Knowledge Centers in Globally Acting Development Organizations: Towards a Design Blueprint

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Abstract

Globally dispersed teams engaged in development cooperation are often of the same nationality and operate within the same cultural background. The challenge for such teams is to align their process knowledge with specific less developed countries’ cultural and political contexts. By means of a single case study, we were able to ascertain a strong demand for knowledge delivery and the possible benefits of synergetic opportunities. However, the knowledge processes, instruments, and tools at the disposal of globally dispersed teams are insufficient to meet their demands and promote optimal knowledge sharing. Consequently, we propose the implementation of a knowledge center (KC). As a service unit for knowledge management initiatives, such a center could support knowledge-sharing processes by considering a specific team’s situational conditions. We present a blueprint for designing such a KC in an international development context.

1. Introduction

Teams in organizations engaged in the development cooperation sector are globally dispersed. While the specialized knowledge needed for development projects is generally similar all over the world, it has to be adapted to the political, cultural, and economic conditions of specific less developed countries [35]. Contrary to the cultural diversity in these countries, the employees of development cooperation organizations mostly originate from the same cultural background, are equally skilled and trained, and work towards the same objectives, which are derived from a political agendas.

As the need for knowledge-based services is high in development projects, optimizing the transfer of knowledge between on-site employees and those abroad, as well as to the headquarters is one of development cooperation organizations’ main objectives [15]. This optimization has to take the knowledge demand’s specificity into consideration.

The objective of this research is to identify knowledge transfer problems in the development branch’s globally dispersed teams. In addition, the consequences of these problems for the knowledge processes’ design and implementation need to be ascertained. Finally, we present a possible solution: a blueprint for designing a knowledge center (KC), which addresses the identified problems.

Our paper is structured as follows: The next section describes development cooperation’s theoretical foundations and the required knowledge management terms and concepts. Thereafter, it identifies the relevant services required for knowledge transfer, and defines a framework for a potential knowledge service unit. This framework is based on processes that support the transfer of knowledge. In the subsequent section, we outline the applied research methodology and describe the research process. Section 4 comprises the study’s results. We subsequently introduce a design blueprint for a KC. This blueprint is aimed at supporting the transfer of knowledge in globally dispersed teams. The last section summarizes the results and outlines the limitations of this research as well as opportunities for further research.

2. Foundations

We undertook a case study with a German development cooperation organization; the following requirements and conditions therefore reflect this branch’s special needs. In addition, we briefly introduce the concepts of knowledge management that are required, thus building the foundation for the subsequent discussion of service units providing knowledge transfer services.

2.1. Development cooperation

Development cooperation organizations are usually non-profit-making ones. Thereby, they do not depend on the conditions that apply to open competition. Since
development cooperation organizations are closely related to countries or international organizations’ political agendas, their operational and organizational structure can be compared to those of public bodies. Consequently, there are important implications to be considered. First, their political interests are of great importance, i.e. their strategic objectives must be planned in the long term. Their political interests may, in fact, be more important than their financial ones. Second, these organizations have two principals: the donor and the bodies in the less developed countries. Knowledge should therefore be prepared to justify investors’ interests. In addition, this knowledge should be documented so that it is application oriented and placeable in less developed countries.

German development cooperation is organized by the Federal Ministry of Economic Cooperation and Development (BMZ). The BMZ and the governments of less developed countries determine country-related concepts. Subsequently, these concepts are recorded in contracts. These contracts include the concrete objective targets, roadmaps, as well as the mode and amount of sponsorship. The BMZ entrusts executing organizations with the implementation of the contracts and controls the results. In turn, the executing organizations cooperate with local project-executing organizations designated by the less developed countries’ governments [9]. The organizational bodies are subdivided into financial, personnel, and technical organizations that support bilateral, European, and multilateral cooperation efforts [9].

