

Knowledge Conversion by Freelancers in the Field of Cultural and Creative Industries

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Abstract: The importance of knowledge as a company's resource has been a topic that has interested researchers for already a number of years (e.g. Mahr, Lievens and Blazevic 2013; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995; Teece, Pisano and Shuen 1997). As companies realize the relevancy of knowledge as their main source of competitive advantage (Nonaka 1991, 96; Vargo and Lusch 2004, 9) and as we move towards a knowledge-based economy (e.g. Drucker 1990; Foray 2004), we see a shift towards knowledge-intensive activities (Foray 2004, 18). In this context, codification of knowledge becomes an essential part of economic action (Steinmueller 2000, 362) and codified knowledge is seen as a key characteristic of the development of modern economies (Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet 2000, 256). In this modern economies, we find evidence of the importance of the knowledge-intensive field of cultural and creative industries (CCIs), both in public administration (e.g. EC 2010) and in academic research (e.g. Potts and Cunningham 2008). Moreover, although industries operating in this sector have higher human capital than the aggregate economy (Potts and Cunningham 2008, 176), this field is mainly formed by freelancers (Europa Innova 2011, 9) who have been systematically neglected by academic literature (Leighton 2015). Due to the importance of knowledge, there is a need to focus on the routines and processes organizations use to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit it (Zahra and George 2002, 199), but also to keep in mind that the practices followed by freelancers are likely to differ because of their need to compensate their lack of internal processes by relying on external ones (Lichtenthaler 2011, 82). Taking this context into account, this article has the objective to look at knowledge conversion in development processes by freelancers in the field of CCIs. The aim of this article is twofold. Firstly, it aims at providing a plausible explanation on how knowledge conversion occurs between clients and freelancers in development processes. Secondly, due to the special characteristics of CCIs (Potts et al, 2008, 168) and the heterogeneity of freelancers (Rapelli 2012, 7), this article aims at analysing how this knowledge conversion process has differences or similarities with models applicable to larger organizations and/or different fields. In order to address these two aims, this paper relies on a dataset comprising twelve development projects. More specifically, primary data were collected in Spain through semi-structured interviews conducted with seven freelancers in January and February 2016. Alongside, secondary data were used with the aim of triangulation. The analysis of these data exposed a general knowledge transfer process in which freelancers engage with the aim of understanding and codifying client's knowledge. The process starts with the creation of an abstract, general, concept which is then turned into stories, keywords and more concrete concepts that are used as the raw material for the final design. The analysis of the interviews revealed certain patterns related to knowledge conversion with a focus on dialogue between client and designer, and the use of metaphors and boundary objects as means to assure the achievement of shared understanding.

Keywords: knowledge codification, knowledge conversion, knowledge transfer, freelancers, cultural and creative industries

1. Introduction

In the past decades, academia and public administration have increased their interest on the topic of knowledge (e.g. EC-KTI 2011; Grant 1996; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995) and companies have acknowledged its relevancy as their main source of competitive advantage (Nonaka 1991, 96; Vargo and Lusch 2004, 9). Our economy is shifting to what has been called a knowledge-based economy (Drucker 1990) characterized by an unprecedented importance of knowledge, which is created at a never-seen speed, and a decrease in the costs of its acquisition, transmission and codification due to the technological revolution (Foray 2004, x).

In this context, and although the importance of knowledge is known, providing a definition for the term has been a complicated task that has occupied the minds of philosophers since the classical Greek era and has led to many epistemological debates (Alavi and Leidner 2001). Generally, knowledge can be viewed as a "dynamic human process of justifying personal belief toward the *truth*". (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, 58, emphasis added). This justification process leads to certified knowledge (Foray 2004, 4) as knowledge becomes legitimized by undertaking a trial-and-error process in which individuals collect more knowledge about its reliability (Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet 2000, 267). Under this view, knowledge is constantly changing and much of the knowledge existing today is likely to be different tomorrow (Axelson 2008, 53).

