# WHAT DO THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS REALLY MANAGE: KNOWLEDGE OR PEOPLE? THE CASE OF A MULTINATIONAL

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*Abstract:* In the literature, with the idea of knowledge as perceptive and as a commodity, which can be codified, stored, and easily transmitted (Chiva and Alegre, 2005), the goal of knowledge management is to capture, utilize, and leverage knowledge via the application of information and communication technologies for the benefit of the organization (Vera and Crossan, 2003). However, the move toward the view of knowledge as socially constructed and rooted in practice has made knowledge management objectives lean towards promoting social networks and the cultivation of trust, norms and shared values amongst employees that constitute "communities of practices" (Bresnen *et. al.,* 2003).

It is argued that despite the emergence of the social view of knowledge, the implication for knowledge management has not been well clarified. Communities of practice are after all just one more identified resource for the knowledge managers to manage. This article studies the situated practices of the knowledge managers in a multinational. It aims at examining what they really manage and to which among the two identified view of knowledge management their practices may be associated. It relied on an investigation framework based on Dewey's pragmatism and an interpretive phenomenological methodology. The investigation was carried out with seven knowledge managers working in two branches of a multinational. The data interpretation relied on the respondent's own terms and category systems rather than those of the researchers. It aimed at identifying cross-case themes that represent the knowledge managers' practices.

It is found that the knowledge managers are assigned by the organization to take care of a Portal, in which there are documents that are considered as codified knowledge to be shared between employees. They are also responsible for motivating and enabling people to use and contribute to that Portal. At the first glance, it seems that the knowledge managers are supposed to manage both knowledge (if knowledge is manageable) and people. However, a deeper look at their practices reveals that knowledge management has not gained legitimacy and acceptance in the organization. What the knowledge managers truly manage is their relationship with the organizational actors at different levels. Only when the knowledge management function has become part of the organization's working life and accepted by these people, that the knowledge managers can accomplish their missions.

*Key words*: knowledge manager, knowledge management, pragmatism, interpretive research

# I. INTRODUCTION

Since the emergence of the “knowledge-based view of the firm” (Grant, 1996a; Grant, 1996b; Spender, 1996a; Libeskind, 1996) with the focus on knowledge as the most strategically important of the firm’s resources, interest in the topic of knowledge management has undoubtedly boomed (Orlikowski, 2002). Knowledge management has become a term commonly used in today’s business environment and has been usually associated with large-budget projects pursued by firms convinced that the competitive advantage of utmost importance is the ability to learn faster than competitors (DeGeus, 1998).

In the literature, with the idea of knowledge as perceptive and as a commodity, which can be codified, stored, and easily transmitted (Chiva and Alegre, 2005), the goal of knowledge management is to capture, utilize, and leverage knowledge via the application of information and communication technologies for the benefit of the organization (Vera and Crossan, 2003). However, the move toward the view of knowledge as socially constructed and rooted in practice has made knowledge management objectives lean towards promoting social networks and the cultivation of trust, norms and shared values amongst employees that constitute “communities of practices” (Bresnen *et. al.,* 2003).

It is argued that despite the emergence of the social view of knowledge, the implication for knowledge management has not been well clarified. Communities of practice are after all just one more identified resource for the knowledge managers to manage. Identifying itself with the practice perspective, which has become a prominent school of thought in the management literature (Gherardi, 2009), this article studies the situated practices of the knowledge managers in a multinational. It aims at examining what they really manage and to which among the two identified view of knowledge management their practices may be associated.

It is found that the knowledge managers are assigned by the organization to take care of a Portal, in which there are documents that are considered as codified knowledge to be shared between employees. They are also responsible for motivating and enabling people to use and contribute to that Portal. At the first glance, it seems that the knowledge managers are supposed to manage both knowledge (if knowledge is manageable) and people. However, a deeper look at their practices reveals that in order to accomplish these two missions, what they truly manage is their relationship with the organizational actors at different levels.

This article is organized as following. It will start by discussing the practice turn in knowledge and knowledge management literatures. The review shows that the knowledge managers themselves need to be studied from a practice lens (Gherardi, 2009) to address the article’s research objectives. The second section will be devoted to an introduction of John Dewey’s pragmatism as our investigation framework. The empirical investigation and the research findings will then be presented.

## II. LITERATURE REVIEW

In the knowledge management literature, one can observe a practice turn in the discussion of what knowledge and knowledge management are.

