

SATISFACTION WITH PROJECT LEARNING AND TRANSFER: AN EXPLORATION THE ROLE OF INTELLECTUAL AND SOCIAL CAPITAL

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ABSTRACT

Projects are increasingly being recognized as important sites for the creation and accumulation of knowledge and learning in organizations ([Ayas & Zeniuk 2001](#); [Hansen 1999](#)). While different in duration, task and other characteristics, one constant among projects is the diversity of skills and knowledge sets that different project team members bring to the team experience. These diverse knowledge sets are critical for the knowledge creation processes in which the team is engaged; however, team diversity can be potentially problematic with respect to the knowledge transfer process. Therefore, firms are faced with a paradox in that skills that are necessary for one learning activity may impede another.

In this paper we explore this paradox by looking at the main and moderating effects of intellectual and social capital on project member's satisfaction with the learning process. Our findings indicate that both forms of capital are necessary for effective project-based learning.

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INTRODUCTION

Projects are increasingly being recognized as important sites for the creation and accumulation of knowledge and learning in organizations ([Ayas & Zeniuk 2001](#); [Hansen 1999](#)). While different in duration, task and other characteristics, one constant is the diversity of skills and knowledge sets that different project team members bring to the team experience. While different knowledge sets are clearly beneficial to the team process in that they facilitate the creation of new and unique organizational knowledge, they are also problematic as they can hinder effective knowledge transfers among team members and across teams to other projects (Ayas & Zeniuk, 2001).

This raises an interesting paradox for managers in project-based firms. Given that knowledge is crucial with respect to creating new products and services as well as exploiting existing learning (March, 1991), and that both the process of knowledge creation and the processes of knowledge transfer are important in the context of project-based work, it is essential that firms effectively manage their knowledge resources. However, the ad-hoc, temporary and discontinuous nature of project-based work poses significant problems for firms in terms of accumulating knowledge and learning from projects ([Bryman et al. 1987](#)). So, while there may be a significant amount of learning within a project, this can be difficult to capture and share across projects (i.e., from one project to another) (Prusak, 1997) or between the project and the wider organization (Prencipe & Tell, 2002).

In this paper we adopt a resource-based perspective, but instead of following convention and looking at resources at the level of the firm, we adopt a more micro perspective and examine resources at the project-level. Specifically, we are interested in the intellectual and social capital that team members bring to their respective project teams, and how those resources facilitate or impede the process of knowledge creation and knowledge transfer. Previous research has suggested that intellectual capital has an important role in knowledge creation efforts (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998) and that the ability to *integrate* knowledge across an increasingly distributed array of professional groups and organizations is critical for knowledge creation (Powell et al, 1996). Similarly, studies of projects and learning have found that social capital is essential for

the transfer of organizational knowledge (Szulanski, 1996; Newell, *et al*, 2003). However given the paradoxical nature of knowledge within team settings, we argue that while intellectual and social capital are both necessary component of project-based learning; neither is sufficient. We posit that both of these are critical to creating effective learning and transfer within organizations.

THEORY/ISSUES

Intellectual Capital and Project Learning

Fundamentally, the successful completion of a project, whether this is the design of a new product or the implementation of a new IT system, depends on selecting project team members with appropriate knowledge, skills and expertise (Schneider & Northcraft, 1999; Teram, 1999). This variety of skill sets on the project team constitutes the intellectual capital of the team – the ‘knowledge and knowing capability of the collectivity’ (Nahapiet & Ghoshal, 1998; 245). The intellectual capital of the team is important in that project team members must be able to absorb and use information that will be relevant to achieving the goals of the project (Cohen & Levinthal, 1990). More specifically, project efficiency is likely to be enhanced if team members can learn from past experience and then share this learning within the project team and then later with others across the broader organization. In doing so, team members are not only bringing new knowledge into and subsequently taking it out of the project, but they are also working with team members to create new knowledge. Given the importance of intellectual capital to the learning process, we hypothesize that:

H1: Satisfaction with the learning process is significantly related to the intellectual capital of the project team members.

Specifically,

H1a: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning into the project is negatively related to the intellectual capital of the project team members.

H1b: Satisfaction with the process of creating new knowledge within the project is positively related to the intellectual capital of the project team members.

H1c: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning out of the project is negatively related to the intellectual capital of the project team members.