As this new knowledge always begins with the individual (Nonaka 1991, 97), this quest for the truth is a solitary adventure (Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet 2000, 275). However, creating this new knowledge is not a simple matter of "processing" objective information (Nonaka 1991, 97). This creation process is highly specific and

personal but the very central role played by individuals makes the formation and the use of knowledge strongly dependent on the organizations and other collective devices they belong to (Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet 2000, 275). However, although organizations are crucial in articulating and amplifying knowledge (Nonaka 1994, 14-15), their success in leveraging it depends on the systems and the processes that enhance the integrative capabilities of the firm (Nambisan 2002, 392).

Despite the crucial role played by organizations in knowledge creation, we have lately witnessed a steady increase in the freelancer population in Europe certainly accentuated by the economic climate in the 2008-2011 period (Rapelli 2012, 14-15). These freelancers, also known as iPros, sole traders or contractors, can be defined as “self-employed knowledge professionals ranging from engineers, consultants, writers and IT specialists through to members of liberal professions such as lawyers and accountants” (Leighton 2015, 81). Although the importance of these freelancers is evident in numerous sectors, accounting for 25% of those working in professional, scientific and technical work (Leighton and Brown 2013, 5), they have often been neglected in academic research (Leighton 2015, 82-83).

As the importance of knowledge grows and as freelancer workforce becomes predominant, we see sectors that rely on them becoming increasingly relevant. In this regard, cultural and creative industries (CCIs) are seen as having increasing economic potential and as being critical gateways to innovation (Kolsteeg 2014, 63). In this field, majority of the workers are freelancers (Europa Innova 2011, 9) and the ability to develop and adopt new knowledge defines the value of the organizations operating in this sector (Potts and Cunningham 2008, 172). These cultural and creative industries are usually grouped together (Kolsteeg 2014, 29) although creative industries are a wider entity and cultural industries a subset (Throsby 2010, 89). Regardless of this distinction, CCIs can be defined as “those industries which have their origin in individual creativity, skill and talent and which have a potential for wealth and job creation through the generation and exploitation of intellectual property” (UK DCMS 2001, 5).

Acknowledging all the above, this article has the aim to provide a conceptualization of how the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge, codification, occurs between clients and freelancers in development processes in CCIs. More specifically, this article deals with the process of knowledge travelling from clients’ needs/wishes to concrete product features. Moreover, the special characteristics of CCIs and the heterogeneity of freelancers (Pott et al, 2008, 168; Rapelli 2012, 7) are taken into account by examining whether their codification processes have differences or similarities with models applicable to larger organizations.

2. Knowledge-based view of the firm and knowledge codification

Somewhat recently, researchers started focusing on the role played by companies in the sharing and transfer of knowledge (e.g. Kogut and Zander 1992; Nonaka 1994). Along with these sharing and transfer activities, organizations create knowledge and consequently get to *know* something (Kogut and Zander 1992, 384, emphasis in original). At the very centre of this creation process we find the codification, or externalization of knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, 66), which has become a very essential part of economic action (Steinmueller 2000, 362).

The knowledge codification process has its origin in the distinction suggested by Polanyi (1966) between *tacit* knowledge, as context-specific personal knowledge which is hard to formalize and communicate, and *explicit* or “codified” knowledge, as knowledge that is transmittable in formal, systematic language. This process of codification consists in the articulation of tacit into explicit knowledge and it is at the very heart of knowledge creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, 64).

Although the importance of knowledge codification for organizations is known, some authors (e.g. Foray 2004, 77; Grant 1996, 116) have warned about the substantial knowledge loss caused by this activity. Tacit knowledge has a personal quality (Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet 2000, 271; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995, viii) and codification depersonalizes it (Foray 2004, 77). This depersonalization “does not leave enough room for ambiguity and interpretation, and it creates inertia in the production of knowledge” (Ancori, Bureth and Cohendet 2000, 273). Moreover, due to its characteristics, tacit knowledge is difficult to replicate and can become a key differentiator and important strategic resource. Its codification makes its replication easier for rival organizations. (Conner and Prahalad 1996) Regardless of this loss, codification opens new opportunities for modelling and representing knowledge and therefore has an influence in rapid knowledge production and accumulation (Foray 2004, 79).