There has been a passionate debate about what knowledge is and what forms or types of it are available. One can distinguish the positivist and constructivist standpoints in this debate (Vera and Crossan, 2003). The two schools of thought have also been labelled “cognitive-possession” and “social-process”, respectively (Chiva and Alegre, 2005).

According to Spender (1996a) and Chiva and Alegre (2005), followers of pure cognitive-possession school believe that knowledge is justified true belief. They all share the idea of knowledge as perceptive and as a commodity. It is possible to codify, store and transmit knowledge between people. Researchers in this school have moved beyond positivist notions of knowledge and adopt a more pluralist point of view. Classifications of knowledge have been developed and then used to examine the various strategies and techniques, through which different types of knowledge are created, codified, converted, transferred, and exchanged. Such researches are grouped under an approach that is often referred to as “taxonomic” (Tsoukas, 1996). A well-known example in this case is the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge put forward by Nonaka (1994).

In the study of knowledge, although the cognitive-possession school is the predominant one, it has been increasingly challenged and complemented by the social-process school (Vera and Crossan, 2003), shifting the notion of knowledge as a commodity to the study of knowledge as socially constructed and held collectively in organizations. This school proposes the idea that reality is socially constructed or conceived and is based on social interactions and discursive behaviours (Chiva and Alegre, 2005). This approach understands knowledge as not as a representation, not in the head nor as a commodity, not as scientific discoveries, it is in practice and as practice (Gherardi, 2000). “Practice articulates knowledge in and about organizing as practical accomplishment, rather than as a transcendental account of decontextualized reality” Gherardi (2000).

There has been a fruitful discussion about knowledge in this school of thought. Brown and Duguid (1998) propose that knowledge should be seen through the prism of practice and elaborate the distinction between “know-how” and “know-what”. Know-what is to a significant degree something people carry around in their head and pass between each other. Know-how embraces the ability to put knows-what into practice. Know-how is revealed in practice and created out of practice. It is, to a great extent, the product of experience and the tacit insights experience provides. They go further to posit that know-how is held by work group rather than individuals because most work is of collective nature. More precisely, it is produced and held in particular communities of practice.

Like Nonaka (1994), Cook and Brown (1999) adopt the distinction of tacit/explicit knowledge put forward by Michael Polany. Based on the notion of communities of practice, they argue that it is necessary to distinguish further between individual and group knowledge. These two dimensions make up four different forms of knowledge. Unlike Tsoukas or Brown and Duguid, Cook and Brown do not believe in the interrelationship between these knowledge forms. For them, these are distinct from each other. This is because in practice, each form of knowledge does work that the others cannot. All of them stand on equal footing; one form cannot be made out of or changed into any other. However, not all of what is known is capture by this understanding of knowledge. They argue for a perspective that does not treat these as separate or separable, a perspective that focuses on the knowledgeability of action, that is on knowing (a verb connoting action, doing, practice) rather than knowledge (a noun connoting thing, elements, facts, processes). Knowledge, in this view, is a tool at the service of knowing (Cook and Brown, 1999).

While Cook and Brown (1999) separate tacit knowledge from knowing, Orlikowski (2002) considers tacit knowledge as a form of knowing. It is inseparable from action because it is constituted through action. The author develops the notion of knowing as a substitution for the notion of knowledge. Knowing emerges from the ongoing and situated actions of organizational members as they engage the world. Knowledge and practice are reciprocally constitutive, so it does not make sense to talk about either knowledge or practice without the other. We can recognize the knowing how by observing the practice but the practice has no meaning apart from the knowing how that constitutes it.

Different views of knowledge lead to different implementations of knowledge management (Alavi and Leider, 2001). Two contrasting schools to knowledge management have developed accordingly, which are termed “cognitive” and “community” models (Swan *et. al.*, 1999).

The cognitive school believes in the cognitive-possession view of knowledge (Bresnen *et. al*., 2003). It tends to see knowledge as a resource, a raw material to be leveraged, processed and utilized for the benefit of the organization. For the first time, it is claimed that knowledge has to be managed as a thing itself. The goal of knowledge management is to capture, codify and distribute organizational knowledge via the application of information and communication technologies so that it can be shared by all employees (McElroy, 2000).