Social Capital and Project Learning

Whether the project is involved in the development of a new drug or a new Information Technology system, there is the need to integrate a broad base of knowledge. However, it is unlikely that project team members will have all the relevant knowledge and expertise necessary to successfully complete the project goals. This is due in part to communication and other resource constraints that enable only a relatively small number of individuals to be directly involved in the project (Grant, 1996). Therefore, to gain additional knowledge that is not held within the project team itself, project team members will need to network with a range of other individuals. Becker (2001) refers to this as the strategy of substituting knowledge with access to knowledge. In doing this team members are drawing upon their collective social capital.

Social capital is “the goodwill available to individuals or groups. Its source lies in the structure and content of the actor’s social relations, and its effects flow from the information, influence, and solidarity that it makes available to the actor” (Adler & Kwon, 2002, p.23). Although the concept of social capital is widely used, Adler and Kwon (2002) highlight one central distinction in the way the concept is defined. They draw a distinction between social capital that is ‘bridging’ – or reaching out beyond the boundaries of the project team, from social capital which is ‘bonding’ – forming cohesive links within the project team boundaries.

While Alder and Kwon (2002) argue against the bridging and bonding distinction suggesting that it has the potential to bifurcate social capital research, we find that in the context of project teams, the distinction is useful. This is due to the embedded nature of project teams. Project teams use internal bonding within the boundaries of the project to collaborate and create knowledge. External bridging however is used as team members seek out or are provided with knowledge and information from others outside the boundaries of the project team.

Bonding Social Capital. Bonding social capital refers to the quality of the collective relations within a defined group, which in this case is a project team (Coleman, 1988). A high level of bonding social capital ensures that there will be an internal cohesiveness that will allow the group to pursue their shared goals. Where a team is more cohesive they are more likely to share with each other any information that they receive, to learn effectively together, and also share be more willing to share this learning with others across the organization. So, we can hypothesize:

H2: Satisfaction with the learning process is significantly related to the bonding social capital of the project team members.

Specifically,

H2a: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning into the project is negatively related to bonding social capital of the project team.

H2b: Satisfaction with the process of creating new knowledge within the project is positively related to bonding social capital of the project team.

H2c: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning out of the project is negatively related to the bonding social capital of the project team members.

Bridging Social Capital. While bonding social capital is internally focused, in contrast, bridging social capital focuses externally. With bridging social capital, social capital is a resource inherent in the social network that can be appropriated by a focal actor, based on relations with others in the network (Burt, 1997). Individuals who provide a 'bridge' across divided communities are important, since they play a brokerage role. For example, Burt (1997) identifies how there are structural holes within any given network – individuals and groups who are relatively disconnected from each other. He suggests that people who bridge across these holes are particularly important to ensure that individuals and groups are not isolated from the larger network. In relation to bridging, where team members are more effective at bridging with others outside the project team, there will be greater satisfaction with the transfer of learning into the project, greater satisfaction with learning within the project since they are more likely to have access to relevant external knowledge, and greater satisfaction with transfer of learning out from the project. Thus, we can hypothesize:

H3: Satisfaction with the learning process is significantly related to the bridging social capital of the project team members.

Specifically,

H3a: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning into the project is positively related to bridging social capital of the project team.

H3b: Satisfaction with the process of creating new knowledge within the team is negatively related to bridging social capital of the project team.

H3c: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning out of the project is positively related to the bridging social capital of the project team members.

Intellectual Capital, Social Capital and Project Learning

While intellectual capital, and bridging and bonding social capital all play unique roles in the process of knowledge creation and transfer, individually, neither of these resources is enough to ensure that the process of project learning is successful. Successful project learning involves both the creation and the movement of knowledge. Instead, we suggest that it takes both of these forms of capital, working in conjunction to achieve successful project-based learning. Therefore, we hypothesize:

H4: Satisfaction with the learning process is significantly related to both the intellectual and social capital of the project team members.

Specifically,

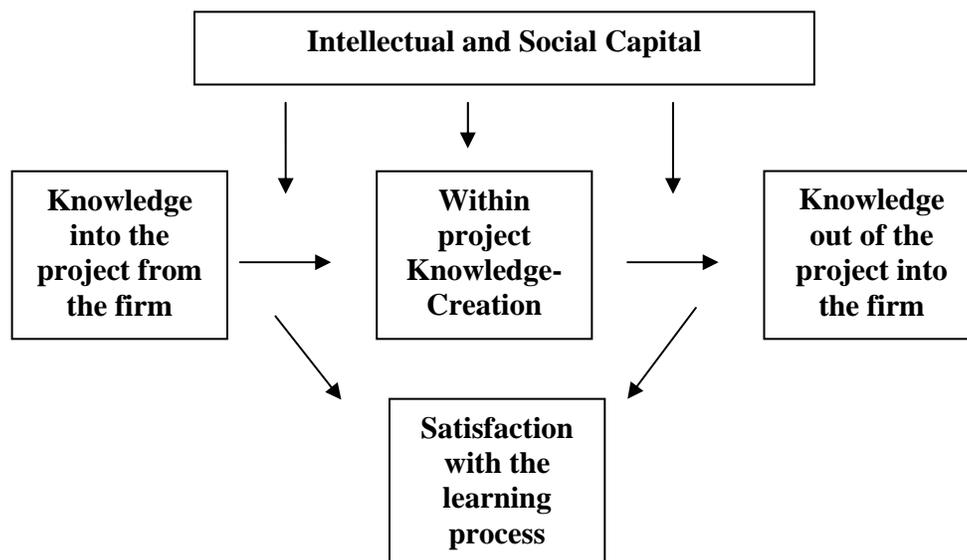
H4a Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning into the project is moderated by the intellectual and social capital of the project team members.

