002, 2004; Thrift, 2005; Alvarez *et al.*, 2005; Scarbrough *et al.*, 2005). Business media include: publishers of business books, CDs, DVDs and journals, magazines and newspapers, such as *Fortune*, the *Economist*, and the *Financial*

*Times*; business television programmes and channels like the *BBC's Working Lunch* and *CNBC* and *Bloomberg*; and, in recent years, a range of Internet-based channels have emerged, from blogs and YouTube to Facebook and Twitter, which have been harnessed by traditional media and independent professional and amateur management and financial specialists.

The success of each of these groups is dependent upon its ability to develop, disseminate and absorb management knowledge. This is achieved through interactions within and between the various groups. Individuals may move between the groups; for instance, management students and scholars take up managerial positions or management consultancy assignments and managers may engage in executive education, or, like management gurus, they may take up guest lecturing opportunities in business schools or invitations to contribute to business magazines or newspapers. Given the porous nature of the boundaries between the groups identified, it is not uncommon for members of the management knowledge field to participate in several of the groups simultaneously. Group members also interact in order to forward their own objectives. So, for example, a manager may employ a management consultant to assist in the delivery of an organizational objective, and managers may attend guru seminars and absorb management media products as a means of keeping abreast of the latest management knowledge.

Importantly, the five groups identified display a high degree of internal heterogeneity. For instance, management consultancies may range from one-person businesses to global consultancy service providers, and the highly differentiated and fragmentary nature of management (Reed and Anthony, 1992) must also be recognized. Such heterogeneity can also be identified among business schools that have varying teaching and research reputations, gurus that have different specialities and abilities to attract audiences and business media ranging from global media conglomerates to individual authors self-publishing on the Internet.

In addition, while having common purposes in terms of the promotion and creation of management knowledge, members of each group may simultaneously be in competition with one another. For instance, management consultants are in competition for clients, business media and gurus are in competition for audiences, business schools are in competition for students, and managers are competing with other managers in their business sector, and sometimes in their own organization, for market share and resources.

Those that belong to them may not reify the groups identified here. For instance, many managers may identify with their organization rather than with a group of managers. Others, though, may have stronger attachment to their identity as managers, developed through management education and membership of professional bodies, such as the Chartered Management Institute. Nonetheless, the groups identified do provide a valuable means of analyzing the field of management knowledge. Despite the diversity between and within the groups that make up the management knowledge field, there is sufficient cognitive proximity (Nooteboom, 2008) between the members to ensure constructive and creative communication.

In summary, following a discussion of the nature of knowledge and management knowledge broadly defined, this section has explored the various groups that comprise the management knowledge field. Even though management knowledge is embedded and invested in practice, the groups considered here are able to extract elements of implicit management knowledge from its practice-based context through the production of management ideas and techniques. In this process, they endow these ideas and

techniques with characteristics that give them the ability to circulate throughout the management knowledge field. Interactions within and between the groups facilitate the diffusion of management ideas and techniques as well as the creation of new implicit management knowledge as codified knowledge is absorbed and translated through the tacit knowledge of recipients and embedded into new organizational practices.

How is this knowledge diffusion process achieved? Is it possible to conceive of the groups identified above as CoPs? And, if so, can the CoPs approach provide any insights into the interactions that take place in the management knowledge field? In particular, can it reveal the processes through which knowledge is created and diffused throughout the field? Before considering these questions, the next section provides a critical overview of the relevant CoPs literature.

### **Community in the management field**

The notion of community is the subject of extensive scholarly interest in the fields of sociology, psychology, political science and economics (Tonnies, 1957; McMillan and Chavis, 1986; Etzioni, 1996; Putnam, 2000; Bowles and Gintis, 2002). Reflecting the nebulous nature of the term, such research has resulted in a variety of definitions (Etzioni, 2000). For the purposes of this paper, and drawing on definitions given in the literature, community is defined in broad terms as characterized by relationships among a group of people which are governed by an accepted set of norms and values. Although community members share some common characteristics, they do not need to be co-located. A community is then much broader than a team or project group established for a specific purpose. Community in this broad sense is evident in all parts of society and the economy.

In the business context, markets and hierarchies, as dominant modes of organizing economic activity, have tended to overshadow the role of community. Nevertheless, recent years have witnessed a resurgence of interest in community among management scholars and practitioners (Amin and Roberts, 2008a). This interest has developed from the seminal work of Lave and Wenger (1991) concerning situated learning in the context of a variety of apprenticeships. Lave and Wenger (1991, p. 98) define a CoP as 'a system of relationships between people, activities, and the world; developing with time, and in relation to other tangential and overlapping communities of practice'. Communities and CoPs are then fairly synonymous, the key point of departure being the centrality of a specific practice in the latter. All communities engage in a variety of practices, whereas CoPs form around specific practices.