However, the cognitive school has been vastly criticized. Critiques have been being mounted of the cognitive approach precisely on the grounds that it ignores the social architecture of knowledge exchange within organizations (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003) and completely side-steps the question of how knowledge is created, disseminated, renewed and applied (Cavaleri, 2004; McElroy, 2000). The critiques have led to the emergence of the community school, which believes in the social-process view of knowledge (Hayes and Walsham, 2003). Developing communities of practice has been viewed as a popular approach for knowledge management because they favor situated and context-dependent learning and knowledge creation (Wenger, 2004). Knowledge management objectives in this school emphasize and promote social networks and the cultivation of trust, norms and shared values amongst employees that constitute “communities of practices” (Bresnen *et. al.*, 2003).

With the move toward the view of knowledge as socially constructed in practice, the implication for knowledge management has not been well clarified. Communities of practice are after all just one more identified resource for the knowledge managers to manage. In a practice perspective, the literature has paid attention to the knowledge to be managed, and has ignored the fact that the knowledge managers' practices and knowledge are also socially and contextually rooted in the local contingency. One may take the knowledge managers as the creative agents being at the focal point to examine how they amend and reproduce the stock of practices on which they draw and how they adjust the implementation of knowledge management idea to the local contingencies. Getting at their situated practices is necessary to understand what doing knowledge management really is in reality.

## III. JOHN DEWEY'S PRAGMATISM

John Dewey's pragmatism is an appropriate framework to understand the organizational context, the situated practices of the knowledge managers, as well as the reciprocal relationship between the two.

Based on Dewey's philosophy, the individual's practices are embedded in the transactional relationship between him and his environment. For Dewey the human organism is always already in touch with reality. He denies the separation between the immaterial mind and the material world. But this does not mean that reality simply reveals itself to the organism. He took his point of departure in interactions taking place in nature, where nature is understood as "a moving whole of interacting parts" (Dewey, 2005). For him, reality only reveals itself as a result of the activities – of the "doings" – of the individual (Biesta and Burbules, 2003).

What is distinctive about the transactions between man and the environment is that this is a double relationship:

> *"The organism acts in accordance with its own structure, simple or complex, upon its surroundings. As a consequence the changes produced in the environment react upon the organism and its activities. The living creature undergoes, suffers, the consequences of its own behavior. This close connection between doing and suffering or undergoing forms what we call experience" (Dewey, 1948).*

This transaction is an active, adaptive, and adjustive process in which the individual seeks to maintain a dynamic balance with his ever-changing environment (Biesta and Burbules, 2003). With his capacity of consciousness, man is able to examine the interchange between himself and his environment and gradually learns how to have some control over nature. Each problem encountered leads to a re-examination of experience in order to include within it new material, more inclusive resolution, and new ways of coping with nature. Man learns through experience and his adjustments to regain equilibrium become more satisfactory. However, man can never recapture the original equilibrium (Dewey, 1938).

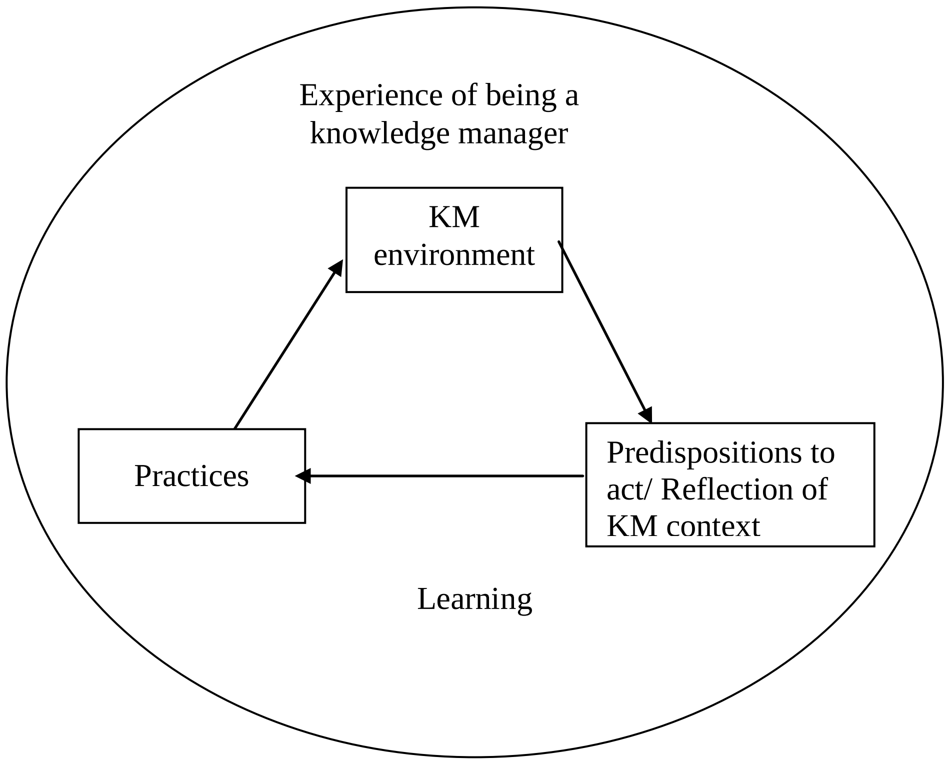
Dewey’s concept of experience helps understand further the individual’s practices. Experience is the very way in which living organisms are connected with reality. The content of our experience includes something had, an undergoing of things which “happen to us”. It also includes responsive “taking”. Experiencing is primarily suffering and enjoyment, the feeling of need and the making of effort, while what is experienced is anything that can occur to anyone. Situation is a chief principle for interpreting an experience. It denotes the entire, pervasive, unique character of all conditions under which and within which an individual organism functions at a given time, including shared routines of behaviour, such as traditions, norms and procedures for thinking, acting and using things.