Most executing organizations are funded by public money. While their headquarters are mainly located in Germany, the majority of executing organizations’ employees work abroad. One of the executing organizations’ main objectives is to combine development cooperation with capacity development. Consequently, project teams are often supplemented with local employees, whose skills are crucial for the project work. Therefore, knowledge has to be transferred between different organizations as well as between employees with different cultural backgrounds.

Lately, the market conditions for development cooperation organizations have changed. Third-party funds business has become more important and competition between donor organizations is increasing due to the professionalization of the services and improved networking [12], [13].

In the light of the various aspects of development cooperation, there is a great need for knowledge and its transfer between different entities [10], [11], [40]. Development cooperation organizations work in a value chain requiring the transfer of knowledge to improve services and to ensure the quality of service provision. Furthermore, international collaboration calls for coordination [18]. Nevertheless, networking and cooperative work is also required by others [6]. While the scope of the knowledge within these organizations is broad due to the numerous topics covered, the experts on a specific topic are often in different countries. Consequently, networking is one of the most important tasks in respect of transferring knowledge between employees. Consequently, development cooperation organizations’ headquarters need to create and maintain a framework that ensures the successful transfer of knowledge.

Compared to other organizations with strategies for managing their knowledge, development cooperation organizations are more dependent on a constant exchange of knowledge. Hence, a variety of tools and instruments, such as lessons learned, project debriefings, and practice sharing is used to ensure the sustainability of knowledge [6], [18]. More importantly, a strategy for managing knowledge transfer is especially useful for these organizations.

2.2. Selected knowledge management foundations

Knowledge management (KM) has received considerable attention since the early 1990s. Many organizations pursue initiatives to systematically manage knowledge with the goal of achieving organizational benefits. According to von Krogh [41], KM refers to identifying and leveraging the collective knowledge in an organization to help the organization compete. More specifically, organizations apply KM practices aimed at process and organizational outcomes, such as enhancing the quality of products or services (e.g., early recognition and correction of mistakes), reducing costs (e.g., avoidance of work duplication or redundancy), or enhancing time saving (e.g., faster availability of required information or key personnel) [2].

Jennex and Olfman define KM systems (KMS) as IS designed to manage organizational knowledge [21]. According to Alavi and Leidner [3], KMS are IT-based systems developed to support or enhance knowledge creation, storage/retrieval, transfer, and application processes. KM researchers commonly distinguish between two basic KMS models: the repository model and the network model [1], [43]. According to Hansen et al. [17], the repository model is the IT-based equivalent of the codification approach to KM, while the network model corresponds to the personalization approach to KM. The codification approach’s main objective is to implement an electronic knowledge repository that codifies, stores, disseminates, and
allows the reuse of knowledge [16], [23]. Thus, the goal is to provide employees with reusable codified knowledge, i.e. with knowledge enshrined in information, such as in electronic documents. Typical IT-based systems for such KMS are enterprise document/content management systems, wikis, terminology management systems, and search engines. In addition, the personalization approach supports the linking of employees so that they can share and exchange knowledge by, for example, facilitating employees’ communication and collaboration [17]. Amongst others, weblogs, social networks, and collaboration software such as electronic discussion forums, virtual team rooms, and instant messaging/awareness are typical KMS examples of such support systems.

2.3. Knowledge services and processes

Knowledge Centers (KCs), which consolidate various knowledge transfer processes, were frequently discussed when the KM discipline first started developing [24], [25], [30], [36]. In addition, a few case studies were undertaken that involved KCs [32], [38]. We assume that the concept was not developed any further due to a lacking holistic understanding and implementation of KM and an appropriate IT infrastructure [28], [39].

Various organizational measures, such as intranets, communities, and expert directories, were separately developed further, since the KM discipline split into IT-focused and human-resource-focused approaches [17]. Since holistic approaches, like the integrated KM concept [34], have recently become more prevalent, science and practice have made efforts to integrate the different services to transfer knowledge into one organizational unit.