The idea of CoPs was elaborated and brought to the attention of management scholars and practitioners by Brown and Duguid (1991). Since the mid-1990s, CoPs have become a means of analyzing and facilitating learning and knowledge transfer in a wide variety of inter- and intra-organizational contexts. More broadly, community is becoming an attractive alternative or complement to hierarchical organizational forms that are ill-equipped to manage the growing number of highly skilled autonomous knowledge workers (Adler, 2001).

Wenger (1998) developed a detailed understanding of the dynamic operation of CoPs focusing on the social interactive dimensions of situated learning through a study of an insurance claims processing office. For Wenger (1998, p. 5) community is 'a way of talking about the social configuration in which our enterprises are defined as worth pursuing and our participation is recognizable as competence'. He goes on



to identify three dimensions of the relation by which practice is the source of coherence of a community (Wenger, 1998, pp. 72–84). First, members interact with one another, establishing norms and relationships through mutual engagement. Secondly, members are bound together by an understanding of a sense of joint enterprise. Finally, members produce over time a shared repertoire of communal resources, including, for example, language, routines, artefacts and stories. Furthermore, Wenger (2000, pp. 227–28) distinguishes between three modes of belonging to social learning systems. First, engagement is achieved through doing things together; for example, talking and producing artefacts. Secondly, imagination involves constructing an image of ourselves, of our communities, and of the world in order to orient ourselves, to reflect on our situation, and to explore possibilities. Finally, *alignment* involves making sure that our local activities are sufficiently aligned with other processes so that they can be effective beyond our own engagement. The characteristics of CoPs elaborated by Wenger (1998) are detailed in Table 1.

According to Wenger (1998, p. 55), within CoPs meaning is negotiated through a process of participation and reification. Wenger (1998, p. 58) defines the concept of reification as the process of giving form to experience by producing objects: ‘Any community of practice produces abstractions, tools, symbols, stories, terms, and concepts that reify something of that practice in a congealed form’ (Wenger, 1998, p. 59). Such forms take on a life of their own outside their original context where their meaning can evolve or even disappear.

The concept of CoPs is not without its weaknesses and limitations (Fox, 2000; Contu and Willmott, 2003; Mutch, 2003; Roberts, 2006; Handley *et al.*, 2006; Hughes *et al.*, 2007). For instance, the use of the term ‘community’ has been recognized as problematic. This is in part because of the positive connotations that it carries, which neglect power dimensions (Fox, 2000; Contu and Willmott, 2003) and the potential rigidities inherent in such social structures (Roberts, 2006). In addition,

**Table 1.** Characteristics of communities of practice

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Communities of practice

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- Sustained mutual relationships – harmonious or conflictual
  - Shared ways of engaging in doing things together
  - The rapid flow of information and propagation of innovation
  - Absence of introductory preambles, as if conversations and interactions were merely the continuation of an ongoing process
  - Very quick setup of a problem to be discussed
  - Substantial overlap in participants’ descriptions of who belongs
  - Knowing what others know, what they can do, and how they can contribute to an enterprise
  - Mutually defining identities
  - The ability to assess the appropriateness of actions and products
  - Specific tools, representations, and other artefacts
  - Local lore, shared stories, inside jokes, knowing laughter
  - Jargon and shortcuts to communication as well as the ease of producing new ones
  - Certain styles recognized as displaying membership
  - A shared discourse reflecting a certain perspective on the world
  - It is not necessary that all participants interact intensely with everyone else
  - It is not necessary that every participant be accountable to a joint enterprise
  - It is not necessary that a repertoire be completely locally produced
- 

Source: Compiled from Wenger (1998, pp. 125–26).

the appropriateness of the term community for the wide array of groupings to which it is applied is questioned. For instance, Lindkvist (2005) forwards the idea of collectivities of practice for short-term projects, and Brown and Duguid (2001) prefer the term 'networks of practice' for all but the smallest co-located organizational groupings. To recognize the diversity with which the term CoPs is employed, Amin and Roberts (2008b) suggest the differentiation of four types of knowing in action – craft, epistemic, professional and virtual communities.

The idea of CoPs has travelled a long way from its original manifestation as an approach to understanding situated learning in apprenticeships (Duguid, 2008; Lave, 2008). Moreover, its evolution has branched in two distinct directions. First, CoPs have been integrated into the management toolkit as methods of managing knowledge, innovation and human resources (Swan *et al.*, 2002; Bellini and Canonico, 2008). In this process, it has transformed from an entity that emerges spontaneously into a supplementary organizational form that management can cultivate (Wenger *et al.*, 2002) and leverage for strategic advantage (Saint-Onge and Wallace, 2003). In this sense, the CoP has itself become a management idea or technique that is being diffused through the management knowledge field. Secondly, the CoP has been extensively employed by scholars in the fields of management and social sciences as a means of analyzing learning and knowledge transfer in intra- and inter-organizational contexts from insurance claims processing, photocopy machine repair, and corporate research to online communities, healthcare activities, professional networks and beyond (Amin and Roberts, 2008b).