Experience covers the whole range of human possibilities. Dewey refers to these dimensions as modes of experience. Dewey discusses about a particular type of experiencing called inquiry: the cognitive mode of experience. The transformation of an indeterminate situation into a determinate one is the natural occasion for the process of inquiry and, therefore, for the transition of experience into the cognitive mode. Inquiry represents a progressive determination of a problem and its possible solution, which takes into account the present and the future. At first, they are vague and occur simply as suggestions that spring up, flash upon us, and occur to us. The suggestion becomes an idea when it is examined with reference to its functional fitness and its capacity as a means of resolving the given situation. This examination takes the form of reasoning as a result of which we are able to appraise better than we were at the outset. One of the key ideas of Dewey’s pragmatism is that reality only reveals itself as a result of the activities – of the “doings” – of the organism. Thus, the final test is determined when the individual undertakes actions, so as to institute by means of observations facts not previously observed, and then use to organize them with other facts into a coherent whole.

Continuity is also an important principle for understanding experience. Different situations succeed one another. But because of the principle of continuity something is carried over from the earlier to the later one. As an individual passes from one situation to another, his world, his environment, expands or contracts. What he has learned in terms of knowledge and skill in one situation becomes an instrument of understanding and dealing effectively with the situations which follow. The process goes on as long as life and learning continue. The principle of continuity of experience rests upon the notion of habits, which are not, or only are in specific cases, patterns of action but should be understood as predispositions to act.

Based on Dewey’s conceptual framework, the individual practices can be understood as embedded in the double relationship between the individual and his environment, in which he modifies, create and reproduces his stock of practices in accordance with the specificities of each particular situation. That ongoing transaction operates below the level of consciousness or in a cognitive mode.  This conception of practice can be represented in the diagram below.

Figure 1: Practices seen through a pragmatist lens




## IV. EMPIRICAL INVESTIGATION

The investigation was carried out by relying on the six procedures put forward by van Manen (1990) for interpretive phenomenological research. They include: *turning to a phenomenon of interest* to formulate our research questions, *investigating the experience as it is lived* that guides our data collection process, *reflecting on essential themes* that characterizing the phenomenon and *describing the phenomenon through writing and rewriting*, which pilot our data analysis, *maintaining a strong, oriented stance toward the question* and *balancing the research context by considering parts and whole*, which help ensure the research validity.

Seven knowledge managers of two branches of a multinational were invited to participate in the study. They are Carol, Helen, Mary, Kathy, Christina, Yvon, and Alex. They work in two different branches and the multinational is the leader in the market of construction materials. Following the three-series interview model of Seidman (2006), each of them was interviewed during two sessions of two hours. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions.

The interpretation relied on the respondent's own terms and category systems rather than those of the researchers. The interpretation process performed cross-case thematic analysis to identify the practices of the knowledge managers. Although global themes were identified across interviews, support for each theme was always available in individual transcripts. It was continuously referred back to individual transcripts to ensure that global themes were not rendered in abstract terms removed from respondent experience (Thompson *et. al.*, 1989).

In the analysis, both explicit and implicit themes were revealed. Explicit themes are those themes that were easily identified or the issues that stood out more readily as meaningful or important. They were revealed early in the analysis process. Implicit themes were the meaning behind the words. There is often a "hidden meaning" behind a large volume of text, which emerges when the researcher dialogues with the text and dwells with the data (van Manen, 1990). They are often not obvious on a first reading of the text.

