

PROCESS OF INTERORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE SHARING AND WOMEN'S ENTREPRENEURSHIP

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Abstract

The present study aims to identify how the process of interorganizational knowledge sharing contributes to women's entrepreneurship in the south of Santa Catarina State. A descriptive and exploratory methodological procedure with qualitative approach was carried, through a field research carried out with the associated women entrepreneurs of the State Council of Woman Entrepreneurs (CEME). The interorganizational knowledge sharing happens during meetings and events held by the CEME and in the Centers, as well as during interactions and informal dialogues among the participants, when tacit knowledge sharing occurs. Knowledge sharing causes organizational learning and contributes to the entrepreneurship of women participating on these events as following: (1) increase in knowledge; (2) creation of unity and connections; (3) information exchange; (4) motivation; (5) personal improvement; (6)

employee development; (7) promotion of necessary changes and (8) networking.

Keywords: Woman entrepreneur; Entrepreneurship; Interorganizational knowledge sharing; State Council of Woman Entrepreneurs (CEME).

1. Introduction

With the change in the world economic scenario in the last decades, and with the quickness of information transfer, knowledge became the main resource to companies that seek competitive differential and remain on the market. Thus, the search for means of management is necessary, which has been addressed by many authors of organizational theories (NONAKA; TAKEUCHI, 1997; DRUCKER, 1999; CHOO, 2000; TERRA, 2001).

However, the major emphasis of these studies is on the organizational knowledge management, in order to work with the intellectual capital existing in the company. These studies, when work only with internal knowledge, do not take the logic of society into consideration. In this sense, Castells (2006), when exposing about networks, states that every transformation on the economic scenario caused companies to form networks in order to achieve goals which were impossible to achieve alone.

Hence, this study intends to understand interorganizational knowledge sharing, which was addressed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1997); however, it was not very well explored. Thus, with all challenges of endeavoring in nowadays economy, this study aims to identify how the process of interorganizational knowledge sharing contributes to women's entrepreneurship in the south of Santa Catarina State. The research has been applied by means of focal group interviews of women entrepreneurs in the southern region of Santa Catarina State, Brazil. Hence, the structure of this study follows the theoretical foundation with the themes entrepreneurship and knowledge management, followed by methodological procedures, results and research analysis and, concluding, their final considerations.

2. Theoretical Reference

2.1 Entrepreneurship

Entrepreneurship can be considered an active method to generate resources (RONSTADT, 1984), so that the entrepreneur is the person having the desire and competences capable of innovate, generating personal and economic development (SCHUMPETER, 1984), taking all opportunities and taking calculated risks. Being an entrepreneur is to develop a passion about the business and sparing no efforts to secure the survival of this business (BAGGIO; BAGGIO, 2014). Entrepreneurs are motivated and proud of what they do, have the perspective of being recognized by the society and admired for what they have built (DORNELAS, 2008). "An entrepreneur is somebody that dreams and seeks to transform this dream into reality" (DOLABELA, 2010, p. 25).

Dornelas (2005) states that entrepreneurship may happen from two perspectives: the entrepreneurship by opportunity, which comes from the visionary entrepreneur, and the entrepreneurship by need, which risks

all the possibilities of the entrepreneur due to lack of resources, as there is no employment alternative. The entrepreneur shall use all her/his efforts forward favorable conditions provided by external environment, which in its turn stimulates and evokes society, generating innovation, Technology and economic growth (DOLABELA, 1999). In an overall vision, entrepreneurship can be founded how the actions taken by people to develop their businesses. This complex process involves not only the entrepreneur; it involves all the environment in which the entrepreneur and the business are inserted (Oliveira, 2012). Thus, endeavoring is acting in order to develop a new business or keep an existing one and, to do so, the entrepreneur needs specific abilities comprehending the need of doing knowledge management (LUCHESE, 2012).

Entrepreneurship in Brazil started to take shape after the creation of the Brazilian Service of Support to Micro and Small Companies (SEBRAE) and of the Brazilian Society for the Promotion of Excellence in Software (SOFTEX). These two entities spread the entrepreneurship in Brazil during the 1990s (DORNELAS, 2005).

2.2 Knowledge Management

Knowledge Management, besides dealing with management of intangible assets, also refers to the management of processes linked to these assets. That is, concerns the planning and decisions made towards the development of such assets and processes, with the objective of achieving an organization goal, improvement of products, services and decisions by means of flexibility and value adding (FIALHO et al., 2010).

