

Knowledge Management in the Human Resource Development (HRD) Office of an Italian Bank: A Case Study

Research proposal

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BP101 – Independent Studies II: Research Proposal for the Dissertation

1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

In the last two decades of the twentieth century the resource-based theory of the firm has received attention as an alternative to the traditional product-based or competitive advantage view. It is a perspective on organisation and strategy formulation inspired by epistemology and suggesting a knowledge-based theory of the firm (Sveiby, 2001).

This brand new perspective has prompted intensive discussions about the importance of Knowledge Management (KM) and that subject is receiving considerable attention, from both academics and practitioners. KM and related strategy concepts are promoted as important and necessary components for organizations to survive and maintain their competitive keenness (Martensson, 2000).

Innumerable times we have read statements like these:

“Knowledge is at the heart of much of today’s global economy, and managing knowledge has become vital to companies’ success.” (Kluge et al., 2001)

“The basic economic resource ... is no longer capital, nor natural resources ..., nor ‘labour’ ... **It is and will be knowledge.**” (Drucker, 1993)

“Capital consists in a great part of knowledge and organization ... knowledge is our most powerful engine of production.” (Marshall, 1965).

The commonality of the above studies is that knowledge is regarded as a critical factor for the organizations’ survival in all of them, but what is KM? Is it a new way to understand organizing and organizations, is it a tool for exploiting knowledge, or is it just another relabelling in the ceaseless flow of fashionable management concepts? (Martensson, 2000). Also, what is the underlying epistemology of knowledge management?

The famous statement “If only we knew what we know ...” has prompted the idea of capturing, sharing and applying knowledge all over the organization. It seems that KM needs to be placed in the wider field of intellectual capital management (Wiig, 1997).

Of particular relevance to this study is a division between an objectivist perspective, in which knowledge is considered as an “object” existing in a number of forms and locations, and a practice-based perspective in which knowledge is considered not to exist independent of human experience and social practice (Hislop, 2005). Scarbrough and Swan (2001) lament what they characterize as the uncritical and unreflexive nature of the mainstream literature on knowledge management. Such literature is typically based on an objectivist perspective on knowledge and characterizes knowledge as an economic commodity, failing to discuss the socially constructed, political, subjective, context-dependent, and dynamic characteristics of knowledge.

The dominance of the objectivist perspective has been challenged by the practice-based perspective that postulates that knowledge and knowing are inseparable from human activity (Hislop, 2005). As recognized by Swan et al. (1999) seeing knowledge as constructed through processes of social

interaction and heedful interrelating among communities of practice means that issues of social networking, power and social inclusion/exclusion come to the forefront.

It has been pointed out (Gorman and Clayton, 2005) that rather less has been written about the key personnel involved, the knowledge managers themselves – in particular, in the area of Human Resources (HR) – and the cultural contexts within which they operate. If KM is to be the core competency and strategic intent of an organization, it needs to be defined primarily in terms of its human social and knowledge processes within the context of their cultural values, attitudes, competencies and commitment (Thite, 2004). According to Watkins and Marsick (1992) “HR professionals have long sought to define who they are in order to clarify what is that they do that is unique, and the concept of KM or learning organisation is one such niche for HR as it brings together the two primary foci of this field: learning and the workplace context in which it takes place.”. Certainly, both knowledge and human resources (HR) are being increasingly regarded as key levers of competitive advantage in today’s global, dynamic and complex business environment. Individual human beings are the ultimate knowledge creators and bearers (Oltra, 2005).

The aim of this paper is to investigate the internal KM activities in the HRD Office. It provides an emphasis on understanding the interactions between knowledge sharing, HRM practices and the role of social networks. The focus is limited to the internal dynamics of knowledge sharing at an Italian Bank. A Qualitative Research is proposed using a Case Study approach. The primary data sources will be semi-structured interviews, observations, and document analysis.

1.2 Topic and Purpose

It is a paradox that, while so many authorities and commentators on knowledge management (KM) have come to the conclusion that KM ultimately depends upon people, it is precisely the People (or HR) aspect that has been the most neglected in studies in this field. Moreover, HR practitioners and HR analysts have been slow in making their mark in this emerging field. (Storey and Quintas, 2001).