In seeking the themes, this analysis is guided by van Manen (1990) in his suggested process for isolating thematic statements. Van Manen (1990) has advised three methods for isolating thematic statements in analysis. All of them are used in the search for meaning in the data and the development of sub-themes and themes in light of the constructed investigation framework. These methods are the detailed reading approach, the selective or highlighting approach, and the wholistic reading approach. Each approach is applicable in different ways and can be used to solicit different information. Although the analysis starts with the wholistic reading approach, continues with the selective/highlighting one, and finishes with the detailed reading one, the approaches are used in an iterative rather than linear manner, which means there is a back-and-forth movement between them as the analysis proceeds. Reading and re-reading the transcripts of the seven participants, and also re-listening to the recorded conversation were made to allow their thoughts, feelings, and stories to filter through the researcher's mind.

The interpretation process also relied on the interpretation tools proposed by Gadamer (1975), which include the hermeneutic circle of understanding, prejudice, the fusion of horizons, and play. Using the hermeneutic circle as a means of interpreting data means that the smallest statements must be understood in terms of the largest cultural contexts. It refers to a part-to-whole mode of interpretation, which occurs through a series of part-to-whole iterations. First, an individual understanding of each interview is sought, which involves viewing each transcript as a whole and relating separate passages of the transcript to its overall content. After each transcript has been interpreted at the individual level, a new part-to-whole phase begins in which separate interviews are related to each other and common pattern identified. There are also interactive movements between these two phases of interpretive cycles. It happens that the researcher may gain an important insight from an interview text interpreted later in the process and then reconsider previously interpreted texts in light of this newly developed understanding (Thompson, 1997). This is back-and-forth movement continues throughout analysis and interpretations are continuously revised as more of the text is grasped (Thompson *et. al.,* 1990). From the beginning to the end of this process, there is a move backwards and forwards through the data as the researcher reflects on the material, the questions, and the answers, another deeper level of the hermeneutic circle of understanding begins to form.

The fusion of horizons means that our interpretive orientation (i.e. background knowledge, underlying assumption, and questions of interest) enabled us to become attuned to specific characteristics and patterns afforded by the textual data. Conversely, the engagement with the textual data could sensitize us to new questions and precipitate revisions in our initial interpretive standpoint (Thompson, 1997). Our prejudice was the first horizon of understanding. When the early analysis started, our horizon of understanding expanded to fit the experience of the knowledge managers, and then our prejudice was re-examined in the light of what had been found. The later analysis, from pure description to being analytical, involved that whole process at a deeper level.

As far as Gadamer's concept of play is concerned, our perspective in the analysis process was included as we dialogued with the text in the context of the hermeneutic circle. Play was done in a playful spirit, like a person playing with a bat and ball. It occurred through dialoguing with the text and this brought about understanding of a subject under inquiry. The ideas were approached in a playful way, quotes being cut and pasted from different interviews and put together under different themes, to see where they best belong.

## V. RESEARCH FINDINGS

### 1. Responsibilities of the knowledge managers

The knowledge managers' common objective consists of two inter-related aspects: ensuring the availability, adequacy and usability of the company's knowledge sharing database, which is called the Portal, and making the culture of sharing knowledge become an intrinsic part of people's daily work.

Ensuring the availability, adequacy and usability of the knowledge sharing database requires several actions. First, the database has to be constantly nourished with new knowledge document, which may be a good practice, a lesson learned, a new standard and so forth. This requires the KMers to constantly identify the documents that are truly valuable and useful for other people. Second, the database has to be maintained, updated, and if necessary improved to make it more user-friendly. They have to do regular cleaning to remove outdated knowledge pieces and extent the validity of documents that are still usable. They also make improvement in the archive of knowledge pieces when needed, so that people can more easily find the documents.

Making people accept knowledge sharing as part of their working life means different things to different KMers in this research. Some KMers motivate people to consult the posted documents and to make their valuable experience available for others in the database. They make sure people are able to use the database and be aware of its development. They also explain to people how to use the knowledge sharing database, as well as make them understand why they need it. Some other KMers explain to people that sharing knowledge is a way of working, which goes further than just using the sharing database. In their ideal vision, sharing knowledge involves all employees at all levels of the hierarchy.