In this codification process, as already discussed, organizations play a critical role in amplifying and developing new knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995 15). Concerning customer knowledge, organizations play a critical role in the articulation of customers’ needs by interacting with them (Lester and Piore 2004, 76) but internalizing this externally generated knowledge cannot rely on spontaneous actions of people, but requires explicit practices of knowledge management (Foray 2004, 212). Therefore, there is need to focus on the formal practices organizations use to acquire, assimilate, transform, and exploit knowledge (Zahra and George 2002, 199).

3. Methodology

3.1 Data collection

In order to investigate the aforementioned problem, a qualitative study was conducted. Qualitative data were used due to the exploratory nature of the research and the special characteristics of the phenomena under study, for which existing theories might not have adequately captured its complexity (Creswell 2013, 47-48). More specifically, this paper relies on primary data of twelve projects in the field of graphic design collected through interviews during January/February 2016. Secondary data were also collected for triangulation purposes. A description of the projects can be found in table 1.

Table 1: Interviewees and projects

Interviewee	Project	Description
Interviewee one	Corporate Image (CI) A	CI for a yoga instructor.
Interviewee one	CI B	CI for a yoga academy.
Interviewee two	Wine labels A	Wine labels for a family-owned vineyard.
Interviewee two	Wine labels B	Wine labels for a large vineyard.
Interviewee three	CI C	CI for a luxurious restaurant.
Interviewee three	CI D	CI for a clinic offering a wide range of services.
Interviewee four	CI E	CI for a major event.
Interviewee four	Illustration A	Illustrations for three books targeted to five-year-old children
Interviewee five	CI F	CI for a digital marketing agency
Interviewee five	CI G	CI for a photographer.
Interviewee six	Album Cover A	Album cover and booklet
Interviewee seven	Phone App A	Illustration for the “walkthrough” of a phone application.

The selection of the informants exploited the special characteristics of graphic design projects in which the designer is forced to listen to the client and use his knowledge into the final product. As one interviewee put it, “it is a totally personalized design”. The sampling process was undertaken in two stages by following a snowball strategy and started by identifying cases of interest from people who knew information rich cases (Creswell 2013, 158). Firstly, personal contacts of the researcher in the field were contacted and asked for others professionals in the sector with whom the researcher had not had any previous contact. As recommended by Strauss and Corbin (1990), these cases were analysed to ensure a certain level of homogeneity that could contribute to building the necessary codes for the analysis.

Secondly, these professionals were contacted and asked whether they would be willing to participate in the research. The individuals who agreed on participating were contacted again and interviews dates were set. These informants received information regarding the nature of the research and were asked to think about two completed projects in advance. This study, therefore, was conducted retrospectively and the interviewees were advised to select those projects they remembered more clearly.

Data were collected through semi-structured interviews and an interview guide was prepared in advance to ensure the compatibility of the answers. Due to the diversity of the projects, the interviews were conducted in a manner that ensured that specific relevant topics were covered for every project. These interviews lasted from forty-five to ninety minutes, were recorded and transcribed verbatim. In order to ensure confidentiality, the names of the designers and clients have been omitted in this paper.

3.2 Data analysis

The data analysis was conducted in three steps as suggested by Strauss and Corbin (1990) but theoretical codes were established in advanced due to the researcher *theoretical sensitivity* (Glasser 1978). These codes emerged from the literature and the researcher’s work experience, and included codes related to the importance of trust

and dialogue or the use of boundary objects. QSR NVivo was used to ensure easy access to data, a rigorous (but not rigid) dialogue between theory and data by which codes could emerge, and a convenient process for analysing, managing, shaping and analysing them (Creswell 2013, 204; Sinkovics and Alfodi 2012, 828).