As Duguid (2008) notes, the CoPs approach is a theory under continual social construction. However, over time the CoPs approach has lost much of its earlier specificity and capacity as a means of analyzing knowledge diffusion at an inter-organizational level. Hence, for the purpose of the analysis undertaken in this paper, the earlier articulation of CoPs as elaborated by Wenger (1998) is employed as an analytical lens through which to explore the knowledge interactions within and between communities in the management knowledge field. In this context the CoPs approach has a number of advantages. First, it acknowledges that practice is an intrinsic condition of the existence of knowledge. In this respect, it 'recognizes the situated and "purposive" nature of knowledge as it is created by a community of individuals who have a shared practice or problem and share in its consequences' (Carlile, 2002, p. 445). Second, CoPs are significant arenas for the replication, development and diffusion of knowledge. Third, the CoPs framework not only provides a mechanism with which to analyze the production and diffusion of knowledge within a particular community, but also how this knowledge is diffused across communities.

### **Crossing boundaries and the diffusion of knowledge**

According to Wenger (1998), CoPs may be part of a number of constellations of CoPs sharing a variety of characteristics (Table 2) and sustained by interactions among practices involving boundary processes. A number of boundary processes through which knowledge can be shared and transferred, including brokering, boundary objects, boundary interactions and cross-disciplinary projects, are identified (Table 3) (Wenger, 1998, 2000). These processes often occur simultaneously and support one another.

The concept of boundary objects was originally developed by Star and Griesemer (1989) in their analysis of the work of a Museum of Vertebrate Zoology. They



**Table 2.** Characteristics of constellations of practice

| Constellations of practice  |
|---|
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Sharing historical roots</li> <li>• Having related enterprises</li> <li>• Serving a cause or belonging to an institution</li> <li>• Facing similar conditions</li> <li>• Having members in common</li> <li>• Sharing artefacts</li> <li>• Having geographical relations of proximity or interaction</li> <li>• Having overlapping styles or discourses</li> <li>• Competing for the same resources</li> <li>• May or may not be named/identified by participants</li> <li>• May or may not have people endeavouring to keep it together</li> <li>• May be created intentionally by boundary straddling individuals</li> <li>• May emerge from circumstances</li> </ul> |

Source: Compiled from Wenger (1998, pp. 126–28).

identified four boundary objects: repositories, ideal types, coincident boundaries and standardized forms. These boundary objects facilitated the communication of knowledge and information between very different groups contributing to the work of the museum. The notion of boundary objects has subsequently attracted much attention from researchers of knowledge transfer. For example, in a study of knowledge sharing in new product development across functional boundaries within the firm, Carlile (2002) identifies three categories of boundary objects that are appropriate for three types of boundaries evident in the cross-disciplinary project: syntactic, semantic and pragmatic. Establishing a shared syntax or language which can ensure accurate communication between the sender and receiver across a boundary can bridge syntactic boundaries. In this instance, shared repositories can act as successful boundary objects. When syntax is not shared across boundaries, the issue becomes one of learning about the sources that create the semantic differences at the boundary rather than merely an issue of information processing. Individuals may use the same language, but it may have very different meanings in different contexts. The types of boundary objects that are effective at a semantic boundary, such as standardized forms and methods, provide a means for individuals to specify and learn about their differences and dependencies. Finally, at a pragmatic boundary, where the importance of the consequences of differences and dependencies between functions, whether positive or negative, must be recognized, effective boundary objects (including objects, models and maps) facilitate a process through which individuals can jointly transform their knowledge. Despite the distinction between these three types of boundaries, Carlile (2002, p. 451) notes that '[s]ome shared syntax is an essential feature of all ... boundary objects'. In contrast, Boland and Tenkasi (1995) in a study of perspective making and perspective taking in communities of knowing, explore boundary objects in terms of visible representations and narratives.

