Informal learning communities in the knowledge economy:
Informal knowledge dvelopment in the multimedia sector

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Abstract: Our research in the multimedia sector is centred on the concept of collective competencies and the way people work and learn. Our findings reflect the changing contours of learning in many knowledge-based sectors. The modes of learning are changing partly because the modes of work and the types of careers in this sector also present new characteristics, and it is this aspect that we explore here: the new modes of collective work or teamwork, and the way people learn in this context.

1.   INTRODUCTION

Visions of learning have been evolving, and informal learning communities and communities of practice have become important concepts that highlight the fact that learning is no longer only happening in classrooms or through formal e-learning mechanisms. The 'Knowledge Economy' implies a far-reaching transformation of the learning process. It has to take into account changes in the labour market, particularly in terms of job mobility and career development. Careers are increasingly fragmented, with people having to move through a number of projects, jobs and firms during their lifetime. This constitutes a considerable challenge for learning, since learning used to be provided by a firm within internal labour markets. Now, especially in sectors such as multimedia, characterised by extreme mobility between firms, but also by a need for permanent learning, the challenge for firms to ensure learning of their employees, and for workers to ensure their own learning, has become quite important. But it

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also has to take into account ways in which people learn informally (at least that was our hypothesis). Indeed, in our view, new careers, described by some as 'nomadic' (Cadin et al., 2000) threaten to increase labour market segmentation, or fragmentation of social cohesion, because of the difficulty some experience in learning. This new reality also requires us to review our visions of learning and to question the modalities by which adults learn in the new economic sectors characterised by mobility and nomadic behaviour.

Over the last 2 years, we have conducted research focusing on people working in the multimedia industry. We found interesting elements in our research concerning the way people work and learn in the multimedia sector and we think these findings reflect the changing contours of working and learning in many knowledge-based sectors (Tremblay, 2001). We would add that the modes of learning are changing partly because the modes of work and the types of careers in this sector also present new characteristics and it is this aspect that we will explore here: the new modes of collective work or teamwork, and the way people learn in this context.

Our paper describes a new way in which to envision the development of competencies and learning in the knowledge economy characterised by boundaryless careers and mobility.

2.   OBJECTIVES AND METHODOLOGY

Our interest is in the modes of exchange and of informal learning, collaborative work, management and development of knowledge within the firm through exchanges between workers.

We contacted some 50 firms and 18 accepted participation in the research. In these 18 firms, we did interviews with workers (web page designers, project leaders, web technicians, etc.) as well as interviews with 12 managers. In each of the firms, we interviewed 3 to 4 workers for about an hour and a half. Workers were questioned on their past employment experience, the type of work they did, what they had learned in previous employment, how they learned in their jobs, the types of interactions with co-workers, and various dimensions related to teamwork and their appreciation of it, since this seems to be the main source of competencies.

3.   COLLECTIVE COMPETENCIES

The 'Knowledge Economy' has important impacts on the ways in which we envisage the development of competencies, especially in 'project-based' sectors such as the multimedia sector, that are also confronted with high

mobility of nomadic employees. In these sectors, the intelligence of the firm is based on the quality of the 'networks of competencies' that constitute this firm and not on the individual capabilities (Le Boterf, 1994).

In such a context, individuals develop their competencies and the industry develops its competencies through a network. Also, collective efficiency of the firm depends largely on its capacity to bring together different types of know-how (Le Boterf, 1994).

Other works on similar subjects indicate that the team (group, project structure and the like) seems to be at the centre of action, much more than the individual. The collective dimension seems to be imposing itself in management science as a fundamental mode of organised or of intelligent action. Deming (1986) is strongly critical of the tyranny of individual short term performances, and highlights the fact that the work flows which are the result of transversal interspeciality teams, and which go beyond hierarchies and functional specialities are the way of the future. Le Boterf (1994) also highlights the importance of different types of knowledge.

Collective competencies refer to the implementation of a new type of management based on the interactivity of multiple players, both employees and managers. It generates new collective behaviours and exchanges that help develop collective competencies as well as new ways of co-operating between the individuals of a firm (eventually beyond the individual firm, within a network of firms or of people). These new collective behaviours, exchanges and forms of co-operation contribute in developing what can be called collective competencies. It is important to note that competencies have generally been studied in an individual context, referring to the competencies or capabilities of the individual, those needed for a specific job and the like. In our view, this was appropriate in a context where internal labour markets dominated, and even more so in a context of closed internal labour markets (Tremblay, 1997), but in the diversity of present working contexts, employment systems have evolved tremendously, particularly so in firms of the knowledge economy characterised by boundaryless careers.