The first step of the analysis involved an open coding process in which the data coming from the interviews were fragmented (Voss, Tsiriktsis and Frohlich 2002, 212). This stage aimed at discovering categories and identification of new concepts (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri 2008, 704) that were added to the previously developed theoretical codes. As suggested by Voss, Tsiriktsis and Frohlich (2002, 212), individual observations and sentences were given names and then regrouped into sub-categories. As new codes arose and as the complexities of the phenomena emerged after the first interviews, the focus slightly changed to concentrate on the relevant issues (Sinkovics and Alfodi 2012; Stake 1981). Codes that emerged in this phase related to the need to find a project and client match or the role of the client and the designer's expertise.

After the open coding, a second step regarding axial coding was performed. In this stage, the previously developed codes were applied to the empirical data (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri 2008, 704). In the last stage, selective coding, core categories were selected and related to other categories (Voss, Tsiriktsis and Frohlich 2002, 212). These categories were integrated and refined to build theories, concepts were established and statements made (Sinkovics, Penz and Ghauri 2008, 704), to generate a plausible conceptualization of the process of knowledge codification used by the interviewed freelancers

4. Discussion

4.1 Knowledge transfer

The analysis of the data reveals a process followed by freelancers in their pursuit of knowledge transfer with the clients. As one can see from Figure 1, the freelancers' activities can be captured in a process that starts with the creation of an understanding of the history and characteristics of the project/organization, the use of references, and the acquisition of knowledge about commercial objectives. This material is then used to generate a highly abstract concept that is further deconstructed into smaller entities, stories, and keywords that form the creativity concept. This creativity concept is the main influencer of the final design. This process was portrayed by interviewee one when she stated that: *"when I start a project, I like to make a group of images, associated words, concepts and metaphors. I like making it visual and then lay it out for the client. The idea is that the concept transmits. After this, I keep going around the concept, looking for keywords and metaphors that will influence the typography and the realization"*.

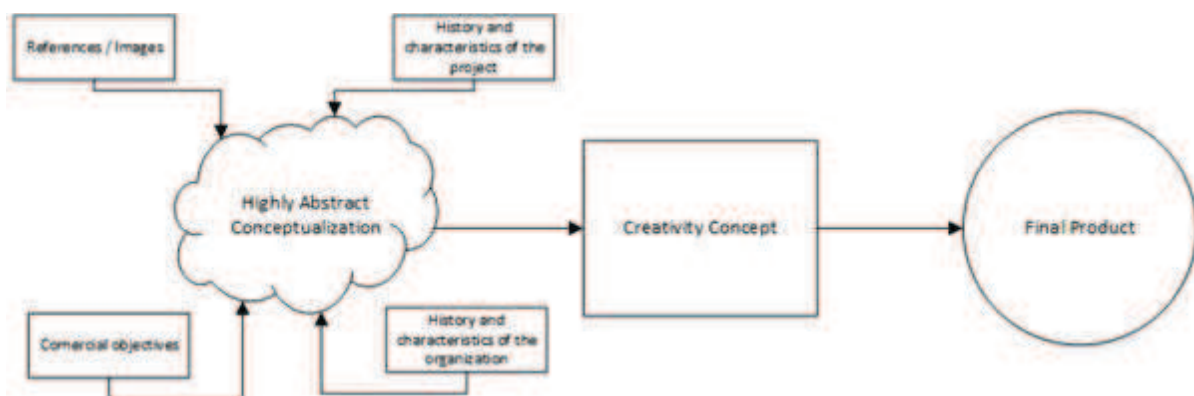


Figure 1: A conceptualized model of knowledge transfer.

As an example of how this process is implemented in practice, interviewee four presented the process behind the development of a CI for a digital marketing agency. The initial concept was developed based on *"the client enthusiasm with sting punk as a dystopia of a baroque futuristic world"* and *"the concept of emotion applied to technology"*. The interviewee highlighted how digital agencies were lacking emotions in their projects at the time and how this reality mingled with the client's passion for sting punk. This combination made them think of the Wizard of Oz's tin man, *"a romantic machine one does not seem to understand completely because it is a man in the form of a suit of armour. One does not really know what's inside, but it works. The only thing missing is the heart; it is deprived of emotions"*. These inputs made the informant design a logo in which a heart was the main element and in which emotions, and the client's passion for sting punk, were present.