Furthermore, boundary processes and practices, overlaps, and peripheries are identified where the role of marginality becomes significant (Star and Griesemer, 1989). New members of a community may be peripheral participants, only becoming full participants once they have gained knowledge and understanding of the activities of the community. Some members may retain a peripheral status and be engaged in a number of communities through their boundary spanning activities. Members of

**Table 3.** Types of boundary processes and their characteristics in general and in the management knowledge field

| Boundary processes          | Examples given by Wenger (2000, pp. 235–38)  | Examples from the management knowledge field  |
|-----------------------------|--|---|
| Brokering                   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boundary spanners: taking care of one specific boundary over time</li> <li>• Roamers: going from place to place, creating connections, moving knowledge</li> <li>• Outposts: bringing back news from the front, exploring new territories</li> <li>• Pairs: personal relationships between two people</li> </ul>                                  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Account managers in consultancies, recruitment and programme directors in business schools</li> <li>• Gurus, academics and management personnel delivering training programmes</li> <li>• Researchers in business schools and consultancies</li> <li>• Client relationships, academic/student relationships</li> </ul>   |
| Boundary objects            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Artefacts: tools, documents, or models</li> <li>• Discourses: common language</li> <li>• Processes: explicit routines and procedures</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Books, journals, magazines, business newspapers, CDs, DVDs, television programmes/channels, commonly accepted management principles</li> <li>• Management qualifications and membership of management associations providing access to a common discourse</li> <li>• Methodologies and management tools, e.g. Total Quality Management, Business Process Reengineering</li> </ul>    |
| Boundary interactions       | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Boundary encounters: visits, discussions and sabbaticals</li> <li>• Boundary practices: practices developed to facilitate the effective crossing of boundaries</li> <li>• Peripheries: facilities by which outsiders can connect with practice in peripheral ways – ‘frequently asked questions’, introductory events and ‘help desks’</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Secondments, and management training through, Executive Education, MBAs and DBAs</li> <li>• Training programmes, socialization activities</li> <li>• Promotional events, e.g. engaging in local and national activities and events in the wider community, open days – especially for business schools, websites</li> </ul>  |
| Cross-disciplinary projects | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Cross-functional projects and teams that combine the knowledge of multiple practices to get something done</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Project involving management consultants and their client firm’s staff, or research and consultancy collaboration between managers and academics, e.g. knowledge transfer partnerships between business schools and private and public sectors organizations</li> <li>• Business media projects that bring together participants and audiences from academia and practice</li> </ul> |

multiple communities can act as brokers between different CoPs; although, as Mutch (2003, p. 397) argues: 'multi-membership is not necessarily a resource that translates into different perspectives' or indeed into the ability to adopt multiple perspectives. Moreover, in a study of the diffusion of knowledge management, the role of intermediary groups was seen as one of the most important factors in creating tension between diffusion and institutionalization (Scarbrough, 2003). Additionally, as Swan *et al.*'s (2002) study of the diffusion of innovation in healthcare demonstrates, communities may resist the introduction of new knowledge when it has the potential to undermine the expertise of members, despite the efforts of brokers.

Nevertheless, elements of styles and discourses, which include language and the way it is used, metaphors, types of narratives, ways of presenting information, manners and behaviour can travel across boundaries (Czarniawska and Joerges, 1996). They can be imported and exported across boundaries, and reinterpreted and adapted in the process of being adopted within various practices (Wenger, 1998, p. 129). As styles and discourses spread across an entire constellation, they can be shared by multiple practices and create forms of continuity that take on a universal character. But they may be integrated into these various practices in very different ways.

### **A communities of practice approach to the diffusion of management knowledge**

Within the management knowledge field various communities and constellations of practice may be identified. Managers, management consultants and management academics can be viewed as CoPs within which there exist mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoires (Table 4). Moreover, the groups forming the communities or broad constellations of management practice are members of multiple CoPs. Managers, for instance, may be part of a functional department and a managerial CoP within their own organization, whilst also being members of the broader community of managers through engagement in professional organizations or enrolment on an executive Masters of Business Administration programme. Similarly, management consultants may be engaged in a CoP within their own consultancy firm while also being integrated into a client organization's CoP and actively engaged in their professional CoP through, for instance, membership of the Institute of Business Consulting. Management academics may engage in CoPs around, for example, subject or research areas both within their own business school and across universities and professional associations, such as the Academy of Management. A range of associations also facilitate broad communities of business schools, for example, those that centre on quality standards, like the European Quality Improvement System (EQUIS) and the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB).

Management consultants, managers and management academics/business schools all interact with one another in a constellation of practice within which a wide range of boundary processes can be identified (Table 3). Boundary interactions are common between these communities; for instance, academics may take sabbaticals in business organizations or consultancy firms, while consultants and managers may study or take on teaching assignments in business schools. A manager may also act as a consultant, and business school academics are often active in the delivery of consultancy services. The various communities that make up the constellation of practice in the management knowledge field are relatively open to outsiders having facilities that enable peripheral interaction, including secondments and training programmes. Finally,