While traditional visions or tayloristic visions of work organisation used to be centred on the job description and on a strong division of labour, the concept of competencies is preferred in a context of new high performance work organisations (Tremblay and Rolland, 1998).

4.   RESEARCH RESULTS

Our work has permitted us to conclude that multimedia workers can indeed be classified as boundaryless workers (for the majority of them). Some are maybe somewhat more linked to the 'craft' and they do not all go

through the situation of independent worker, but if they are not typical boundaryless workers, they are in the parent categories or 'frontaliers' or 'itinerants' presented by Cadin et al. (2000). In all cases mobility is very important in their trajectory, and many have done a certain number of jobs, although the majority are quite young. Let us now turn to the results observed concerning the modes of development of knowledge and what we have called collective competencies, following Le Boterf (1994).

4.1   Teamwork : do you work alone or with others ?

We know the importance given to collaborative work in new theories on learning, as well as in some human resource management theories, mainly those to do with the learning organisation. We therefore wanted to know if people actually did work with others, and whether this was the case most of the time or not. If we start here with the managers or employers (12 out of the 60 interviews), they say they usually work with others.

In the case of employees, certain specific tasks bring them to work alone, but the work is usually done in teams, and responsibilities are shared in teams in general. There is much interaction between the workers, even if there is some division of labour between them. The employees usually find teamwork 'easy, useful and pleasant'. They like to work with others, even if some say it is not always easy. Many will say that teamwork is essential, that it helps you lose less time. In fact, the capacity to work in a group seems to constitute a selection criteria for many firms when they are hiring, but more importantly, it also has become a selection criteria for workers who are looking for the 'good job' as well as for project managers who want their projects to go forward smoothly. 'One rotten apple in the basket', as we all know, can lead to many others, and therefore to difficulties in a project.

4.2   Feeling that they are working towards a common goal and that there is room for expression

Unanimously, managers as well as employees say they have the feeling of working towards a common goal, although some do mention that it is not always an easy thing! We sometimes find a rather traditional and hierarchical mode of information management, in a top-down way. While some pretend that the knowledge economy is based only on project teams, with no hierarchy, we see it is not always the case, even in some small firms.

Also, managers and employees consider that there is a good team spirit and cohesion in various groups. Some firms have installed ping pong tables or billiard tables, apparently to create personal ties between employees that

go beyond professional relations. In another paper, we refer to this type of knowledge as 'knowing whom', following Cadin et al. (2000). This is seen as favouring a better working environment, as well as fostering communication and cross-learning. Clearly, the team spirit is essential to all and we might even speak of a form of 'camaraderie', which to many is one of the important criteria of a 'good job'.

Most offices are open spaces, and many of them organise social activities, etc. Clearly, we are close here to the Japanese model of management (Tremblay and Rolland, 1998; 2000), where the firm is a 'family' and where workers are encouraged to participate – but mainly after office hours in the Japanese case – in various social activities, such as 'drinking with the guys' (women are generally excluded from these jobs and activities!). An interesting element in one case is: the possibility of expression seems to constitute a substitute to a higher wage. It is true that a number of studies in human resource management have highlighted the fact that employees more and more seek other advantages than traditional wage increases. Autonomy, responsibilisation, social exchanges and other similar elements seem to constitute elements of what today's employees consider a 'good job' (Lowe and Schellenberg, 2001).

4.3   Exchanges and co-operation are useful

Each considers that working in collaborative ways is useful and that they could not attain the same results if they were working alone. The advantages they see are numerous. The managers as well as employees often mention the transfer of information, of expertise, the learning of new competencies, the diversity of points of view, the sharing of knowledge, the stimulation that is provoked by these exchanges, and the learning that is derived by all these experiences of working with others. A few persons mentioned inconveniences related to the work, sometimes it being less structured in such a context, when people do not get involved as much as they should, or when some are slower than others. Some consider that this can be detrimental to teamwork and to learning, but say that the situation is infrequent.