H4b: Satisfaction with the process of creating new knowledge within the team is moderated by the intellectual and social capital of the project team members.

H4c: Satisfaction with the process of transferring learning out of the project is moderated by the intellectual and social capital of the project team members.

FIGURE 1

Model of the Effects of Intellectual and Social Capital on Project-Learning Processes



METHODS/PROCEDURES

Sample Selection and Data Collection

To better understand the project learning process, we conducted a study of two diverse project-based firms, in two different industrial sectors in the United Kingdom. While both firms used projects to conduct the majority of their operations, one firm is a large recently privatized utility while the other firm is a mid-sized construction firm. We chose these two firms because these industrial sectors are critical within the UK economy and because they both had projects of similar duration and were at similar phases in the project life-cycle (Leonard-Barton, 1990).

We used a questionnaire to collect our data. Before disseminating the questionnaire, we extensively pre-tested it both with practitioners in the two industries under investigation as well as with a number of academics. In the case of the utility company, we used a web-based questionnaire distribution system, sending out 400 questionnaires and receiving back 145 usable responses (response rate of 36.3%). In the construction company, we were unable to use a web-based system due to a lack of computers at construction sites. Therefore we used the more traditional mail survey mailing 224 and receiving back 87 usable responses (response rate of 38.8%). In each case we used the Dilman (1978; 2000) multiple contact methodology. To ensure the homogeneity of the sample, we ran t-tests on a number of critical parameters. All of the t-tests were not significant so we combined the two samples giving us an overall n of 232 and an overall response rate of 37%.

Measures

For the independent variables intellectual capital and bonding and bridging social capital, we used composite measures which were developed based on the literature. We tested for reliability in all of our scales, and then we summed the individual questions to create a composite variable. In all cases, the independent variables we measured using a seven point Likert scale with a defined neutral point.

Intellectual Capital: To measure intellectual capital, we followed Nahapiet and Ghoshal (1998) who define intellectual capital as the knowledge and knowing capability of the collective (245). We looked at the project member's technical ability, team working skills and whether they possessed the necessary information needed to complete the project.

Factor scores for this variable were .77 and above with a corresponding Cronbach's alpha of .72.

Bonding social capital: In developing our measure of bonding social capital, we drew on Coleman (1988) whose definition of social capital emphasizes the collective relations within a defined group. Specifically, we examined the willingness of the project team members to share knowledge with one another, the extent to which they regularly provided each other with information, the extent to which they knew what others on the team were doing, and the extent to which they knew who to approach in the project for information. Factor scores for this variable were at the .67 level and above with a corresponding Cronbach's alpha of .63

Bridging social capital: To develop our measure of bridging social capital, we drew on Burt's (1992), definition of social capital which is as resource inherent in a social network that can be appropriated by an individual based on the relations with others in the network. We measured bridging social capital by examining the relationship between the focal projects team members and other members of the organization. Specifically, we looked at the willingness of members across projects to share knowledge, the willingness of members across projects to provide updates and information, the readiness of different project teams to help one another and the knowledge of whom to contact on another team for information. Factor scores for this variable were .68 and above with a Cronbach's alpha of .72.

Satisfaction with the learning process. To measure our dependent variable satisfaction with the learning process, we used single item measures. Specifically, we asked whether project members were 1) satisfied with the transfer of learning from other projects into this project, 2) satisfied with the learning within the project, and then 3) satisfied with the transfer of learning from this project to other projects. Since each of the dependent variables is a single item measure, no alpha values can be calculated.

In addition to our focal variables, we included two control variables in our model. We added the level of previous project experience and the similarity of the focal project to previous projects to the model because previous literature as well as field work that preceded this inquiry suggested that these variables were critical to the success of project learning and knowledge transfer.