Recent research has defined knowledge service units that support knowledge transfer processes [22]. In accordance with a KM strategy, which is derived from the corporate strategy, a KC can operate as a service unit for KM initiatives. Although many corporate KM organizations mainly structure knowledge transfer processes conceptually, a KC can operatively maintain these processes. Consequently, the implementation of a KC depends on the management board’s commitment, as a KC is a resource-intensive expansion of a KM organization. Since the scientific discussion of KCs is comparatively new, the general concept is briefly introduced in the following, and a design blueprint is presented later in this paper.

Figure 1. Overview of the integrated KMS architecture [34]

The integrated KMS architecture presented next was developed by Riempp [34] and will serve as a reference framework for the development of the design blueprint (for other frameworks cf. for example [7], [27], and [43]). The architecture was chosen because: (1) it addresses both the technological as well as the social dimension of KM; (2) it links KM and KMS to business processes.

The architecture consists of three layers (strategy, process, and system) and four pillars (content, collaboration, competence, and orientation). Finally, all the above-mentioned elements are influenced by organizational culture (see figure 1).

The strategy layer is composed of the business strategy, the KM goals and strategy, as well as the measurement system. In the latter, metrics are defined to monitor the progress of the KM initiatives [37]. The process layer encompasses business and support processes. KM processes constitute support processes executed by employees with KM roles. KM roles bundle specific KM activities undertaken by individuals and/or groups, for example, localizing and collecting, exchanging, using, and (further) developing knowledge. The system layer describes the KMS, which is accessed through a portal and composed of the following four functional pillars: (1) Content – relates to the management of content, its context, and the information objects in which it is contained. (2) Competence – addresses all aspects related to the competencies of individuals and groups within the organization. (3) Collaboration – supports individuals and groups who use content and apply their competencies to identify exchange and create knowledge. (4) Orientation – provides the search, navigation, and administration functions required by the other pillars.
The resources required for a KC depend on the maintained tasks. The following tasks are specifically found [22]:

- Searches in databases/catalogues
- Research services
- Proactive information

Database-related search offers access to internally or externally hosted information through an intranet or Internet tool. Information can be stored, processed, and shared by a document management system [7]. Knowledge should be stored as information in documents, or as contact opportunities for experts or networks. Research services are more personal. Employees can contact the KC via phone, email, or contact forms to address requests related to certain knowledge domains. Such research services can be subdivided into to the type of knowledge, volume, or topic required. Depending on the researchers’ expertise and skills, inquiries can be answered by the KC or by the organizations’ unit that is in charge. In the latter case, the KC acts as a hub for inquiries. Since knowledge is collected in the KC, new knowledge can emerge by combining it [31]. Since the resulting knowledge may be relevant for the development cooperation business, the KC proactively supplies it to the relevant contact people. If KCs are regarded as a service unit for KM initiatives, they can also maintain additional tasks that support the knowledge transfer processes within an organization or between organizations.

The findings in current research show that KCs’ tasks scope depends on different influencing parameters, such as the strategic coordination between KM organization and KCs, the homogeneity or heterogeneity of the distributed products, and the cultural circumstances [22].

It is easier to codify and transfer knowledge for organizations that distribute homogeneous products, like consulting services for specific technologies, since the knowledge about such products is more standardized. Thus, searching databases as well as standardized research services are realistic processes. The maintenance of heterogeneous products demands a more personalized knowledge transfer. This type of transfer is more specific, less inclined to be codified, and thus more bound to individuals [17]. Both KM organizations and KCs are concerned with establishing and supporting personal contacts. Accordingly, such KCs use community support and personalized research services. Searching databases can be a complementary method.

Ultimately, several basic conditions have to be considered when implementing KCs; these conditions also need to be adjusted to individual needs. Both KM and management support play decisive roles in the process.