One objective of this paper is therefore to contribute to the development of both the KM and HRM literatures through building a bridge between the subjects. KM has important implications for the management of HR, particularly in terms of the development of knowledge-sharing (Scarborough, 2003). The focus of this paper will be on the growing importance of networks, and the critical need to integrate knowledge and action, as well as on the consequent interactivity that these changes demand with a range of groups inside and outside the organisation.

Garavan *et al.* (2000) see that the daily task of human resource development in building of a learning organisation as: assisting employees in creating and using knowledge, establishing appropriate networks, and engaging in double-loop learning.

The second objective of the paper is to identify how HRD practitioners view HRD, what factors they consider critical for HRD practice, and other issues related to training. Knowledge sharing at the workplace, in my experience, is a socially constructed exchange process where people integrate and share their personal, social, academic and professional experiences with their work colleagues.

Through this interaction, the construction of knowledge and its meaning within work practices will appear to evolve as a function of doing work.

The aim of the researcher is to integrate theory and practice to provide major and actionable contributions to practice.

1.3 Research Questions and Framework

The central problem statements are:

- **What are the interpersonal activities by which knowledge is shared among professionals working in the HRD Office of an Italian Bank?**
- **Why are these activities perceived to be effective in the context of knowledge management?**

Some years ago a Dutch study (Filius *et al.*, 2000) asked quite similar questions to those proposed in this study; the present study differs from that in adopting a qualitative rather than a largely quantitative approach.

In answering these questions, the research will seek to focus on the way individuals or groups within the organisation transfer knowledge when it is not explicitly written down or stored in databases. The research aims to strike a balance between offering insightful comment on workplace problems/opportunities, and extending theory beyond the observations gained from a review of the current literature that bears on the topic.

This paper adopts the *community model* (Swan *et al.*, 1999), as seen in Table I, in order to show the embeddedness of knowledge in social networks including occupational groups and teams. Although the model is developed in the light of KM, it also applies to the knowledge sharing process.

Table I The Community Model of Knowledge Sharing (adapted from Swan *et al.*, 1999, p. 11)

-
- Knowledge is socially constructed and based on experience
 - Knowledge is transferred through participation in social networks including occupational groups and teams
 - Gains from knowledge management include greater awareness of internal and external sources of knowledge
 - The primary function of knowledge management is to encourage knowledge sharing among and between groups and individuals
 - The dominant metaphor is the human community
 - The critical success factor is trust
-

This model is linked here to the Human Resource Management (HRM) implications of the Personalization Strategy developed by Hansen *et al.* (1999), as seen in Table II. These models form the main framework for this research study.

Table II The Personalization Strategy (adapted from Hansen *et al.*, 1999)

Knowledge Strategy	Personalization
HRM Implications personal skills	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Motivate people to share their knowledge with others • Training should emphasize the development of inter-personal skills • Reward people for sharing knowledge with others

1.4 Limitations

This paper focuses on the micro-level processes and practices of the social dimension of knowledge management at an Italian Bank. The discussion is limited to the internal dynamics of knowledge-sharing at the Bank.

A stakeholder analysis is beyond the purpose of this study and would rather diverge from the objective of providing a richly detailed account of the internal activities of the HRD Office of the Bank, and the way social networks, long-term relationships, and HR practices relate to the outcome of the degree to which knowledge is internally shared.

Since the researcher is the main research instrument in Qualitative Enquiry, my own lack of previous experiences might be considered, together with the lack of time available to conduct the research, as the main limitations of this study.

The investigator will use a naturalistic approach in which the sampling will be purposive, so as to maximize information. In such a study, there is no precise generalization, although to some extent, this study may be transferable to other similar settings.

As Patton (1990) notes: “There are no perfect research designs. There are always trade-offs.”.

2. Review of the Literature

2.1 Related Research

Knowledge Management

In order to better understand KM, it is necessary to see the subject within the broader context of the relevant changes taking place in the global economic framework itself (Neef, 1999). Knowledge management has its origins in a number of related business improvement areas, such as total quality management (TQM), business process re-engineering (BPR), information systems (IS) and human resource management (HRM) (Metaxiotis et al., 2005), as well as organizational learning, and the learning organization to name but a few.

The popularity of KM has increased rapidly, especially after 1996, and it has become a central topic of management philosophy and a management tool. This popularity is reflected in the growing number of articles and books on the topic. In 1995 there were 45 articles about KM in the ABI/Information database, 158 in 1998, and in 2002 the number has increased to 835 (Petersen and Poulfelt, 2002). Specific journals have been established and many organizations have introduced KM programmes.