Depending on the individual KMers, the actual tasks may be different. One may be responsible for maintaining and nourishing the database. One may take care of providing training sessions. One may carry out different activities to promote the knowledge sharing culture. One may do some of each of those activities. It should be noted that not all the KMers in this study devote 100% of their time to the knowledge management mission. They have other duties and can be considered as part-time KMers.

At the first glance, it seems that the knowledge managers are supposed to manage both knowledge (if knowledge is manageable) and people. Their practices can be considered to be associated with both schools of thought in the knowledge management literature. However, a deeper look at their practices reveals that due to the particularity of their local context, in which the knowledge management function has yet gained an accepted place, the KMers have to manage more than just knowledge and people. The following section will discuss about the specificity of the knowledge management function.

## 2. The specificity of the knowledge management function in the multinational

The main specificity of knowledge management is that it is fragile and lacks acceptance. It always has the risk of being eliminated and has not obtained an accepted place, just like a boat on an angry river, which is always endangered by the hazards and the white-water on the river and floats on the river without becoming part of it.

Knowledge management was considered in the past as a highly important issue for the top management of the multinational. It was an important element for the organization's strategic plan (Alex). However, the organization now focuses on issues such as cost reduction or security improvement rather than knowledge management. The strategic objectives tend to transform "from long-term to short-term oriented" (Mary). As knowledge management is a long-term endeavor (Carol), of which the seeds take time to bear fruits (Alex), it is understandable that the strategic objectives no longer include knowledge management. The organization considers that sufficient resources have been invested in knowledge management; it is now time to move to other things (Alex). It is "some kind of rolling cycle that throws knowledge management out of the center of attention" (Alex).

The diminished importance of knowledge management can be seen clearly by the fact that knowledge sharing is now not on any agenda of the management meetings. In the past, the top managers were willing to express openly their appreciation of the subject on the internal media. For the time being, the situation is: "if the managers had that idea on their agenda and to finish their meeting with at least one perspective to be shared, or to be published, or to be followed up, that is an opportunity for us and we could make a lot of progress" (Helen).

When knowledge management was a priority, "it was easier to do the job", because "everyone knew it was a priority and we should do something" (Kathy). It was relatively easy for the KMers to introduce new initiatives and achieve their mission because a top organizational priority is always on the top of people's mind (Helen). Now the "golden age of knowledge management" (Alex) being over, people doubt the necessity of knowledge management. They do not spend time for knowledge sharing activities because knowledge management is not an organizational priority; it is just a side-activity of the organization (Christina).

In this context, the KMers have to mobilize and create different practices in order to accomplish their missions. The next section will present what the KMers truly manage.

## 3. What the knowledge managers truly manage

It is found that in order to take care of the Portal and motivate people to use and contribute to it, the KMers have to focus their efforts on managing their relationship with different actors in the organization.

a. Relationship with the strategic helpers

The KMers have to rely on a network of strategic helpers to carry out their missions. The KMers are not holders of knowledge. They cannot provide the knowledge pieces that are "credible and useful" (Alex). To maintain and update the Portal, Alex and Christina have to rely on the technical experts or community heads, who can "supply knowledge to the sharing database" (Alex, Helen) and "evaluate the pertinence" of each document (Christina). To communicate with plant people about the Portal, they have to rely on the relation directors in the technical centers. The multinational has about 40000 people working in more than 150 plants through out the world. The knowledge managers cannot "do anything" if they work alone (Christina). These directors have direct contact with plant people. As intermediary actors, they can help the knowledge managers to "reach plant people" (Yvon, Kathy) and "cascade down the sharing culture and the utility of the sharing database" (Yvon). They can also help the knowledge managers to collect lessons learned and good practices created by plant people for the databases in the Portal (Mary) and inform plant people of newly posted documents in the Portal (Kathy).

Unfortunately for the KMers, due to the non-strategic position of the knowledge management function, it is difficult to get help from the strategic helpers. They do not even understand exactly what the knowledge managers are responsible for and what knowledge management is (Christina). Due to the non-strategic status of knowledge management, helping the knowledge managers is just a "side activity" of the experts (Christina). They consider the assistance provided to the KMers as extra workload (Yvon) and helping the KMers "move down in their to-do list" (Christina). Alex pictures this situation as:

> We have to collaborate with people, who are not necessarily available. They are not only physically unavailable but also mentally not willing to work with us.

With regard to Alex, they question his credibility because he is just "a young engineer, who has been in the company for only three years" and "has never been to a plant". They do not think "such person is capable of collaborating with the experts, who have been there for 25 years. They do not think he is "able to manage the documents that have been there for 15 years".