3. Research methodology

In this paper, we provide an analysis of the knowledge processes within development cooperation organizations. We chose the development cooperation branch because its international collaboration problems are highly relevant to business in this branch and therefore need to be identified and efficiently supported. Furthermore, development cooperation organizations compete less against one another than, for example, with private consulting firms. Consequently, they are more open to external evaluation, which their donors also demand. We undertook an explorative single case study to identify the precise problems encountered by their knowledge transfer. We therefore conducted ten interviews with one organization’s employees in different hierarchical positions and in thematically diverse roles. These employees play important roles in the core consulting processes. Furthermore, in keeping with their function, the interviewees were classified as either suppliers or consumers of knowledge.

An explorative design was chosen, as there is very little knowledge of the derivation and occurrence of problems in development cooperation organizations, resulting in a suboptimal dispersion of knowledge within such organizations. Case studies can capture rich detail [42], and enable researchers to carry out an in-depth study of artifacts in a business environment [19]. The case study approach was chosen, as case research is useful when a phenomenon is complex and broad, when the current body of knowledge is not sufficient to permit the formulation of causal questions, when a holistic, in-depth investigation is required, and it is impossible to study a phenomenon outside the context in which it occurs [4], [5], [14]. These conditions are thought to apply to the study of knowledge transfer processes. Moreover, the purpose traditionally pursued by case studies is the generation of theories for later testing [26], which is in line with our research aim.

The interviews are based on a semi-structured guideline that we developed. This is subdivided into the following sections: questions about the knowledge demand (types of knowledge, existing supply processes, and instruments) and the relevance of the knowledge transfer processes as previously defined (which a KC can maintain). A final open question elicits information on the need for, the options regarding, and the boundaries to optimizing knowledge transfer processes. The interviews were mainly
conducted telephonically, as most of the interviewees worked abroad (e.g., in Vietnam, Brazil, Nigeria, and Pakistan). On average, the interviews lasted 40 minutes and were conducted by two interviewers. Subsequently, we transcribed them fully. Furthermore, the interview results were discussed with the organization’s chief knowledge officer (CKO), who was able to interpret the validity of the results.

The interviews were complemented by a review of internal reports on the organization’s KM measures and a literature review of similar projects in the development cooperation branch. The criteria for the review were: the kind of knowledge required, the demand for and supply of knowledge, and the relevance of the identified processes. Since the research is explorative by nature, it was possible to identify additional criteria for the review. After the results of the explorative study had been reviewed, they were discussed with the organization’s CKO and members of the KM initiative. Finally, we made recommendations regarding the knowledge processes’ improvement.

The research design aims at identifying the problems that occur in globally acting development organizations’ knowledge transfer processes, and at designing a KC blueprint to solve these problems.

4. Results

The results of our research provide profound insights into the structures of a development cooperation organization’s knowledge transfer, as well as cues for the potential to optimize this. Globally dispersed teams specifically require high quality knowledge transfer. The deployed and business-relevant knowledge is not only heterogeneous due to the differences between the cultural and political constraints and the hierarchical functionalities, but also in respect of the types of knowledge.

Specialized knowledge is the main resource for these organizations’ daily work, which already varies strongly. Since these organizations are small, this knowledge cannot be generated internally. They therefore depend on knowledge distributed by the scientific community. The interviewees often complained that the internal and external information is too extensive. Thus, one of the interviewees’ main requests is for consolidated knowledge in the form of, for example, desk reviews:

“No one can read through a 50-pages study within office hours. I need a half-page executive summary with a contact address.” (Interviewee 1)

Furthermore, the middle and upper management required aggregated knowledge about projects and their strategic objectives, as well as about their organization’s local placement. In practice, this knowledge is extracted from employees’ experience. The organization’s political needs make an internal perception essential. Similarly, there were requests for an overview of other donors’ activities in less developed countries that also considered the implications for the own organization.