**Table 4.** Communities of practice (CoPs) and boundary spanners (BS) in the management knowledge field

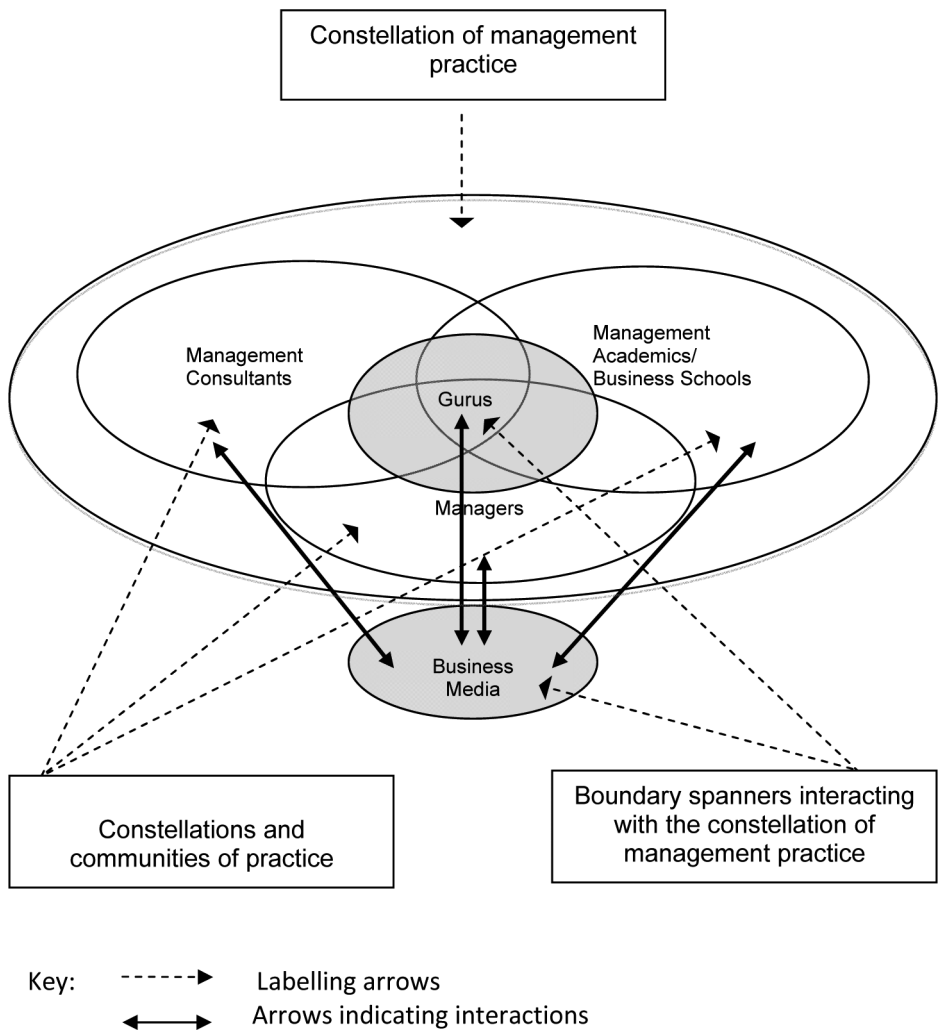
| Dimensions of a CoP | Management consultants (CoP)   | Business schools & management academics (CoP)   | Managers (CoP)   | Management gurus (BS)   | Business media (BS)  |
|---------------------|--|---|--|---|--|
| Mutual engagement   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The provision of services to clients</li> <li>The creation, diffusion and absorption of new management knowledge</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The diffusion of new management knowledge</li> <li>The creation of new management knowledge</li> </ul>   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Management of organizations</li> <li>The creation of context specific knowledge and the absorption of new management knowledge to sustain competitive advantage</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul>   |
| Joint enterprise    | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Serving the needs of clients by providing the latest management techniques</li> <li>Creating and absorbing new knowledge to maintain competitive advantage</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Supplying management education (e.g. MBAs, DBAs, CPD, executive education)</li> <li>Undertaking management research to validate existing management knowledge and to create new knowledge</li> <li>Enhancing management education and acquiring national and international quality accreditation (e.g. AMBA, EQUIS and AACSB)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>The management of an organization</li> <li>Building and maintaining competitive advantage by creating context specific knowledge and absorbing the latest management knowledge</li> <li>Dissemination of management knowledge through the organization, e.g. 'best practice' initiatives</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Creating new management knowledge</li> <li>Disseminating new management knowledge through performance on the international lecture circuit</li> <li>Production of boundary objects, such as books and DVDs, to facilitate the diffusion of management knowledge</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Production and marketing of boundary objects, such as books, CDs, and DVDs to facilitate the diffusion of management knowledge</li> </ul> |