RESULTS

To test our hypotheses, we used multiple linear regressions. To test hypothesis

one which examined the effects of intellectual capital on the satisfaction with the learning process, we found that each of the three overall models were significant at the $p < .001$ level. For the individual variables, we found that intellectual capital was significant with respect to knowledge transferred into the project, (H1a; $p < .05$), as well as with respect to the learning created within the project (H1b; $p < .05$), but that it was not significant with respect to knowledge that was transferred out of the project (H1c). Therefore we have partial support for hypothesis 1.

For hypotheses 2 we tested the relationship between bonding social capital and the satisfaction with the learning process. Again, we found that the each of the three overall models for all three dependent variables was significant at the $p < .001$ level. For the individual variables, we found that bonding social capital was not significant with respect to knowledge transferred into the project, (H2a) but that it was highly significant with respect to learning created within the project (H2b; $p < .001$), and significant with respect to knowledge that was transferred out of the project (H2c; $p < .05$). Therefore we have partial support for hypothesis 2.

For hypotheses 3 we tested the relationship between bridging social capital and the satisfaction with the learning process. Again, we found that each of the three overall models were significant at the $p < .001$ level. For the individual variables, we found that bridging social capital was not significant with respect to knowledge transferred into the project, (H3a), nor was it significant with respect to learning created within the project (H3b) but that it was significant with respect to knowledge that was transferred out of the project (H3c; $p < .05$). Therefore, we have limited support for hypothesis 3.

For hypothesis four we tested the moderating effects of intellectual and social capital on satisfaction with the learning process. Again, we found that each of the three overall models were significant at the $p < .000$ level. However, for the individual moderating variable we found that no significance between the moderating variable with respect to knowledge transferred into the project, (H4a), nor was it significant with respect to learning created within the project (H4b) or with knowledge that was transferred out of the project (H4c). Therefore, we have no support for hypothesis 4.

Table one presents the results of the regression analysis.

Table One: Regression Analysis

Dependent Variable→	Satisfaction with knowledge transfer to project	Satisfaction with the knowledge created within the project	Satisfaction with knowledge transfer from the project
Independent Variables			
Intellectual Capital	.003*	.004**	.106
Social Capital - Bonding	.089	.000***	.040*
Social Capital - Bridging	.075	.174	.004**
Intellectual Capital and Social Capital	.589	.235	.294
Control Variables			
Previous Experience	.399	.015*	.101
Similarity of Project	.061	.152	.899
Model Statistics			
Model Significance	.000***	.000***	.000***
R ²	.172	.257	.152
N	215	214	215

p<.05; ** p<.01;***p<.001

CONCLUSIONS

In this paper we tested the role of intellectual capital and bridging and bonding social capital as they relate to the level of satisfaction with project learning and cross-project knowledge transfer. We found that there was support for our contention that intellectual capital was positively and significantly linked to the creation of project learning; that social capital bonding was positively and significantly related to the creation project learning. However, with social capital bridging we found that it was positively and significantly related to outward knowledge transfer but was not significantly related to inward knowledge transfer. In addition, we found intellectual capital was related to inward knowledge transfer and that bonding social capital was significantly related to outward knowledge transfer. We also did not find any inverse relationships, as we had predicted. This leads us to our four principal findings.

The role of intellectual capital in project learning and transfer. Our findings suggest that

intellectual capital plays an important role in the project learning process. Intellectual capital is clearly a vital component of the process of bringing knowledge into the project as well as creating knowledge within the project boundaries. This finding resonates with the research on teams which argues that team composition and in particular cross-functional teams are important in breaking down boundaries among functional areas as well as in creating new and novel solutions to existing organizational problems (Powell et al, 1996). In addition, our own fieldwork that accompanied this research suggests that when organizations are looking to change an existing process, then it is vital to organize a project team in which the members have multiple perspectives on that issue. While the process of knowledge creation within the boundaries of the project may be slower when there are multiple sets of knowledge represented, solutions are typically better conceived and tend to be better accepted within the wider organization.

While we expected that intellectual capital would be essential to the knowledge creation process within the boundaries of the team, we did not expect that it would be an important component of the transfer process. However, we can speculate that the process of bringing knowledge into the team is similar to the process of overall team organization, and hence intellectual capital would be a necessary component.

The role of bonding social capital in project learning and transfer. While intellectual capital is clearly important in the process of bringing knowledge into the project and creating new knowledge, bonding social capital reflects the importance of a strong cohesive team to the knowledge creation process. The significance of bonding social capital in the knowledge creation process illustrates that a strong cohesive team with strong linkages among team members is essential when project members are asked to embark down the path of new knowledge creation. This suggests that organizations should encourage the formation of close team bonds for effective knowledge generation.