Therefore, to get help from them, the KMers have to keep "reminding them all the time" (Helen) by "being in their face", by "emailing them all the time", by conference call on a regular basis (Helen, Carol), by "regular meetings" to review the progress (Christina), so that things will not be forgotten (Alex). Following up is indispensable. Christina observes that if she does not actively follow up with the experts, they will never come and remind her that something has to be done. Put in other way, "nothing will happen". Yvon tries to "attend every expert network meeting", so that he can "remind and convince them of the need to help the knowledge managers". Defining concrete actions and objectives for the experts and then following up is also important to keep the them involved. Christina explains:

> To make things progress, I have to have a concrete action plan with specific deadline, to write a report after each meeting, saying that we have decided to do this and this, and by what date it must be done. Then it has to be me who re-contact them some time before the deadline, remind them that we have planed to see each other again by this date and these things have to be done by that date, and ask what they have been able to do.

Even staying in touch and following up are not easy do to. The KMers must be “Zen” (Carol) and understand that in the multinational things take time to be done (Christina). The knowledge managers have must be able to accept to work with what the strategic helpers are willing to devote to knowledge management. In the words of Christina: “we live with the amount of time the experts are willing to give us”. Depending on each individual expert, they can get a lot of help or almost nothing (Kathy). Christina states:

> It really depends. If you happen to have someone who is interested in knowledge management, he will help you a lot. If it is someone who does not care at all and who is in a decision-making position, the decisions can’t be made and you cannot progress.

b. Relationship with the sponsor

Due to the lack of the acceptance of the knowledge management function, the KMers have to seek sponsors for their activities. The sponsors are people having “strategic roles” in the organization (Carol). They can be the top level managers (branch level, group level), the Business unit directors, members of the Business unit’s executive committee, or managers of strategic functions, which have hierarchical authority on the strategic helpers, such as performance managers.

The role of the sponsors is critical because they are able to make employees believe in the importance of sharing knowledge. Carol states:

> Their role is crucial. It is them, who will tell the employees that knowledge management and knowledge sharing are important. If they don’t, no one will think that KM is important.

More importantly, having the support from the sponsors, the KMers can do their job more easily. The sponsors are able to make the other strategic helpers more committed in helping the KMers. Christina notes that if the sponsors say that “knowledge management is important, put in place what is necessary for the function”, the job of the KMers will be much more facilitated thanks for greater commitment of the strategic helpers. The influencing power of the sponsors can be seen clearly in Carol’s example. When she looks for regional sponsors, she proposes a list of persons, makes it be approved by the branch director, then approaches the people in the list for their accord. In fact, she notes that: “when we tell them that it is the branch director who recommended, no one will answer no“.

The sponsors have a myriad of preoccupations. The KMers make them committed by defining their responsibility for knowledge sharing in a simple way. They define concretes actions and objectives for the sponsors to undertake (Carol). What they expect from the sponsors is "to show their support with the rest of the organization, to make KM visible in the organizational life, and explain to people that sharing knowledge is beneficial" (Carol). They also expect the sponsors to support the activities of the KMers. For example, the sponsors can invite the KMers to present about knowledge management and their objectives at the executive committee's meeting. They can define objectives in terms of sharing knowledge, such as the number of knowledge documents to be contributed, to their subordinates. They can acknowledge on the Intranet or during their meetings people's contributions to give them motivation.

The KMers have to convince the sponsors by aligning the benefits of sharing knowledge with the organization's goals. Christina says that they convince the sponsors by reminding that "knowledge sharing is part of the Principles of actions of the company", so they can "give knowledge management an important role".

Carol notes that the KMers can get support from the sponsors only when they can get something beneficial in return. She states:

> I think that the sponsors will support only successful projects, projects that give them back something. It is true that it's difficult to get sponsorship when we are in trouble, when KM is not seen as valuable for the organization.

That means the KMers has to be able to show real beneficial results of sharing knowledge. It has to equip itself with a "shining example", "un truc un peu quick win" (Alex). It has to make knowledge management become "un sujet qui est en progression, qui a une visibilité, qui pouvait aussi valoriser le sponsor d'être identifié à ce sujet la " (Carol).

c. Relationship with plant people

Plant people consider knowledge management as belonging to an ideal world that is apart from the constraints of their daily life. In the past, there were many problems with the Portal such as multiple passwords, slow speed, and heterogeneous databases. Plant people considered the Portal as user-unfriendly and refused to use it. They do not really care that the Portal exists and that the knowledge managers are there to help them solve the problems and use it effectively. Christina says that "plant people exchange experience and practices without us", they just use their email and telephone. And they tend to keep their perception about the Portal and assume that nothing has changed (Alex).