Knowledge Management is connected to all learning processes in an organization, that is, it acts in the acquisition and development of knowledge, in the dissemination and in building memories, as well as in the process of elaboration of fundamental competences for the organization - (FLEURY; FLEURY, 2004). The application of knowledge management keeps the organizations constantly updated, promoting competitive advantage and creating innovation. Besides organizational knowledge, the knowledge of the entrepreneur itself adds value to individuals, which consequently will add value to the organization (SALGADO; CAMIOTTI; LEZANA, 2012). Entrepreneurship and knowledge management are strongly connected, because endeavoring is being constantly managing knowledge as a way of taking new actions, new ideas and new businesses, so that capabilities of individuals, developed by knowledge management, are necessary (SALGADO; CAMIOTTI; LEZANA, 2012).

Due to changes in the economic scenario, in order to keep companies competitive on the market, the adoption of new management models was necessary, where the proactive management of knowledge became the main axis of competitiveness of companies and countries (TERRA, 2001; TERRA, 2005). Knowledge, from this moment on, became main object of many studies. Almeida and Souza (2011) state that, in order to achieve the concept of knowledge, it is important to know the existing distinction between data and information. The authors understand data as the systematic register of all events, people or objects, as well as an address, a wage amount, birth date, among others. Such data, when processed, cumulatively, comparatively or in any other way, become likely to be interpreted and, later, constitute and information 2011. Davenport and Prusak (1998) state that information is the junction of data interpreted and that now

has a wider sense to the receptor. Knowledge, differently from data and information, is understood as the result of the relations happening in environments and that, by means of a learning process, develops itself and results in new practices (DAVENPORT; PRUSAK, 1998).

Knowledge divides into tacit and explicit. Tacit knowledge is internalized in the individuals and is difficult to be externalized and shared. Such kind of knowledge refers to beliefs, personal values and experiences, while explicit knowledge is easily accessible, as it is presented in formal language and can be found in documents, books, manuals, among other sources. According to the authors, knowledge creation in organizations is a result of the constant interaction between the two kinds of knowledge (NONAKA; TAKEUCHI, 1997).

This interaction among knowledges, also known as conversion, occurs in a spiral-shape, known as SECI, and happens in different levels: individual, group, organizational and interorganizational, starting by socialization, phase in which sharing of life experience and mental models occur. Subsequently, the stage of externalization happens, in which groups discuss and reflect upon what has been previously addressed; then, there is the stage of combination, the junction of the new and the old knowledge. To conclude, the stage the authors call “learning by doing”, that is, the internalization, in which individuals put the new knowledge, resulting from the spiral-shaped process, in practice (NONAKA; TAKEUCHI, 1997).

2.3 Knowledge Sharing

To Fleury and Oliveira Junior (2001, p. 295), knowledge sharing “is defined as the process of knowledge dissemination inside a company or with other companies, under the control of the company owning this knowledge”. Probst, Raub and Romhardt (2006, p. 136) define knowledge sharing and distribution as “a process of distribution centrally directed of knowledge between a given group of employees or it can be a knowledge transfer among individuals, or among teams or work groups” because knowledge is an element usually transferred during personal exchange among individuals.

Tarapanoff (2006) states that, when conceptualizing knowledge sharing, this is characterized as a process, not as an object *per se*. In order to have an easy, comfortable and transparent knowledge and information sharing implemented, the environment should be favorable to it, even before the implementation of usual knowledge management processes such as technologies, classifications, among others.

To Probst, Raub and Romhardt (2006, p. 161), “knowledge sharing and distribution have a prominent position in knowledge management”, because such activities are the foundation for vital competitive factors such as time and quality, besides its leveraging, and for being a common thread to other aspects of knowledge management. The authors also emphasize that knowledge sharing and distribution in the organization is crucial, so that the information or experiences of individuals can be disseminated and used by everybody in the company. Thus, the premise is that there should have a knowledge coming from internal sources (knowledge development) or external (knowledge acquisition), followed by conditions for knowledge sharing and distribution that, according to the authors, is the set of the recognition and location (by the potential user) of the individual or organizational knowledge assets, by means of tools supporting the sharing and distribution of organizational knowledge, which comprehend physical, technical and organizational aspects of labor situations, both individual or group.

However, Probst, Raub and Romhardt (2006) state that the problems arise from knowledge distribution, because one of the greater difficulties regarding knowledge management is the distribution of knowledge to the right people, or make organizational knowledge available whenever necessary. Companies tend to underestimate this difficulty, as according to the authors, surveys show that more than half of the intellectual capital is not exploited and very few people possess the vital organizational knowledge, due to the difficulty of knowledge transfer to people who could use it.