**Table 4.** (*Continued*)

| Dimensions of a CoP | Management consultants (CoP)   | Business schools & management academics (CoP)  | Managers (CoP)   | Management gurus (BS)   | Business media (BS)                                    |
|---------------------|--|--|--|---|--|
| Shared repertoire   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language, styles, documents, narratives, identity, methodological approaches, educational backgrounds (e.g. MBAs), academic and practitioner literature, membership of consultancy associations (e.g. Management Consultancy Association and the Institute of Business Consulting)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Business school resources (e.g. academic libraries, alumni), language, styles, documents, videos, DVDs, narratives, identity, educational backgrounds (e.g. MBAs, PhDs), academic and practitioner literature, academic and business school associations (e.g. Academy of Management, Association of Business Schools)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language, styles, documents, narratives, identity, management techniques, educational backgrounds (e.g. MBAs, DBAs CPD), practitioner literature, membership of professional management associations (e.g. Chartered Management Institute)</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>Language, styles, narratives, performance techniques, identity, educational backgrounds (e.g. MBAs), academic and practitioner literature</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>None</li> </ul> |

members of each community may participate in cross-disciplinary projects in which managers, management consultants and academics may work together to achieve a specific objective, perhaps related to research, education or consultancy. Active in multiple CoPs, members of the constellation of practice take on brokering and boundary spanning roles facilitating the widespread diffusion of management knowledge.

Figure 1 depicts the management knowledge field as five groups, all of which are involved in the creation, legitimating and diffusion of management knowledge. Unlike Suddaby and Greenwood's (2001, p. 941) cycle of knowledge production and consumption in which knowledge passes from one group to another in a systematic way, with certain groups having specific responsibilities in the production cycle, this representation of the management knowledge field reveals a more complex process of knowledge production and consumption in which all groups are actively involved in the processes of production, legitimating, diffusion and consumption of management



**Figure 1.** Constellations of practice and boundary spanners in the management knowledge field



knowledge. The overlapping of the managers, management consultants and management academics/business school groups reflects the fact that members of each of these groups often have multiple memberships. To represent the activities of these groups as distinct is to overlook significant interactions between them.

Gurus and the business media are also present in the management knowledge field (Figure 1). However these are not CoPs. While gurus may be embedded in a management, consultant or business school community, they do not constitute a CoP. Gurus are individuals that work with various groups. They do not generally share in a socially constructed practice with other gurus. Although they may share joint enterprise and repertoire with one another, they are not mutually engaged. Given that gurus usually derive from management, consultancy or business schools, they are very much integrated into the constellations of management practice. Consequently, they may be conceptualized here as brokers and boundary spanners since they are an important conduit through which management knowledge moves between the CoPs in the field.

Similarly, the business media has a boundary-spanning role through the creation of boundary objects in the form of books, journals, magazines, CDs, DVDs and the transmission of management and business information, opinion and analysis. However, while gurus are often a part of the communities of management practice, the business media merely interacts with the various communities in the management knowledge field. While there are no doubt CoPs in the field of business media, these communities are not present in the management knowledge field. Individuals working in the business media may have previously worked in communities of management practice, but they do not continue to have mutual engagement with these communities or to share a joint enterprise with them. Rather, they are engaged with colleagues in the business media sector. Nevertheless, the business media group does share some elements of the communities of management practice's repertoire related to the diffusion of management knowledge in the form of various media outputs (Table 4).

So, while gurus are more integrated within the various communities, the business media simply interacts with these groups, including gurus, with the aim of drawing information, in the form of management ideas and techniques, from them and packaging it for sale and profit. The business media more generally are, then, essential facilitators of the reification of knowledge through the creation of boundary objects, which circulate widely in the management knowledge field and are actively marketed to a global audience.

Yet, the creation of boundary objects is not confined to the gurus and media. Participants in all sections of the management knowledge field are actively engaged, through a process of reification, in the production of boundary objects, including artefacts such as documents, manuals, websites, databases, common styles and discourses, and routines and procedures. For instance, consultancies develop knowledge management systems that support the generation, commodification and commercialization of management knowledge products (Heusinkveld and Benders, 2002–03).

The creation of easily transferable management knowledge is problematic because of its practice-based nature. Management knowledge is then invested from the outset with a number of features that potentially reduce its potential for widespread diffusion. To appreciate how management knowledge is disseminated, it is necessary to recognize the distinction between implicit management knowledge and management ideas and techniques outlined earlier.

Some aspects of management knowledge are more mobile than others. Such knowledge can be extracted from context specific practice and embedded into ideas and techniques that can be easily disseminated in the management knowledge field. In a sense, as elements of implicit management knowledge are extracted and transformed through a process of abstraction, a reification process results in the development of management ideas and techniques. Importantly, ideas and techniques that develop in this way do not fully capture the implicit knowledge from which they derive. Consequently, management ideas and techniques, while described in, for example, a clearly defined set of steps on how to implement some specific management practice, actually remain somewhat vague at the level of application, for it is at this level that context specific implicit management knowledge is required to interpret and absorb the ideas and techniques into practice.