Again, as with intellectual capital, while we expected that bonding social capital would be essential the knowledge we did not expect that it would play an important in the movement of knowledge out, beyond the boundaries of the team. This is an interesting finding, which is more difficult to explain. Perhaps if team members are involved in a positive and rewarding team experience, in which they feel that they have successfully created a new or important set of knowledge, then they are eager to share that experience with colleagues that are in other parts of the organization.

The role of bridging social capital in project learning and transfer. Interestingly, while both bonding and bridging social capital were related to knowledge transfer out of the

project, neither was related to knowledge transfer into the project. Bridging social capital in particular addresses the need for “*know who*” when disseminating knowledge outside of the project into the wider organization. Our study suggests that one critical component of team composition is knowledge of others in the organization outside of the project’s boundaries. This finding is consistent with the field work that was conducted in conjunction with this study. In a business process reengineering project that involved creating new knowledge and disseminating that knowledge across the wider organization, the knowledge creation process was relatively successful on the local level. However, given the project team members’ lack of wider contacts in the greater organization, the new knowledge was not successfully disseminated to other groups that were enacting similar processes (Newell *et al*, 2003). This suggests that if disseminating newly created knowledge into the wider organization is a mandate of the project team, then no matter how good the solution is that is created, it takes people who have those strong bridging ties to move knowledge beyond the local situation. However, there is a caveat here, since both the quantitative data and the qualitative data suggested that while bridges were important for transferring knowledge out of a project, this supply of knowledge was relatively useless since there was no corresponding demand. Thus, for example, the quantitative data presented here demonstrate that while social capital bridges were important for transferring knowledge out of the project they were not important in transferring knowledge into the project.

Moderating effects of intellectual and social capital and the paradox of project learning. Finally, we looked at the interaction effects between intellectual and social capital. We did this because we contend that it takes both intellectual and social capital, working together to be successful with respect to project learning. However, while we find that overall, both of these resources are necessary, when we looked at the individual models, we had no findings. This leads us to believe that project learning is contradictory in that the skills that make for successful learning in one part of the process (i.e., bring new knowledge into the project), and very different from the skills that are needed in other areas (i.e., moving new knowledge out of the project into other areas of the organization). This suggests that project learning is a highly complex process and that teams need to be extremely careful when they select team members as a plethora of different skill-sets are necessary for successful project learning.

In conclusion, our findings have a number of important implications for our understanding of resources as well as for managers. With respect to resources, this

study underscores the importance of intellectual and social capital on the knowledge creation and transfer process. This suggests that it is people who matter with respect to project learning, both individually in terms of what they know, and collectively in terms of who they know. While the importance of the individual in the learning process has been emphasized in the conceptual literature, our study adds the important dimension of empirical verification.

For manager, this study challenges managers to think carefully about the composition of the project team not only in terms of who has the requisite *know what* (intellectual capital) but also, how those project team members are likely to interact (bonding social capital) and then with whom in the wider organization are each of the team members connected (bridging social capital). Our study suggests that it takes all three of these areas working together to facilitate project learning and cross-project knowledge transfer. Moreover, the findings suggest that managers need to encourage project team members to use their social capital bridges not only to transfer knowledge out of the project but also to seek out relevant knowledge to bring into the project. The one-way transfer of knowledge from but not into the project indicates a major gap in cross-project knowledge transfer processes, and may be indicative of a larger problem in that individuals within organizations may not know what knowledge resides in their firm and hence do not attempt to look beyond the boundaries of their project.

With respect to future research, our findings suggest that additional work needs to be done in the area of projects and learning. For example, this study does not take into consideration the organizational context in which learning is created. Different organizational contexts could assist or hinder the knowledge creation process. In addition this research does not look at the level of specifically of knowledge transferred or created. It seems likely that if knowledge is highly specific to a particular project, then it will be less likely to be transferred outside of the boundaries of that endeavour. Future research in these areas would help to answer such questions.

How projects create and then disseminate learning is an increasingly important question. Our study makes a small but significant contribution by looking at knowledge creation and dissemination mechanisms. We address the paradox of project learning by suggesting that while both intellectual and social capital are necessary component of the learning process, neither alone is sufficient. However, we find that intellectual capital and social capital play very different roles in the knowledge creation and transfer process. We conclude by suggesting that more research that looks at the project as the

focal unit of analysis is needed given the importance of projects in present-day organizations.

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