In the last two decades of the twentieth century the resource-based theory of the firm has received attention as an alternative to the traditional product-based or competitive advantage view. It is a perspective on organisation and strategy formulation inspired by epistemology and suggesting a knowledge-based theory of the firm (Sveiby, 2001).

KM, then, is about harnessing the intellectual and social capital of individuals in order to improve organizational learning capabilities, recognising that knowledge, and not simply information, is the primary source of an organization's innovative potential (Marshall, 1997; Castells, 1996). Scarbrough et al. (1999) review highlighted a major gap in the KM literature in terms of its treatment of people. They found that the learning organization literature had emphasized people management issues, such as selection, motivation and rewards, trust, organizational development and culture. However, the KM literature paid little attention to these issues and focused rather on IT and information systems (IS) to create the networks structures, which can link together individuals distributed across time and space (Swann et al., 1999).

The term knowledge management is often problematic as there is little consensus regarding its definition (Neef, 1999).

An essential part of knowledge management is knowledge. There is also a lack of consensus on knowledge itself. Some see knowledge as a commodity like any other that can be stored and made independent of time and place, while others see knowledge as social in nature and very dependent on context.

Of particular importance is the distinction among the concepts of data, information and knowledge. Data can be viewed either as factual, raw material or signals with no meaning. Information is data related to other data, refined and structured so as to have meaning.

When communicated, knowledge becomes information and, consequently, the raw material of new knowledge. Information has a meaning and it becomes knowledge when a person internalizes it.

Assudani (2005) points out that: <<A review of the literature along the epistemological dimensions ... does however permit one to discern two broad perspectives ... into which can be classed. In the first perspective, knowledge is viewed as a resource that can be possessed or even created by actors and/or the networks in which they participate. In the second, knowledge is viewed as a process of doing – of knowing how to leverage and how to mediate the relationship between the possession and the creation dimension.>>.

“**We know more than we can tell**” (Polanyi, 1966). Another way of defining knowledge is to make a distinction between two different dimensions of knowledge: “tacit” and “explicit” (Polanyi, 1966). “All knowledge is either tacit or rooted in tacit knowledge” (Polanyi, 1966). Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) in their seminal work propose a spiral between the ontological and epistemological dimensions of knowledge (SECI-Model) in terms of a continual dialogue between tacit and explicit knowledge for creating organizational knowledge. Learning, as also innovation is the culmination of the interplay between tacit and explicit knowledge of the individuals (Assudani, 2005).

Reviewing the literature, what is apparent is that there is general agreement that the primary objectives of KM are to identify and leverage the collective knowledge in an organization to achieve the overriding goal of helping organizations compete and survive (Choo, 1996).

Hislop in his work (2005), after distinguishing between the objectivist and the practice-based epistemologies of knowledge, argues that from the former perspective, while sharing of tacit knowledge is acknowledged to be difficult, complex, and time-consuming, the sharing of explicit knowledge by contrast is regarded as relatively straightforward.

Table III An objectivist perspective on knowledge management (adapted form Table 2.4, Hislop 2005, p. 23)

Knowledge management: objectivist perspective

- Convert tacit to explicit knowledge
- Codification/capture of relevant knowledge
- Collect knowledge in central repository
- Structure/systematize knowledge (into discrete categories)

- Technology plays a key role
-

The starting point is the processes of codifying relevant knowledge, converting tacit to explicit knowledge. The next stage in the KM process involves collecting all the codified knowledge together into a central repository, and then structuring it in a systematic way. Finally, technology plays a key role in knowledge management processes utilizing the objectivist perspective.

On the other hand, one of the central components of the practice-based perspective on knowledge management is that it eschews the idea that it is possible for organizations to collect knowledge together into a central repository (Hislop, 2005).

Table IV A practice-based perspective on knowledge management (adapted from Table 3.5, Hislop 2005, p. 37)

Knowledge management from a practice-based epistemology

1. Knowledge sharing/acquisition requires ‘perspective making’ and ‘perspective taking’ – developing an understanding of tacit assumptions
 2. Knowledge sharing/acquisition through – ‘rich’ social interaction – immersion in practice-watching and/or doing
 3. Management role to facilitate social interaction
-

From this perspective the sharing of knowledge does not involve the simple transferal of a fixed entity between two people. Instead, the sharing of knowledge involves two people actively inferring and constructing meaning. The perspective-making, and the perspective-taking processes typically require an extensive amount of social interaction and face-to-face communication, which is a conclusion reached by a number of empirical studies (Hislop, 2005).