In fact, an important characteristic of a successful idea or technique is that it lends itself to multiple interpretations. Fransman (1999, p. 3), in a study of innovation, refers to the concept of 'interpretive ambiguity' which 'exists when the current information set is capable of yielding inconsistent inferences regarding what should be believed'. Under conditions of interpretive ambiguity, actors 'make a "leap" from the information which they have ... to a constructed set of more sharply defined beliefs' (Fransman, 1999, p. 3). Indeed, for management ideas to become popular, they must be characterized by a degree of ambiguity (Kieser, 1997, p. 59). Similarly, Benders and van Veen (2001, p. 38) use the term 'interpretative viability' and Giroux (2006) refers to 'pragmatic ambiguity' to denote how popular management concepts lend themselves to various interpretations. Consequently, management ideas and techniques incorporate a degree of ambiguity to ensure widespread relevance and influence. To secure extensive diffusion, their design and packaging draws on common beliefs, narratives and practices evident in the elements of shared mutual engagement, joint enterprise and repertoire that exist in the management knowledge field.

Boundary processes, especially in the form of brokers, boundary spanners and boundary objects, provide the infrastructure through which management ideas and techniques diffuse throughout the management knowledge field. Each individual CoP derives value from management ideas and techniques in its own distinctive way. Through the application of ideas and techniques, knowledge is extracted from generalized notions and re-embedded or infused into the local practice of the specific CoP. To be able to absorb the new knowledge, these communities must share elements of implicit management knowledge, present in the form of common beliefs and perspectives or shared predispositions, with which they can interpret and find locally relevant meaning in the ideas and techniques that they absorb. As Polanyi (1966, p. 7) notes, 'explicit knowledge must rely on being tacitly understood and applied'.

There is an important difference between, on the one hand, managers, management consultants and business schools/management academics, and, on the other hand, gurus and the business media. While the former gain success and profit through the diffusion and application of management knowledge embodied in ideas and techniques, the latter strive only to disseminate management ideas and techniques. Moreover, for gurus and the business media, dissemination is an end in itself. Hence there is no desire to retain control over the ideas and techniques beyond the sale of, for instance, books or speaking engagements (although most media outputs are protected by copyright and the sustained attraction of gurus is ensured by careful management of reputation). For managers, management consultants and business

schools, retaining control over the knowledge, and the means of diffusion, is particularly important in terms of securing competitive advantage.

These two groups then differ in a significant manner, as does the knowledge that they disseminate. While gurus and the business media disseminate management ideas and techniques, managers, management consultants and business schools disseminate knowledge about applying such ideas in idiosyncratic contexts. In this process they engage not only with mobile management ideas and techniques, but also with context-dependent implicit management knowledge.

For gurus and business media, management knowledge is largely disseminated in a unidirectional market transaction. Books, magazines and DVDs, for example, do not involve the diffusion of knowledge through a process of social interaction or practice. In contrast, managers, consultants and business schools/academics are more often involved in the diffusion and application of knowledge in a social context. This is clearly the case for managers in their everyday management practice. For management consultants and business schools, the diffusion of knowledge occurs within the social relationship brought about as a consequence of the establishment of a contractual relationship arising from a market transaction. In a sense, then, the knowledge is transferred internally and in a two-way process – within the boundaries of an ongoing commercial relationship. Consequently, in this analysis, managers, consultants and business schools/academics can be conceived of as CoPs within which knowledge is diffused and created through practice. In contrast, gurus and the business media are brokers and boundary spanners promoting the diffusion of management ideas and techniques across the constellation of management practice.

Consequently, two very different knowledge diffusion strategies exist in the management knowledge field. For gurus and business media, the creation of knowledge that can easily circulate is of key importance, while for managers and consultants and in part for business schools the aim is to obtain some form of proprietary control over the knowledge diffusion and application process. Knowledge, captured in ideas and techniques, may circulate easily, but this is not the same as applying and using information productively. Managers and consultants will then develop distinctive mechanisms through which they apply generalized management ideas and techniques. In particular, they combine them with implicit management knowledge, in the process re-embedding them into locally specific practice. In so doing, they seek to establish a proprietary claim over the application method – whether formally with a trademark or copyright, or informally through procedures and practices that are difficult to imitate in other contexts. For instance, consultancy firms may develop specific methodological approaches when undertaking consultancy projects. McKinsey & Co's various methodologies have collectively become known as the 'McKinsey way' (Rasiel, 1999).

While the development of ideas and techniques is important in terms of facilitating the circulation of management knowledge, at the end of the day the benefits of these ideas and techniques are attained only if the knowledge is applied and incorporated into practice. This process is something achieved by managers, consultants and business schools/academics in their various CoPs. So, while ideas may circulate with relative ease, whether they are absorbed and applied is quite another matter.