The process portrayed in Figure 1 seems to be quite in line with Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995, 64-65) views regarding knowledge creation in larger enterprises. In their view, concepts are deduced from slogans developed by top-management, make explicit through the use of metaphors and then conceptualized in end-products. In order to get a better grasp on the process of codification, the article concentrates now on this matter.

4.2 Knowledge codification

The analysis of the data, and as has been highlighted previously in the literature (e.g. Hedlund 1994; Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), showed the crucial role of dialogue in the codification process. For example, interviewee one talked about *"insisting on personal contact, talk a lot so things emerge"* whereas interviewee three mentioned that *"we met up a number of times and discuss about sport, his activities... with no hurry, until we had a scope and an agreement on where to go to"*. The process of knowledge codification and its influencers is portrayed in Figure 2.

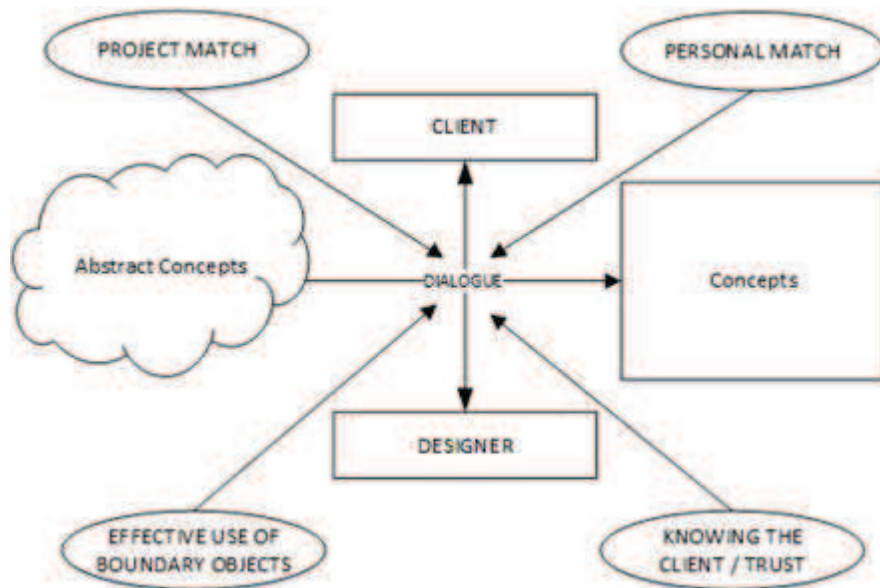


Figure 2: Knowledge codification and its influencers.

Based on the data, we see that the willingness of the designer to engage in the dialogue is influenced by a variety of reasons including the distinction between projects that bring only money and those projects closer to the designer's passions. This "project match" was expressed by interviewee three as *"always when there is a personal interest, the project works more naturally and it is easier for the designer. In this case, because it is about health and sport, and it is something I like to do a lot, I was interested and it is something I was able to understand more quickly and make questions with more insight"*. Moreover, this passion influences the willingness to use time in the dialogue as highlighted by interviewee six: *"if you believe the project is going to be more fun, perhaps you do not mind using more time for it compared to other projects, because you know the time used is going to be more pleasant and the results are going to be more enriching"*.

Knowing the client in every aspect, professionally and personally alike, and a need for a "personal match", including a relatively similar sense-making process, were also highlighted as main influencers of knowledge codification. Not having this match inhibits the understanding of the needs themselves and affects the possibilities for success. As interviewee three put it: *"there is a need to see that you fit together. Both services and client wise. (...) If this "feeling" is not present, the project will not be successful"*. Although this feeling is inherently related to the client and designer themselves, and the project at hand, it seems to be influenced by the capacity of the designer to build trust with the client throughout the process of dialogue. Again interviewee three stated that *"there is a need to communicate trust in what you do and make it clear that you believe in the client's business. The best way to do so is to make the questions you really understand and pursue understanding over the whole client's business"*. Similar processual views were portrayed by interviewee two when talking about trust as being, *"in the end, a relationship you work from the beginning till the end of the project. If you start well, and you manage the steps, probably the project will end up well"*.