Hansen et al. (1999) point out that,

... consultants do not take a uniform approach to managing knowledge. The consulting business employs two very different knowledge management strategies. In some companies, the strategy centers on the computer. Knowledge is carefully codified and stored in databases, where it can be accessed and used easily by anyone in the company. We call this the *codification strategy*. In other companies, knowledge is closely tied to the person who developed it and is shared mainly through direct person-to-person contacts. The chief purpose of computers at such companies is to help people communicate knowledge, not to store it. We call this the *personalization strategy*. A company’s choice of strategy is far from arbitrary – it depends on the way the company serves its clients, the economics of its business, and the people it hires.

Storey and Quintas (2001) assert that developing the trust, motivation and commitment of workers epitomizes one of the key issues in relation to the management of knowledge workers, and especially:

... It is a paradox that, while so many authorities and commentators on knowledge management (KM) have come to the conclusion that KM ultimately depends upon people, it is precisely the people (or HR) aspect

that has been the most neglected in studies in this field. Moreover, HR practitioners and HR analysts have been slow in making their mark in this emerging field ...

A wide range of survey findings and case study evidence on KM initiatives show that human, social, and cultural factors are typically key determinants of the success or failure of knowledge management initiatives, for example, with evidence suggesting that a reluctance by workers to share, or even hoard their knowledge is not uncommon. The 'first generation' knowledge management literature neglected the importance of such issues (Hislop, 2005).

Swan et al. (1999) point out quite a similar critique of the literature on KM because the communication of knowledge is only possible between people who, to some extent at least, share a system of meaning. From their point of view, knowledge is not transferred but must be continuously created and recreated through networking as individuals come to share a common understanding or a common frame of reference.

Edwards et al. (2003), in a survey of KM academics and practitioners, discovered that "communities of practice" represented the second most important concept developed in the literature on knowledge management. Communities of practice are informal groups of individuals that collectively create, and share knowledge through shared activity. Hislop (2005) suggests that the community of practice concept is based on two central premises: the practice-based perspective on knowledge, and the group based-character of organizational activity. Lave and Wenger (1991) define them as a community of practitioners within which situational learning develops, which results in the community developing "a set of relations among persons, activity and the world".

Hildreth and Kimble (2002) point out that it is clear that there is a shift in the KM movement to recognizing that there is some knowledge that cannot be captured, codified and stored. It is also fundamental to recognize that knowledge is in people – be it soft or hard. The importance of the social context to the learning of softer knowledge, and the lack of success of trying to see IT as a solution, all indicate the importance of the human aspect to the management of soft knowledge. Therefore, a key part of the management of knowledge is facilitating communication and interaction between people. All true KM projects become projects of soft knowledge to some degree. Therefore, we need to move from trying to capture/codify/store (i.e., Information Resource management (IRM)) towards emphasizing the human aspect. Wenger's (1998) reification/participation duality provides a way forward for KM as it takes into account the need to maintain the balance between the harder and the softer aspects of knowledge and reinforces the idea of Communities of Practice as an environment for creating, sustaining and nurturing the softer aspects of knowledge, although questions remain (Hildreth and Kimble, 2002).

As recognized by Swan et al. (1999) seeing knowledge as constructed through processes of social interaction and heedful interrelating among communities of practice means that issues of social networking, power and social inclusion/exclusion come to the forefront.

A recent study (Blackman and Henderson, 2005) suggest that far from knowledge management being done, there are still many developments ahead. However, these are entirely in matters relating directly to knowledge – its epistemology and application – rather than in its management. Many of these issues are epistemologically uncertain, that is to say, it is not clear how one learns and knows about such things. Indeed it is the applications of KMS (knowledge management system) "solutions" without commensurate regard for the philosophical issues, that is the chief reason for the continuing disappointment with knowledge management in many quarters (Blackman and Henderson, 2005).

Human Resource Development (HRD)

As organisations develop into learning-oriented organisations, and innovation and flexibility are among the core challenges for many firms, ‘learning’ is becoming more of a strategic organisational challenge. This new significance of learning for the business is highlighted in concepts such as the *learning organisation and knowledge management*. Also, with the decline of lifetime employment and the rapid speed of change, it is necessary for individual workers to learn continuously throughout their working lives in order to keep up with changes and to remain attractive for employers. So, lifelong learning has become a challenge at the individual level too, and this new emphasis on ‘learning’ poses challenges for HRD (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002).