### **Discussion and directions for further research**

What insights can be gained from the application of the CoPs approach to the diffusion of management knowledge? It is possible to make a number of observations

about the management knowledge field. First, managers, management consultants and business school academics demonstrate the characteristics of CoPs, while management gurus and the business media provide a valuable function in the management knowledge field as brokers and boundary spanners in the constellation of management practice.

Secondly, understanding the diffusion of management knowledge requires that a distinction is made between the diffusion of management knowledge and its application. While management gurus and the business media are primarily concerned with the diffusion of knowledge through the development of management ideas and techniques, they have no role in facilitating its application. Managers, management consultants and business school academics are all to a greater or lesser extent involved with facilitating the application as well as diffusion of knowledge. Indeed, the very competitiveness of managers, consultants and business schools depends on their ability to demonstrate their success in applying knowledge. In a sense, while gurus and the business media are concerned with circulating ideas and techniques, managers, consultants and business schools are involved in the embedding of such knowledge firmly into specific contexts through social practice.

Thirdly, drawing a distinction between implicit management knowledge and management ideas and techniques helps to reveal the complexities of knowledge diffusion and application. Although ideas and techniques may be easily diffused, the ability to apply them successfully may remain somewhat obscure, taking place in the social interaction between managers and workers, consultants and clients, and business schools and students. To secure their competitive advantage, managers, consultants and business schools will try to gain a proprietary claim over their ability to apply ideas and techniques. However, it is in the application process that implicit management knowledge plays an important role and this type of knowledge, with its socially embedded context specific nature, is more difficult to imitate and diffuse widely.

So, while ideas and techniques may be easily diffused throughout the management knowledge field, for knowledge to be applied it must be tailored to specific situations through the activities of managers, consultants and business schools. This process of tailoring requires the development of a relationship with the recipient of the knowledge and it is through the subsequent social interaction that knowledge can be customized and applied successfully to specific organizational contexts. Through this process, knowledge is adapted, refined and developed with the result that new implicit management knowledge is created, elements of which, over time, can be abstracted from the specific context with the potential to diffuse throughout the management knowledge field. Importantly, management knowledge is dynamic and continually evolving.

By exploring the interactions of various independent organizations and groups that operate within the management knowledge field, the analysis presented here provides a detailed understanding of the knowledge diffusion and creation process at an inter-organizational level. Yet, it has also raised issues that require further consideration. In particular, the role of power within and between CoPs warrants significant attention. The balance of power between community members is a factor determining which knowledge is legitimized and which is not. A deeper appreciation of power and the related issue of trust within CoPs would further enrich our understanding of the knowledge creation and diffusion process.

A number of key CoPs has been identified within the management knowledge field. As noted, these communities interact and overlap. Understanding these interactions

and overlaps and their role in the knowledge creation and diffusion process is also an area requiring further consideration. The role of communities that impinge on the management knowledge field, such as management gurus and business media, which act as brokers and boundary spanners, has also been noted. In particular, the role of business media has been highlighted since it plays an important role in the commodification of management knowledge. Management media products can be viewed as boundary objects that facilitate the widespread diffusion of management ideas and techniques. A fuller appreciation of the role that the business media play in the diffusion of management knowledge would be useful, as would the identification and investigation of other communities that interact with the various CoPs that constitute the management knowledge field.

Exploring the differences between managers, management consultants and business schools on the one hand, and gurus and business media on the other, has revealed their distinctive knowledge diffusion strategies. Both strategies require consideration of issues related to the protection of intellectual property. An understanding of the methods used to protect proprietary knowledge in the management knowledge field would provide additional insights into factors promoting and restricting the diffusion of management knowledge.

Much discussion of knowledge diffusion within the management field is concerned with ideas; that is, knowledge which is to some extent codified in order to allow commodification. Yet, as Polanyi (1966) notes, tacit knowledge is of vital importance to the understanding of codified knowledge. Little is known of the interaction between tacit and codified knowledge in the management knowledge field. This, then, is an issue in need of further investigation.

Finally, despite the expanding literature on knowledge transfer and management knowledge, little attention has so far been devoted to the diffusion of management knowledge at a micro-organizational level in the global context. The framework developed above may be fruitfully applied to the global diffusion of management knowledge.

## Conclusion

The CoP framework has proved to be a useful tool with which to analyze the interactions between groups present in the management knowledge field. Through the analysis of the activities of management gurus, management consultants, management academics, managers and business media as they facilitate the diffusion of management knowledge, this paper has gone some way towards addressing the question of how management knowledge circulates among organizations. The theorization of the diffusion of management knowledge set out in this paper provides a framework of value to members of the management community concerned with inter-organizational knowledge transfer both at a local and global level. Moreover, several directions for further investigation have been identified. Major efforts are required to reveal the full complexities of management knowledge diffusion.

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