Overall, the codification stage can be viewed as an ongoing process of moving an object from its current state to a required end (outcome) state (Carlile 2002). Boundary objects, as defined by Carlille (2002) or Star (1989), were used to achieve a shared understanding. These boundary objects, as objects that are shared and shareable across different problem solving contexts (Star 1989), are the means by which knowledge is transferred. They have the capacity to provide an infrastructure process where current and more novel forms of knowledge can be *jointly* transformed, producing more shared knowledge (Carlile 2002, 453, emphasis added). The use of these boundary objects, such as sketches or visual metaphors, was mentioned by every interviewee as a tool to “*try to get to a territory in which we both felt at ease*” or to “*sell a big idea and then work on polishing the need*”. In other words, as stated by interviewee one, “*through images everything is way easier*”.

5. Conclusions

As we can see from the analysis above, the knowledge transfer process followed by the interviewed freelancers does not differ greatly from the ones applied by larger enterprises. However, it was highlighted in the interviews that asking for advice from external actors is a common practice among freelancers. Every project analysed was completed with a certain level of external help as emphasized by interviewee one as “*I always ask for opinion*”, interviewee two “*I always try to consult*” or interviewee five, “*I always consult*”. In this regard, the use of external help seems to be a way to substitute the critical role played by organizations in articulating and amplifying knowledge (Nonaka 1994, 14-15).

The use of boundary objects in the dialogue process was emphasized as the main tool used to achieve an understanding of the clients’ needs and wants. Knowing the client and the positive effect of trust were also highlighted as important in successful knowledge codification but other aspects such as the necessity to find a match between the client and the designer himself (similar sense-making processes, preferences of communication, etc.) and the nature of the project, seemed to have an even more critical role.

Regarding the article’s managerial implications, as highlighted by Voss, Tsiriktsis and Frohlich (2002, 195), being free from the rigidity of questionnaires and models, case research can deliver results that can be highly valuable for practitioners, the ultimate users of research. This research is not an exception and findings regarding the necessity to find a match in personal and project levels are directly applicable. The stressed importance of trust and the use of boundary objects in the dialogue process also serve as a reminder to managers leading projects in which knowledge codification and shared understanding are needed.

Overall, this exploratory conference paper sets the ground for future research on the process of knowledge transfer and codification between freelancers and clients in the field of CCIs. Due to its exploratory nature, the opportunities for further research are extensive. Firstly, the cases were selected with the objective of achieving a certain level of homogeneity to ensure the analysis of such diverse range of projects was possible. This strategy made the development of an initial theory possible but, as recommended by Creswell (2013, 155), a second step asks for the selection of a more heterogeneous sample of individuals. Moreover, these data were collected exclusively in Spain and culture and other locational aspects might have an influence on the ways this process is handled. Therefore, more diverse data from individuals from different cultures and backgrounds could be used to test and extent the initially developed theory presented in this paper.

Secondly, this paper focuses in the conversion process from tacit to explicit without paying enough attention to the processes of knowledge acquisition and knowledge application (e.g. Zahra and George 2002). Moreover, it does not consider the other types of conversion used in knowledge creation: socialization, externalization and combination (Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). A more detailed investigation of these activities is needed to achieve a holistic view of the process of knowledge transfer between freelancers and clients.

Lastly, this paper relies entirely on completed projects for which data were collected retrospectively. Although the process of knowledge transfer, and the routines in which freelancers engage, were present in one way or another in every development process, a study following cases in real-time and in a more longitudinal manner will likely be of interest for theory development and testing purposes.

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