Recent tendencies in the work format, such as the cooperation among companies in virtual organization, as well as the distance of individual forms of work, have led to the emphasis on workgroup, in which most of the employees work in groups or project groups, and the success of these groups directly depends on the efficiency of the knowledge sharing between their members; make knowledge sharing a crucial requirement for efficient organizations (Probst; Raub; Romhardt, 2006).

The same authors mention other organizational scenarios providing barriers to knowledge sharing, such as virtual offices and teams, sudden company structure changes, such as acquisitions or divestments, the spatial disposal of work areas, besides individual barriers that reduce the willingness or the capacity of people to disseminate knowledge voluntarily. For example, difficulty in describing, communicating or disseminating knowledge, possession of knowledge as only and particular property and knowledge as a power base in the company (PROBST; RAUB; ROMHARDT, 2006).

Davenport and Prusak (1998) also show some of the reasons why people in the organizations understand and absorb new knowledge, nevertheless, does not use this knowledge, such as lack of respect and or suspicion about the source of knowledge, resistance to changes, pride, stubbornness, lack of time, lack of opportunity and fear of taking risks; this latter, mostly, in companies that punish errors. Tarapanoff (2006) complement that a competitive, non-collaborative organizational culture is also a problem related to knowledge sharing, because departments, employees and executives compete among themselves, there is no motivation to knowledge sharing. In this sense, sharing or interchange of knowledge is subject to the culture of trust in the organization. Probst, Raub and Romhardt (2006) complement that despite the difficulty of establishing a trusted environment, this is crucial to knowledge sharing. Trust is built by short steps, through positive examples, however, negative events such as, for instance, the dismissal of an important knowledge agent, can cause evident effects on trust.

Probst, Raub and Romhardt (2006) state that such tendencies can be compensated by many of the existing aids for knowledge management, which have been advancing on methodology. Processes' structuration forms enhance new opportunities by means of more advanced technologies and more mature organizational methods. Davenport and Prusak (1998) corroborate and state that technology takes knowledge wherever necessary, however, it has the task of distributing and storing knowledge for interchange purposes; it is not capable of create neither guarantee or promote knowledge sharing. Such actions will only be possible if a corporate culture, stimulating these activities, exists.

Laudon and Laudon (1999) point out the benefits occurred to make organizational knowledge easily available. Simplifying the access to knowledge, improving the value of knowledge and use it to improve processes, are vital actions for a company to succeed and survive. The authors state that knowledge that cannot be communicated and shared with others become useless to the organization. Thus, the authors

forward ideas regarding the development of procedures and routines for knowledge creation, flow and sharing, and list training programs, informal networks, administrative experience shared and communicated through a culture of support as a mechanism for knowledge sharing. Complementarily, Rosa et al. (2011) show that knowledge can be shared by means of many mechanisms: tacit knowledge sharing demands mechanisms where interaction among people occur, while in order to explicit knowledge sharing happen, it is necessary to have tools in order to make the documentation of knowledge possible.

2.4 Interorganizational Knowledge Sharing

Knowledge sharing may occur inside the organization (intraorganizational), in which the main source of knowledge is the employee (DARROCH, 2003), or among organizations (interorganizational). In this case, knowledge can be acquired from competition, universities, suppliers, clients, among others (ROSA et al., 2011). Nodari et al. (2014) define interorganizational knowledge sharing is the process that allows mutual learning among companies, and happens by learning among members of different organizations, and when the conversion of individual learning into organizational learning happens.

Interorganizational knowledge transfer results on the development of organizational competences and, consequently, on organizational performance (NODARI, 2013), as well as it provides competitive advantage by means of the creation and management of knowledge sharing processes (DYER; NOBEOKA, 2000).

In a study about development of capabilities through interorganizational sharing, Nodari (2013) points out that there is a greater tendency of companies to participate in a knowledge sharing relation, in comparison to individuals. In other words, the more knowledge a company donates to a partner, the more the receiver will be able to donate its knowledge. That is, the more knowledge is collected, the more probable to donate it. Thus, it forms a vicious circle of knowledge sharing. The authors also state that the establishment of this process of donation and collection of knowledge is favorable to the development of dynamic capabilities; however, such relation is guided by the absorptive capacity of the company. Absorptive capacity is the ability of a company to recognize the value of new and external information, assimilate and apply them to commercial purposes, what is crucial for innovative capacities (COHEN; LEVINTHAL, 1990). All this is added to the fact that, in order to develop organizational competences and, consequently, impact positively on organizational performance, the company shall not only provide knowledge, but also collect it (NODARI, 2013).