HRD as an organizational process comprises the skilful planning and facilitation of a variety of formal and informal learning and knowledge processes and experiences, primarily but not exclusively in the workplace, in order that organizational progress and individual potential can be enhanced through the competence, adaptability, collaboration and knowledge-creating activity of all who work for the organisation. (Harrison R., and Kessels J., 2004).

Nevertheless, Garavan *et al.* (1999) point out that “HRD as a concept, model, approach discourse or set of practices remains unclear. A number of dimensions do however emerge from an analysis of the literature, specifically:

- HRD is intrinsically related to overall business strategy and competitive advantage;
- HRD is conceptualised as an investment in human resources capability rather than an employment cost;
- HRD is concerned with change at all levels both organisational and personal;
- HRD views the employee in a “holistic” sense;
- HRD is concerned with identifying and enhancing the core competencies required at each level to meet its present and future objectives;
- HRD focuses on the management and delivery of training activities within the organisation;
- HRD concerns itself with selecting the best delivery systems designed to enhance human resource competencies;
- HRD is concerned with organisational and individual learning;
- HRD consists of a set of generic activities associated with learning;
- HRD is a social and discursive construct;
- HRD is concerned with how well human resource development strategies are reinforced by and reinforce other HR strategies.

Despite the signposting of such dimensions, no unified model of HRD is yet in evidence”.

KM has obvious implications for developing people management practices. Such practices that can

locate those experts with valuable tacit knowledge (hence implications for recruitment and selection), encourage them to collaborate and share their knowledge (hence implications for rewards) and retain them within the firm (hence implications for career development, training and appraisal) are critical to managing knowledge (Swan *et al.*, 1999).

Studies of learning at the workplace have indicated that, even though formal learning interventions are planned and conducted in order to improve the performance of the organisation, most learning on the job is unplanned, unorganised and informal.

“Organizations have to create much of their essential knowledge in the workplace through day-to-day processes of learning embedded in normal working activities. This extends the boundaries of HRD beyond formal training to embrace the promotion of a broad range of learning activities. Accordingly, the recent debate on the current and future tasks facing HRD practitioners concerns such questions as how to recognize and enhance informal learning at the workplace, and how to shift the emphasis of HRD activities from training towards other forms of learning (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2000; Marsick, 2001; in Slotte *et al.*, 2004)”.

The results of a European study into the changing role of HRD show that HRD functions in learning-oriented organisations appear to focus on the broader field of learning instead of on training (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002). The vision of HRD departments in learning-oriented organisations regarding their own role can be characterised by three basic principles. These three principles (focus on learning, learning as a shared responsibility and linking learning to work) are explained in the literature as well as by HRD departments working on the development towards becoming a learning organisation (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002). In the envisioned role of the HRD professionals, four sets of strategies could be discerned, with regard to:

- supporting the business in general, or supporting current strategic business objectives;
- supporting (informal) learning and knowledge sharing;
- providing training;
- changing HRD practices/structures (Tjepkema *et al.*, 2002).

In dealing with the research questions the paper finds it useful the framework of Communities of Practice (Lave and Wenger, 1991). According to Wenger (1998), social participation within the community is the key to informal learning. It is embedded in the practices and relationships of the workplace and helps to create identity and meaning. “The concept of a community of practice where individuals learn to ‘become’ members of that community (Lave and Wenger, 1991) through a process of socialization, developing shared understandings of practice, also provided useful theoretical insights into how HRM and HRD practitioners ‘become’ critically reflective practitioners.” (Corley and Eades, 2004).

Communities of Practice have been of great interest to knowledge management scholars due to the ability they seem to have for transferring tacit knowledge within a group of workers through social processes. An aim of this study is to focus on the tacit sharing of knowledge within the work context. HRD professionals and the Banking Industry have a strong reliance on knowledge, and often on the tacit dimension of knowledge. Moreover, they provide a rich source of data in relation to interpersonal and tacit sharing processes.

