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Practicing effective knowledge sharing in international hotel joint ventures

Vincent P. Magnini*

Virginia Tech, Pamplin College of Business, 362 Wallace Hall, Blacksburg, VA 24060, USA

Abstract

Knowledge sharing can be described as the process by which individuals mutually exchange their knowledge and collaboratively generate new knowledge. Since international hotel joint venture partners typically possess skills in competing areas, this process of knowledge sharing is critical to the success of these alliances. Therefore, this article presents a framework that can be used to foster effective knowledge sharing at the individual joint venture manager level, at the relationship level between individuals, and across the entire organization.

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1. Introduction

A joint venture is a common form of international expansion for hotel corporations (Kivela and Leung, 2005). This is largely due to the fact that the foreign partner and the domestic partner typically possess knowledge and expertise in different areas (Dhanaraj et al., 2004). Often in the hotel industry, the foreign partner is proficient in the use of the latest technology (for example, managing global distribution systems) and the domestic partner is well versed in the local culture (for instance, managing the local labor force).

Hotel joint ventures have been likened to snowflakes because no two are alike (Kokish, 2000); yet, regardless of form, all hotel joint ventures are repositories of knowledge. Hence, the vital issue is how individual or group interactions feed organizational knowledge creation. Joint ventures cannot create knowledge without individuals, but unless individual knowledge is disseminated to other individuals and groups, the knowledge will be of little or no benefit to the joint venture. Stated differently, the knowledge that the foreign and domestic partners bring to the international joint venture (IJV) must be managed in order to realize the benefits of forming the partnership.

*Tel.: +15402315515.

E-mail address: magnini@vt.edu

With the multitude of IJVs that currently exist in the hotel industry this issue of IJV knowledge sharing is of paramount managerial relevance, but has received very little attention in extant hospitality literature. Hence, the purpose of this paper is to begin filling this gap by explicating a knowledge-sharing framework for hotel IJVs. Consequently, the novel contribution of this research is a framework that considers knowledge sharing from the individual joint venture manager level, at the relationship level between individuals, and at an organization-wide level. No previous work has considered each of these three levels. Thus, the remainder of this paper is organized as follows: first, a conceptual background on knowledge sharing in IJVs is presented; second, knowledge sharing is explored at the individual level; third, knowledge sharing is addressed at the relationship level between parties; next, organization-wide characteristics that foster effective knowledge sharing are outlined; lastly, managerial and research implications are presented.

2. Conceptual background on international joint venture knowledge sharing

In the broadest sense, knowledge sharing can be defined as the process by which individuals mutually exchange their knowledge and collaboratively generate new knowledge (Van den Hoof and DeRidder, 2004). In a marketplace where knowledge can serve as a sustainable competitive advantage, in addition to managing tasks and human resources, managers must manage knowledge itself, just as any other resource (Berdrow and Lane, 2003). In an international hotel joint venture, the knowledge possessed by an individual must be shared with other individuals in order for its value to be maximized (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2005). In other words, knowledge is a highly valuable asset that must be appropriately exchanged between joint venture partners.

Different types of knowledge exist within hotel corporations. One type, tacit knowledge, can be described as knowledge that is non-verbalizable, intuitive, and unarticulated (Polanyi, 1962). This type of knowledge has been transformed into habits and can only be transmitted through active involvement of the teacher (Spender, 1996). Stated differently, it is highly context specific which makes it difficult to formalize and communicate (Nonaka, 1994). For instance, in the hotel business, handling service failure recovery situations can be viewed as a form of tacit knowledge as each failure scenario is context specific. Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is knowledge that is transmitted in formal, systematic language (Polanyi, 1966; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). For example, in a hotel, explicit knowledge can be conveyed through the use of written standard operating procedures (SOPs).

In most cases the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge is grey and the two should not be viewed as a dichotomy, but instead a continuum should be conceptualized with the two types of knowledge at either end (Inkpen and Dinur, 1998). More specifically, Inkpen and Dinur (1998) posit that these two types of knowledge should be classified on a spectrum that ranges from explicit knowledge characterized by specific processes and tacit knowledge gained through experience and contained in individual cognition and organization routines. For instance, the written hotel corporation's SOPs referred to in the previous paragraph are likely the "bare-essentials" of hotel operations likely require the exchange of tacit knowledge in order to fully implement them.

In a hotel IJV, there exist three interrelated paths through which knowledge can flow. The first path, called *transfer*, encompasses the flow of existing knowledge between the IJV partners and between the parent companies (Berdrow and Lane, 2003). This flow of knowledge can include, for instance, a partner observing the use of a technology such as a centralized reservation system. More specifically, a western joint venture partner may be familiar with technology such as WizCom that updates hotel reservation information simultaneously across all four global distribution systems (Adams, 2000). Or a western joint venture partner may be proficient using data mining technology such as Hilton's E. piphany E.4 software (Stevens, 2001) and Starwood Hotel Corporation's Unica Corp's Affinium software (Tichelle and

Maselli, 2001) that allow these companies to more clearly understand changing customer wants and predict future demand trends. Therefore, within the context of knowledge sharing, transfer entails accepting what the partner does, assimilating it into one's own systems or altering one's own resources to imitate it without fully comprehending how it works (Berdrow and Lane, 2003). Sometimes, however, this imitation can eventually result in an understanding of deep-rooted tacit knowledge. This positive outcome can be termed internalization. Nevertheless, on the contrary, the peril is that the underlying tacit knowledge may never become fully developed or can be incorrectly interpreted resulting in eventual negative consequences (Berdrow and Lane, 2003). While potentially good and bad outcomes can derive from knowledge transfer, if managed correctly the positive can typically far outweigh the negative.

The second path of knowledge flow in a hotel IJV is termed transformation. This type of knowledge flow can be described as the integration, application, and leveraging of contributed knowledge and the creation of new knowledge as a result of the activities (Berdrow and Lane, 2003, pp. 18). That is, when an IJV is formed the partners are now experiencing new circumstances and situations. Consequently, any new knowledge or insights gained through these novel experiences can be categorized as knowledge transformation. For example, in a hotel IJV in Saudi Arabia, the two joint venture partners must use their combined knowledge to adapt to the recent Saudization policy in which expatriate hotel workers must be replaced by local workers within 2 years (Sadi and Henderson, 2005). That is, the foreign and Saudi partners most work together to interpret and comply with this new government mandated policy. Hence, knowledge gained in this new situation can be characterized as transformation.

The third possibility for the flow of knowledge in a hotel IJV is called *harvesting* and it entails the flow of knowledge from the IJV to the parent where it can be applied to company efforts elsewhere. For instance, knowledge harvested from a hotel IJV in Beijing may be applicable to a hotel project in Shanghai. For example, between 1986 and 1988, the Chinese government passed regulations on hiring Chinese labor by foreign enterprises (Li, 1995). The regulations stipulated that Chinese employees of a foreignowned operation must be paid 20-50% higher than state employees in similar operations. In turn, government agencies passed laws stating that the foreign enterprises are sometimes responsible for their employee's housing, education, and old age pensions; consequently, the knowledge gained on one joint venture project in China can be harvested and used as guidance on future projects. Thus, parent firms should actively seek opportunities to harvest knowledge because IJVs typically provide ample opportunities for the parents to learn from the experience (Inkpen, 1995). In other words, corporate headquarters can use the knowledge gained through IJV operations in Beijing to better manage IJVs in Shanghai. Not too surprising, however, extant research indicates that parent companies

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