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Managing creative coalitions: Reflections on the social side of services innovation

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Summary   This article considers the third dimension of the oft-discussed triumvirate of services science, concentrating on how social and managerial knowledge can be integrated with science and engineering to promote services innovation. Given the backgrounds and occupations of the authors, it represents an exploration in the sort of cross-boundary collaboration and joint analysis that is vital in this area, straddling the contrasting perspectives of social science and engineering, as well as the worlds of the academic and the practitioner. Our dialogue about the principles that may be capable of supporting a multidisciplinary approach to services innovation has underlined the importance of straight talking about disciplinary tensions and priorities, and mutual sensitivity to contextual conditions and constraints. Recognizing that creative insights and options for innovative activity emerge from the lower as well as the upper levels of organizational hierarchies and that viable improvement projects must connect with local insights and aspirations, this article cautions against designer tendencies to innovate from above or beyond the service workplace. Extending the logic of boundary-breaking collaboration, it argues for a more open approach to programme shaping from a broader alignment of engineering and the physical and social sciences with practitioner perspectives from manager, employee and other stakeholder groups on the ground.
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Introduction

The economic significance of the service sector and services innovation has underlined the importance of knowledge, creativity and collaborative networking for organizational effectiveness in the advanced economies (McLaughlin and Paton, 2008a). Of course, the underlying theme of harnessing stakeholder insights and purposefully managing flows of knowledge and information is far from novel. The challenges associated with organizational learning for competitive advantage, with creating and distributing knowledge in modern business environments, have occupied policymakers, scholars and management commentators for a significant number of years (Drucker, 1993). They have also

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triggered debates about appropriate institutional contexts, structural arrangements and systems of regulation and facilitation that can support the knowledge economy.

Unfortunately, much of the discussion of knowledge as an economic resource has been conducted at quite a high level of abstraction, with a great deal of general, speculative and prescriptive commentary claiming space for organizational learning and extolling the virtues of knowledge networks, without illuminating the processes, relationships, issues and complexities involved. There is, of course, a rich library of relevant research insights, assembled over many years, that can help to counteract the influence of 'quick to market' promotional scenarios and superficial calls for synergy teams, the cultural fusion of knowledge workers and the 'leveraging' of complementary skills to meet market demands. The research itself tends to be segmented, however, and is often less than accessible to practitioners who require an integrated understanding of key issues and a consistent, well-grounded and explicit logic of action.

Relevant research within traditional academic disciplines and subject configurations can seem partial or remote from organizational pressures to respond to developing conditions and contingencies, which is why the services science agenda for inter-disciplinary, silo-breaching research is both timely and important (Paton and McLaughlin, 2008). Straddling established boundaries and attending to the social organization of mutual learning is problematical here as elsewhere, however. Engaging researchers from the constituent disciplines of services science — engineering together with the physical and social sciences — to deliver a coherent approach to services innovation is a knowledge management project that underlines the difficulty of supporting collaborative alliances and sustaining creative coalitions.

Looking beyond conventional boundaries

Research on knowledge management within the fields of strategy and international business has tended to concentrate on inter-organizational learning, and the merit of securing strategic alliances and partnership deals to promote the transfer of insights and ideas between firms, including suppliers and contractors, to expand or enhance available products and services. Associated case studies have captured some of the difficulties with this, illustrating how national cultural differences can complicate patterns of communication and interpretation in virtual project teams and geographically dispersed networks of engineers, designers and managers, for example (Hong et al., 2006). The more applied of these investigations have also tried to classify the characteristics of effective inter-organizational collaboration, and to identify management interventions that can lower cultural barriers and facilitate knowledge transfers (Harryson et al., 2008).

This applied interest in actively managing flows of knowledge and creative input is not so obvious with accumulated research on intra-organizational learning. Much of the emphasis in this area, certainly with organization studies, anthropology and industrial and organizational sociology, centers on workplace socialization and the generation and transmission of knowledge through distinctive sub-cultures or 'communities of practice' that rely on informal processes and tacit understandings that are neglected, and even opposed, in mainstream management thinking. Analytically, these communities call attention to voluntary associations, behavioural norms and protocols that influence the sharing and application of knowledge within occupational groupings, and in the absence of formal training or instruction. Originally, they provided a means of explaining how new recruits are inducted and accepted into clearly defined sub-cultures, subsequently reproducing solidaristic or insular orientations to work that are capable of undermining organizational performance. More positive effects have also been recognized, however, with researchers indicating that workplace communities can become 'natural workgroups' that use tacit knowledge and collective insights, often spontaneously, to register improvements in processes, performance and outcomes (Fincham, 1989). Given the importance now attached to the knowledge economy and the responsive, learning organization, this research on the self-developing and self-transforming initiatives of work groups is attracting greater attention (Beirne, 2006).

One of the distinguishing features of services science is that it aims to connect these different levels of interest and, by extension, bring the contrasting forms and patterns of analysis into closer alignment. Indeed, it looks beyond established patterns of inter and intra-organizational research to include wider constituencies of scholars, stakeholders and practitioners from science and engineering backgrounds, as well as those within management, the humanities and social sciences. The range and ambition of the services science project is impressive. The expressed enthusiasm for dialogue, consensus shaping and the cross fertilization of knowledge is admirable and apposite. Yet the basis for a more integrative treatment is far from clear. The conceptual underpinnings for sustained and progressive cross-boundary collaboration are less obvious than the policy exhortations and economic arguments to take a broader and more inclusive view of services innovation.

Similar calls for a united front on innovation have been issued in the past, notably to make more of computer and communications technologies at the workplace through alliances of computer science, engineering and the social sciences (Greenbaum and Kyng, 1991). The economic rationale was, and is, just as pressing, and the initial appetite for dialogue equally strong. However, progress in this area has been limited by matters of theory and orientation, and by professional preoccupations and priorities that delivered non-correspondence rather than straight talking, producing slippage back to silo or perspective-based communication patterns (Beirne, 2006). One of the more obvious lessons to be drawn from this sort of engagement is that an effective alignment of disciplinary talent for truly co-operative applied research will not follow automatically from an economic rationale or from initial declarations of mutual advantage. It requires, in addition, a dialogue about theoretical fundamentals and a consensus on operating principles and priorities.

With services science and innovation, there are already signs of non-correspondence, with writers seeming to talk