Unfortunately, edited books can often be categorized into two classes: Either they consist of only slightly revised repetitions of published articles or they include pieces of research which are not publishable elsewhere. Fortunately, this book does not fall into either of these categories. Volker Mahnke and Torben Pedersen present an original collection of articles clustered around the question of knowledge governance in the MNC. They have succeeded to include many established researchers but also given a voice to other authors. In contrast to many earlier studies in this field, the emphasis is put on the specific management challenges rather than on the description of the characteristics of senders, receivers and knowledge. The chapters include a great variety of styles: from reviews of theory and conceptual frameworks to case studies and empirical studies. To unite the diverse contributes into a meaningful order, the volume is split in four parts: (I) Fundamental Perspectives on Knowledge Governance, (II) Governing External Knowledge Relations, (III) Governing Internal Knowledge Relations, and (IV) Knowledge Governance and Business Development. Although all contributions have a merit in itself and deserve to be discussed, I will focus on selected chapters which have particularly stimulated my interest and seem to provide avenues for future research development in this area.

The first contribution stems from the editors. Instead of limiting themselves to an introductory preface they present some of their own views on this field of research and also develop a framework to classify the following chapters. Reading the introductory part of this chapter it becomes evident that the editors have chosen the contributions with great care. This results in a collection of research which is definitely worth more than the single unlinked pieces. An important perspective of this introduction is the emphasis on value creation as the ultimate goal of knowledge governance. This attitude reflects the trend in recent publications which are more concerned about the value created through knowledge transfer/management (than the barriers to bridge in order to maximize knowledge flows). The other important line of thinking described by Mahnke and Pedersen is the distinction between cognition and motivation as challenges to the management of knowledge in MNCs. Prior research has dealt with the respective variables but failed to distinguish problems of the participants’ willingness from those rooted in their ability. The following chapters are positioned in a matrix of internal vs. external knowledge flows and cognition vs. motivation. Unfortunately, not all authors focus on the issue of value creation through knowledge governance.

Another “fundamental” perspective is given by Mats Forsgren who discusses the impact and changes of network theory during the last decades. This article is well written and provides an excellent introduction to the field, but might not be too informative to more specialized researchers. Highly interesting, however, is Forsgren’s outlook at the end of this chapter. He suggests going beyond a sender-recipient model towards a perspective of “problem-solving” and mutual interaction – an approach which he has earlier developed together with Ulf Andersson and Ulf Holm (2003). He also points towards the questions of network boarders and radical changes of networks.

In the second part of the volume, concerned with external knowledge relations, Marjorie A. Lyles and Charles
Dhanaraj present an integrative conceptual framework for learning in international alliances. Building on Lyles’ (1988) learning framework, the authors come up with a structure-process view of organizational learning. Within this model, the stages of organizational learning are framed by social capital and set in a cognitive context by absorptive capacity. In addition, organizational factors, reward systems, knowledge activists and organizational structure affect the development of learning capabilities. In line with Mahnke and Pedersen’s vision of the book, this model does not only aim to describe how learning works but aims to maximize learning effectiveness. Despite its setting in the field of inter-firm cooperation, this framework can be used as a general approach to increase learning effectiveness in firms. Probably most important for future theory development is the notion that learning is not only a cognitive but a social process.

Equally concerned with external knowledge relations but more focused on the motivation than the cognition aspect is Joanne E. Oxley’s article on “Learning vs. Protection in Inter-Firm Alliances”. She speaks out about some prejudices commonly attributed to transaction cost economics and the resource/knowledge-based view of the firm. Put in a nutshell, Oxley finds convincing arguments against a simplistic straw-man version of TCE often adopted by researchers subscribing to RBV. This chapter is particularly interesting as it does not only shed light on the specific question raised in the alliance context, but questions the theoretical cornerstones often used by researchers when dealing with knowledge exchange. Thus, the real contribution of this chapter reaches beyond the research on alliances and lies in the synergies Oxley finds in the two theoretical streams.

Shifting the focus to the MNC’s internal governance of knowledge flows, Jens Gammelgaard, Ulf Holm and Torben Pedersen address the dilemmas of subsidiary knowledge transfer. In line with the conceptualization of the MNC as a differentiated network, this topic has received increasing attention during the last years. The authors address different dilemmas of subsidiary knowledge transfer. Ultimately, they all boil down to questions of internal and external connectedness. Although this short chapter only presents a relatively simple empirical study, the emphasis and direction of this research is notable. A combination of this research and Forsgren’s thoughts on networks – mentioned above – seems to be a very interesting avenue for future studies.

Detached form the order of the book, two chapters – Valerie J. Lindsay et al. (in part III) and Anders Blomstermo and Deo D. Sharma (in part IV) – focus on service firms. Investigations of service firms are rare and it is interesting to see how these two chapters depart from different perspectives. The former contribution centres on the individual and the motivational challenges in service firms by drawing on a general model of knowledge exchange. The aim of the latter chapter is to shape strategies for the internationalization process of firms and to outline differences between hard- and soft-service firms with regard to knowledge management challenges. This research points up that differences between service firms might be more important than the commonly used distinction between manufacturing and service firms.

References


Reviewed on: December 1, 2004
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