3. Research Methodology

3.1 Overall Approach

This chapter discusses the research design and methodology that will be used in the study to answer the following two research questions:

- **What are the interpersonal activities by which knowledge is shared among professionals working in the HRD Office of an Italian Bank?**
- **Why are these activities perceived to be effective in the context of knowledge management?**

In developing the research strategy, the overall goal is to ensure that the research design completely addresses the research questions, and that the data collection is suitable for achieving this aim. This study is concerned with research to develop a better understanding of the interpersonal knowledge sharing used by HRD professionals. As noted above, previous research has not fully addressed many social and individual issues related to participation in sharing knowledge.

Qualitative research provides useful insight into these issues, as it is well suited for investigating social relations and interactions (Flick, 1998). The emphasis will consequently be on exploratory research. Marshall and Rossman (1999) suggest that exploratory and descriptive research, particularly in cases of “contemporary” research where the phenomenon is unfolding at the time of the study, is best suited to qualitative methods. This study uses Qualitative Methods due to its inductive, descriptive and exploratory nature.

A naturalistic inquiry is conducted in a natural setting (Creswell, 2003), and a human, the researcher himself, is the primary instrument (Lincoln and Guba, 1985). Marshall and Rossman (1999) point out that this entails immersion in the everyday life of the setting chosen for the study; the researcher enters the participants’ world and through ongoing interaction, seeks participants’ perspectives and meanings.

Miles and Huberman (1994) suggest the following features of qualitative research:

- conducted through an intense and/or prolonged contact with a “field” or life situation (typically “normal” situations, reflective of everyday life of, for example, organisations);
- researcher’s role is to gain a holistic overview of the context under study;
- researcher attempts to capture data on the perceptions of local actors “from the inside”;
- main task: explicate the ways for managing day-to-day situations;
- many possible interpretations of material;

- little standardized instrumentation is used at the outset; most analysis is done with words.

Miles and Huberman focus on qualitative data in the form of words, as I will too, based on interviews, observations and documents. Qualitative research is an emergent design. Meanings and interpretations are negotiated with human data sources because it is the subjects' realities that the researcher attempts to reconstruct (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1988).

This study will utilise the case study research approach. Eisenhardt (1989) states that the case study is a research strategy which focuses on understanding the dynamics present within single settings and can employ an embedded design, that is, multiple levels of analysis within a single study.

Yin (1994) gives this definition: "A case study is an empirical inquiry that:

- investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context; when
- the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident; and in which
- multiple sources of evidence are used.

The case study strategy seems particularly appropriate for this research. The tasks and processes performed by HRD professionals in the sharing of knowledge are linked to a particular project or problem, and will occur in the context of their community of practice.

3.2 Site/Population Selection

The intent of qualitative research is to understand a particular social situation, event, role, group, or interaction (Locke, Spirduso, Silverman, 2000). This study will be conducted (*fieldwork*) at the headquarter of an Italian Bank (ABC). This bank was established in the 1800s and has approximately 4.000 employees. Its headquarter is located in Tuscany, and it has several branches throughout central Italy. As a traditional, long-established bank, ABC's organisational structure is rather rigid, with little room for instantaneous and rapid change. It is hierarchical and highly centralised. In spite of the rigid organisational structure of ABC, there are a number of social mechanisms, such as long-term employment relationships, HRM practices, and social networks, that support knowledge sharing within the organisation.

Participants in this study will be some HRD professionals including one or two HR managers. I will be observing them in the context of everyday experiences and events, and the focus will be on the perceptions and meanings attached to those experiences as expressed by the participants. This include making sense of critical events and issues that arise.

3.3 Researcher's Role

Qualitative research is interpretative research, with the inquirer typically involved in a sustained and intensive experience with participants. This introduces a range of strategic, ethical and personal issues into the qualitative research process (Locke, *et al.*, 2000, cited in Creswell, 2003).

In qualitative studies, the researcher is the instrument (Marshall and Rossman, 1999). The risk to participants in this study should be minimal, as it may only reveal organisational politics. The study

will attempt to discover ideas and feelings about how and why participants share knowledge, which is information that is non beyond what would be discussed in a day-to-day work environment.

Participants do not always have the opportunity to discuss these topics, and the research will provide them an opportunity to do so in a confidential context. The fieldwork will make no attempt to evaluate participants' job performance, as sharing is voluntary and not compensated.