Chen et al. (2006) forward ideas on the crucial importance of external knowledge to small and medium-sized companies, and complete that they are in need of external knowledge and interorganizational knowledge transfer. Through their survey regarding interorganizational knowledge, which promoted a vision about practices and needs to practice knowledge transfer in small and medium-sized companies in the United Kingdom, Chen et al. (2006) point out that the engagement in activities of interorganizational knowledge transfer, social and electronic networks are important channels for companies to acquire knowledge needed. The survey shows that it is more likely to acquire important knowledge from social networks than by electronic social networks. In their study, the authors related that 99% of the companies studied shown the need for interorganizational knowledge transfer, and are intensely involved in activities

such as meetings with clients, counseling with friends or members of other organizations. Some of them share knowledge even with their competition. Such activities show themselves as important paths to interorganizational knowledge transfer (CHEN et al., 2006).

3. Methodology

The present study has as main goal to identify how the process of interorganizational knowledge sharing contributes to women’s entrepreneurship in the south of Santa Catarina State. For this purpose, this study is characterized as interdisciplinary, with use of applied and exploratory research, through qualitative approach, made by a field study held with women entrepreneur and associated to the State Council of Woman Entrepreneurs (CEME).

The field study was held by means of interviews, using a semi structured script formed by topics, in discussion groups, with two groups of 5-7 women belonging to the Southern region of Santa Catarina State, Brasil. The women interviewed work in varied sections of retail, industry and services. The script was made with the objective of identifying how the interorganizational knowledge sharing happens among the women associated to the CEME during the meetings and workshops developed by them, and how this sharing contributes to the growth of their companies or for the companies in which they work.

CEME, founded in 1997, is the female extension of the Federation of Business Associations of Santa Catarina State (FACISC), considered the biggest representative body of female entrepreneurship class, intensely acting in all regions of the state. Formed by the Women Entrepreneur Centers all over Santa Catarina State, the CEME gathers until the present date, 53 centers, responsible for the movement of around a thousand companies (CEME, 2017).

4. Results

The present section addressed the data description and result discussion, as per data collected by the researchers. As shown by Table 1, the identification of some forms related by both groups was identified, in which interorganizational knowledge sharing promoted by the CEME meetings and by Centers contribute to women entrepreneurs participating on these events.

Table 1. Improvements brought to entrepreneurship.

Improvements brought to women’s entrepreneurship by means of interorganizational knowledge sharing held by the CEME	
Increase in knowledge	Motivation to act in companies
Creation of unity and connections	Employee development
Personal improvement	Promotion of necessary changes
Information exchange	Networking

Source: Research data (2017).

Through the stories of the interviewees, both groups listed improvements that knowledge sharing provided by the CEME and by the Centers has brought not only to their enterprises, but also to women in the role of entrepreneurs.

A factor highlighted was that knowledge sharing which happens even between entrepreneurs that compete on the market. The women interviewed welcomed this sharing and agree that, in this case, competition does not interfere and all sectors are benefited by it, because brings growth. This knowledge is presented in several ways, such as technical visits, lectures, *workshops*, meetings and events held for the members and, mostly, it is shown in informal interactions among the entrepreneurs, what they call exchange of information. During these meetings, there are moments in which the members dialogue informally among each other. These are great opportunities for tacit knowledge sharing. Rosa et al. (2011) supports this practice and shows that tacit knowledge sharing demands mechanisms in which the interaction among people happens. According to the women interviewed, these opportunities provided by the meetings add a lot to their businesses, towards motivation, overcoming barriers, generation of new ideas and in problem solving, as stated by the interviewees E4 of Group 1: “The exchange of ideas adds value to every kind of business” (E4, Group 1). The interviewee E1 of Group 2 complements and states:

I am here since 2010 and I have learned a lot of things, indeed, besides the exchange among colleagues. Sometimes we think we have a huge problem, and talk to other person that also have it, and you minimize your problem after this talk. It is like a therapy, you know, so I guess this information exchange is very important to women entrepreneurs' lives and to create partnerships (E1, Group 2).

These reports meet the thoughts of Chen et al. (2006), when state that the involvement in activities of interorganizational knowledge transfer, social and electronic networks are important channels to companies to acquire the knowledge needed: it is more likely to acquire important knowledge from social networks than through electronic networks.

The women interviewed state that such knowledge make the entrepreneurs see the necessity of change in their endeavors, which becomes an improvement provided by sharing. When having it, they have the opportunity to see the mistakes made towards their endeavors and, from these mistakes, promote the changes needed to fix them, as stated by the interviewee E3 of Group 2: “I guess that is it, we will see the things we are doing right and other simple things that we did not realize and understand that everybody make mistakes, so, we vary, improve what we learn and fix things we were not doing right”.