4.4   What is a good team: a group of persons with similar competencies or different ones ?

There is some debate as to what represents a good composition for a team. Do team members need to have similar competencies or is it preferable for them to have different specialisations, as is suggested by some (Rabasse,

1999)? The majority of our interviewees consider that there is more quality, diversity and efficiency in a team where members have different specialisations. Managers look for complementary specialisations within teams. They want individuals to have some basic competencies in a specific field, but also want them to be open to others, adaptable, and flexible. They also like the idea of bringing together people with different views on an issue. This capacity of adaptation brings to mind the Japanese model of management, where people are hired for their potential, their future capacities, and not on the bases of knowledge acquired. It is up to the firm to give the more specialised training and it is expected of workers that they will continue to learn through work, within the organisation.

4.5   Advantages and risks from sharing knowledge

All consider it is important to share their knowledge, to diffuse their knowledge and they do it with great pleasure in general. If some expect nothing in return, others expect reciprocity but do not wait until that happens to start sharing. For most persons interviewed, sharing knowledge is essential. It favours the development and growth of all, individuals and the firm alike. Most persons say there is no danger in sharing one's knowledge with others within the firm, and that it is even necessary for the functioning of the firm. Opinions vary as concerns sharing knowledge with people from other firms. Some consider there is a risk in sharing one's knowledge with others, while others see it more as an exchange which benefits all parties.

4.6   Use of software (knowledge sharing devices)

We initially wanted to study software and devices used in the different firms in order to develop exchanges between employees, possibly in the form of communities of practice. We expected to find many such devices and software in these multimedia firms. Surprisingly, this was not the case. Most firms have a system for information sharing (intranet usually) and the employees use e-mail to communicate within the firm, but also with clients or homeworkers. The intranet systems are used for the management of projects, the diffusion of information and training, service to the clients or even games. However, we saw no usage that could be considered in any way moving in the direction of creating virtual communities of practice. It may have been too early for this. One firm only has something approaching this, in the sense that they do try to get people to share information on project contents through the web: for all others, it is mainly use of e-mail and intranet, mainly for administrative management, not for knowledge management or learning.

4.7 Definition of collective competencies

We wanted to know if workers had any idea what this concept of collective competencies meant. Clearly, they do function in a way that favours the development of collective competencies as presented in Le Boterf (1994). We asked an open question on this and most answered that they did not know the concept, but nevertheless gave definitions which came quite close to the meaning of the term for researchers.

One person synthesised the concept well, saying it 'represents what a group can do, but could not be done by an individual' (*'Ce qu'un groupe peut faire et qu'un individu seul ne pourrait réaliser'*).

5.   CONCLUSION

To a certain extent, this research must be seen as exploratory in nature, since the data were collected with some 60 interviews in 18 multimedia firms in Montreal. The interviews were based on open-ended questions and the respondents do not represent a representative sample in the statistical sense of the word. However, the convergence of responses leads us to conclude that we have drawn a useful picture of the issues considered here; the last interviews confirmed what had been said in previous interviews, leading us to conclude that we had attained a critical level of validity.

Our data lead us to think that collaborative work, teamwork and knowledge sharing have become normal in these multimedia firms. The perceptions and values of workers in this sector seem to go counter to those of the traditional tayloristic vision of work, based on a strong division of labour and little if any exchange between workers. Here, workers consider that they lose nothing in exchanging information; on the contrary, they seem convinced that they are gaining in these exchanges, and that their 'competitive advantage', to take business economics terms, can only be increased.

Our interviewees are ready to share information, often without expecting anything in return, although they consider that everyone – or almost everyone – shares, and that you always end up gaining something in terms of learning.

In the traditional vision, information and knowledge are power, and most people keep the information they have access to in order to protect their source of power. In the world presented to us here, knowledge is shared and learning occurs through sharing, which corresponds to the definition of collective competencies which we put forward. We must however remain prudent. As for continuous learning, just-in-time and other new workplace

practices, the collectivist vision of collaborative work has also become a new 'buzzword'. However, we did see that beyond managers, the workers of the sector, of whom very few read educational or management journals, also share this vision of work as a collective entreprise. Many of the workers in this sector are young. Is this a generation effect? Maybe. This remains to be seen in future research.

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