Access to the site has been already gained by a gatekeeper and participants will receive an invitation explaining the aim of the research, and an informed consent will be obtained. Neither the organisation nor participants will be identified in any written documentation of this research. The analysis process requires consideration of words, tone, context, non-verbals, internal consistency, frequency, intensity, and such demands on the researcher are not without dangers of bias and conflict (Krueger, 1994). The literature review is also subject to this kind of risks. It is therefore important to make such frameworks explicit by stating what is brought into the research process by the researcher.

3.4 Data Collection Methods and Analysis

This research is based on a single case study (Stake, 1995), interviews will be the primary vehicle for data gathering, while observations, documents, and casual conversation with staff will be used as supplements. This study aims to uncover the routines and processes in-depth to gain better understanding of the complex process of knowledge sharing.

It really seems that *interviews* have many advantages in achieving the aims of this study. An interview may be described "as a conversation with purpose" (Rossman and Rallis, 1998), and the researcher will search for prospective participants. Prior to contacting and interviewing participants, an interview guide is going to be developed. To conduct *observations*, the inquirer will consider factors such as what settings to examine, whether the settings are rich with information, and when and where the observation will be performed.

During the investigation process, the settings will usually be offices, so as to examine how HRD professionals behave, how they communicate with each other, and how they run their work. In a naturalistic inquiry the term document refers to the broad range of written and symbolic records, as well as any available materials and data (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993). An important feature or benefit of *documents* is their unobtrusiveness. This process will allow the researcher to confirm other data obtained from interviews and observations.

Data analysis is process of bringing order, structure, and meaning to the mass of data collected (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993; Rossman and Rallis, 1998), in order to meet the objectives of the research and answer the research questions. To assist in data collection and in analysis I will utilise a *field log*. Data gathered from interviews, observations, documents will be processed according to the constant comparative method (Lincoln and Guba, 1985; Merriam, 1998).

The basic question facing the qualitative researcher is how to capture the complexity of reality studied, and how to make convincing sense of it (Strauss, 1987). The raw data collected will be used to find meaning through a process of systematic description of the interrelationships called “coding”. This should be an interactive, dynamic, and ongoing process so that a construction of the findings be created.

3.5 Trustworthiness

In any research, the results that are trustworthy – credible, transferable, dependable, and confirmable – become the major concern (Merriam, 1998). The researcher will utilise a number of methods to establish trustworthiness. Prolonged engagement will be used to establish credibility (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993), as well as dialogue with participants and peer debriefing. Triangulation will also be brought into play to promote credibility.

As recommended by Lincoln and Guba (1985), transferability will be established through use of multiple data sources and rich descriptions, though it is difficult to attain in a single-case study (Yin, 1994). Purposive sampling will also be used to support transferability of the study. A reflexive field log (*journal*) will promote credibility, transferability, dependability, and confirmability (Erlandson *et al.*, 1993).

3.6 Timetable

“There is never enough time to do all the work that seems to be essential in order to do a thorough job, but if you have a handover date, then somehow the work has to be completed in the specified time. It is unlikely you will be able to keep rigidly to a timetable, but some attempt should be made to devise a schedule so that you can check progress periodically and, if necessary, force yourself to move from one stage of the research to the next.” (Bell, 2005).

With this in mind I present the following timetable (adapted from Hart, 2005).

Month	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8
Literature Search								
Literature Review					Review Updated/Refined			
Specify Guiding Questions				Analyse Ethical Issues				Data Analysis
Select Strategy and Methods					Data Collection			
Start Writing Sections								Summarise Findings

Interpretation and		
Conclusions		
	Draft Sections	Construct Chapters
Final Draft and		Finishing
(Timetable adapted from Hart (2005), p. 397)		

3.7 Ethical Issues

Prevention of harm is a general ethical rule among researchers of all disciplines and methodologies. The researcher should do the utmost to prevent any damage or harm on participants. Participants in qualitative studies are particularly vulnerable to invasion of privacy, unwanted identification, breach of confidentiality and trust, misrepresentation, and exploitation (Punch, 1994).

All these issues will be taken into account in this study. However, Punch (1994) suggests that qualitative researchers not be daunted or deterred by ethical issues. In fact, he advises that “fieldwork is fun; it is easy; anyone can do it; it is salutary for young academics to flee the nest; and they should be able to take any moral or political dilemmas encountered in their stride”.

This research will also maintain independence from possible bias results, ensuring security of data during and after completion of the research. The University’s formal procedures will be ensured as well as consent from participants.

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Paolo Cassai

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