The women interviewed also state that the participation in meetings is an opportunity that depart them from the daily duties imposed by the direction of their businesses, dedicating some time to think, reflect and make plans to their endeavors, what is usually not possible due to the overload imposed by work and personal life tasks as mothers and wives, as stated by the interviewee E7 of Group 1: “I should take a time to do this, to start organizing my things, to organize my tasks because everything is like ‘everybody does everything’, you know, so I should do it too” (E7, Group 1).

Personal improvement was also mentioned in the narratives. The women interviewed state that having

access to this experience of knowledge sharing, and the interaction with other entrepreneurs of different places of Santa Catarina State, benefits not only the company, but the women as well. The women state that this interaction is a motivating factor. Participating in meetings and events, interacting with other women that are often facing the same problems, make them feel more secure in relation to their businesses, as stated by the interviewee E4 of Group 2: “We need to go after this motivation, this space to get motivated, so you can administrate your business”. The interviewee E5 of Group 1 complements, stating that motivation is one of the greater gains provided by sharing in meetings, which brings us more willing to work and continue their business: “I guess motivation is what we most bring, right? We leave the place more motivated, you know? Tomorrow we will get up feeling better, we will go to work feeling different” (E5, Group 1).

The development of employees was also an improvement brought by the knowledge sharing held by meetings. The women interviewed acknowledge the importance of sharing the knowledge acquired in meetings with the employees of their companies, and such behavior is crucial to the development of the company. To Nodari et al. (2014) this cycle causes the organizational learning, that is, after mutual learning among companies, the individual learning conversion arises in organizational learning. The interviewee E2 of Group 1 shows how this sharing happens: “We gathered together [the city of] São José, then I arrived and I showed [something] to them, [and said] look how nice it is, what we can take advantage from, so we share [this knowledge], all together”.

The narratives also shown that the participation in meetings and knowledge sharing creates unity and connection between the participants, an important factor in the view of entrepreneurs, because this way they feel supported in difficult times, as related by the E1 of Group 1:

“So, whether you want it or not, we create a unity, we continue to create, I guess, you create bonds with people when you participate on things, and make friends, so, I guess it is very important, so this is a matter of unity, because you cannot walk alone”.

To conclude, the authors understand that these meetings strongly foster the networking among participants, which is extremely important to their professional life nowadays. The women entrepreneur state that, through the meetings, they had the opportunity of selling their products with other entrepreneurs, increased their client portfolio by indicating their services among the members of the centers, had the opportunity of disclosing their business and setting many partnerships with the participants. As stated by the interviewee E4 of Group 2: “[we] benefit from networking, besides the constant interaction with other people, with other entrepreneurs” (E4, Grupo2).

The authors perceived that all the cycle of knowledge sharing provided by the meetings of CEME and Centers, corroborates what Nodari (2013) states about interorganizational sharing, that is, sharing the knowledge of the organization with members of other organizations results on a greater shared knowledge flow, taking into account that, when getting knowledge, the receptor will be more willing to donate knowledge to the partner company, which results in competitive advantage and better organizational

performance.

5. Conclusion

The goal proposed to the present study aimed to identify how the process of interorganizational knowledge sharing contributes to women's entrepreneurship in the south of Santa Catarina State. The participation in meetings and in events promoted by the CEME and by the Centers provide to women entrepreneurs a high flow of interorganizational knowledge sharing, which, according to the literature, cause the organizational learning, essential for the increase and development of organizations.

The authors understand that information sharing does not happen only through technical visits, lectures, workshops, meetings and events, as well as during informal meetings, dialogues and interactions, including meetings with other entrepreneurs competing in the market. During these meetings, tacit knowledge sharing happens, which is considered by the women entrepreneurs as excellent opportunities of learning, not only for their endeavors but for women in their role of entrepreneurs. Such moments motivate them regarding the overcome of obstacles, generation of new ideas and problem solving. This knowledge also makes the women interviewed to see what points of their businesses need changes and improvements because, when getting new knowledge, these women have the opportunity of observing and finding their mistakes and apply corrective measures.

These meetings also shown a way of escaping their turbulent agenda and dedicate exclusive time to reflect and plan their endeavors. They acknowledge the importance of having knowledge sharing not only among the women entrepreneurs, but also inside the company.

To conclude, the authors understand that these meetings strongly promote networking among the participants, which results in the opportunity of selling their products with other entrepreneurs, increased their client portfolio by indicating their services among the members of the centers, had the opportunity of disclosing their business and setting many partnerships with the participants.

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