Kathy, Yvon, and Mary experience the most the lack of interest of plant people because they are in direct contact with plants via their training. They see that plant people use the lack of time as an excuse for not using and contributing to the Portal (Yvon). Mary's training participants often show no "extraordinary interest", they do not see why they should be using the Portal given their many other tasks. Kathy complains that she "prays and prays" but plant people still do not pay attention to what she is trying to tell them. What they say is: "for the last 20 years I did not use the databases, so I will not use them now" (Kathy).

To cope with this hostility, the KMers try to make a place for the knowledge management activities in the working life of plant people. They identify and take advantage of the existing organizational courses of actions and processes, into which they can integrate the knowledge sharing activity. Alex explains that he wants the knowledge management "is no longer a box apart from the chain and become one of the links of the chain".

The organizational events represent an occasion, into which the KMers can integrate their messages about the Portal to plant people. For example, Yvon and Kathy "take every chance" to participate in the plants' network meetings to come and present about knowledge sharing and the sharing database. Kathy and Mary have "succeeded" to make the participation in the training session on the knowledge sharing database an obligation for new employees. Contributing at least one document to the sharing database has become an assignment for them (Alex). The KMers acknowledge that this approach is "the only useful one to ask people to involve", "to push people", "to generate pressure" (Yvon). If knowledge sharing is not part of people's assigned objectives, nothing happens at the end (Yvon).

Besides, the KMers strives for making the Portal useful for the accomplishment of plant people's objectives. "There is no point in seeing knowledge management functioning on its own, promoting knowledge sharing and so on. It has to be related to the strategic imperative" (Helen). That is why Carol always tries to collect new documents for the Portal in accordance with the annual priorities and objectives of the organization.

## VI. DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION

This article has studied the situated practice of the KMers in a multinational to see what they truly manage and their knowledge management approach. It relied on an investigation framework based on Dewey's pragmatism and an interpretive phenomenological methodology. The investigation was carried out with seven KMers working in two branches of a multinational. The data interpretation relied on the respondent's own terms and category systems rather than those of the researchers. It aimed at identifying cross-case themes that represent the KMers' practices.

It is found that the knowledge managers are assigned by the organization to manage supposedly codified knowledge and people (to the extent that they are responsible for motivating and enabling people to use and contribute to that Portal). At the first glance, it seems that the knowledge managers' practices can be associated with both schools of thought in the knowledge management literature. However, a closer look at their practices reveals that knowledge management has not gained legitimacy and acceptance in the organization. In order to manage knowledge and people, the KMers have to first manage their relationship with organizational actors at different levels. The actors, with whom the KMers in this study have to manage their relationship, include: the top level managers, the strategic helpers – the holders of knowledge and legitimate people that can convince others of the benefits of knowledge management, and the people working in the multinational's plants scattered through out the world.  Only when the KM function has become part of the organization's working life and accepted by these people, that the KMers can accomplish their missions.

The implication of these findings is that the move toward the social view of knowledge has not clearly pointed out what doing knowledge management in a socially situated context really is or should really be. This article argues that the KMers are the creative agents being at the focal point in the implementation of knowledge management idea in accordance with the local contingencies. They should receive more significant attention in future research in the domain of knowledge management.

One criticism that may be raised about this research is that as a consequence of the absence of randomness and of the limited number of participants, the results cannot be generalized. In the strictest empirical sense, the first part of the criticism is accurate in that the results only apply strictly to the participants interviewed. However, for Dewey, we have no access to ourselves and the world except through a background. The world is not known directly, but only as it appears through the background's interpretations (Polkinghoime, 2000). Because the background in which we live is implicit and partially hidden, it is not open to complete description; it is, however, available to an increased, though not complete, understanding of how it functions in our lives. Hence, we argue that if the results have illuminated to some significant degree, the "worlds" of the participants, then they are valuable. Moreover, Seidman (2006) suggests that identifying global themes across interviews is a means for improving interpretive vision and capturing figural aspects emerging from a given set of experiences, not a means for attaining some type of convergent validation and offering exhaustive descriptions of the phenomenon. The common patterns of practices of the KMers we have identified may serve as an alternative to generalizability.

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