Several interviewees also maintained that all knowledge could be found given sufficient time and effort:

“To be honest, I never required crucial information that I could not retrieve.” (Interviewee 6)

The interviewees differed in their evaluation of knowledge transfer processes’ relevance as described in the introduction of this paper. The process of web-based search is considered highly relevant. Either the interviewees themselves or assigned trainees compiled knowledge by using databases or the Internet. However, the quality of the organization’s internal search engine was consistently criticized:

“I think the DMS is quite catastrophic. It is helpful if you know exactly what you are looking for and if you roughly know where to find it. Generally, the ‘Google function’ within the DMS does not yield satisfactory results.” (Interviewee 7)

Thus, it is very difficult to locate knowledge that is assumed to exist within an organization. The implementation of a new version of the search engine was imminent at the time of the interview. According to the project manager in charge, the first internal tests indicated significant improvements in the search quality.

In principle, research services were also considered relevant:

“They are highly relevant for all work steps and topics.”

(Interviewee 2)

“Very relevant at the beginning of the project.”

(Interviewee 3)

However, according to the interviewees, the quality of the existing offerings needs to improve.

“It would be more relevant if it were custom-tailored. I [currently] hardly ever make use of it.”

(Interviewee 4)

On the one hand, due to the age of the various external consultants who answer inquiries, they are either unable or unwilling to adapt to new requirements. On the other hand, the existing structures are not used, because the consumers find them cost and time-consuming. Further reasons for their neglect are the lack of transparency and the employees’ knowledge of the structures. The interviewees very often

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1 We translated the original quotes from German. The interviews’ transcripts are available on request.
postulated: the improvement of their existing networks was
improvement of their knowledge networks, specifically use personal connections. The
experienced employees, who have well-connected
importance of personal knowledge exchange. The more
codification. All the interviewees emphasized the
heterogeneous, it is not easily transferable by means of
alternative sources to research services:

One should rather strengthen personal links than
build new structures.” (Interviewee 1)

Nevertheless, the necessity of improving non-
personalized knowledge services did become apparent.
On the one hand, these organizations have a very high
employee turnover of approx. 25 percent. This means
that, in particular, new employees have problems at the
beginning, because they do not yet have the
appropriate linkages, although they need to become
acquainted with new topics quickly. On the other hand,
the organizations are so decentrally organized that
employees who deal with the same topic often do not
contact one another personally. Furthermore, the
transfer of codified knowledge enables more
employees to access it, allowing synergies, and
avoiding work duplication:

“We have a very strong expert culture and intense
exchanges take place in the corridors. The problem is
the decentralized organization. For this reason alone,
it is essential that there should be other mechanisms
for exchange.” (Interviewee 8)

The codified and communicated KM strategy within
an organization considers the importance of informal
personal networks, but also tries to strengthen the
codified exchange of knowledge.

Young employees especially expressed an interest
in organizational units that offer research services. A
central service unit already offers services of a limited
complexity, but is seldom used:

“This service is not very well known within the
organization – I think, if it were better known, we
would have problems with the budget and with the
number of inquiries.” (Interviewee 8)

In addition, there are services that offer topic-
related knowledge. However, due to limited demand
and supply resources, these services often remain
unused. An interviewee pointed out that due to the
diversity of the knowledge offered by service
providers, there is a need to distinguish between them:

“One has to consider that there are different kinds
of knowledge centers. Their differentiation has to be
authorized and their individual mandates defined.”
(Interviewee 9)

A knowledge service unit’s additional process of
providing information proactively was deprecatingly
assessed:

“Whatever is offered, I do not need a proactive
supply [of knowledge]. I have an overflowing mailbox
with senseless newsletters from a great many
departments, in which people report what they are
doing and what they have recently invented.”
(Interviewee 1)

The interviewees were thus concerned about an
information overload if information were to be to proactively supplied by service units. Such units’
ability to provide sufficient qualitative knowledge on
certain topics was especially critically evaluated. The
relevance of personal contacts to obtain pertinent
information was once more emphasized:

“This is happening informally – between persons
and between institutions.” (Interviewee 2)

The implementation and maintenance of knowledge
communities and the transfer of their knowledge were
ascertained as additional relevant processes for the
transfer of knowledge. The existing communities are
well established, but partially fail to codify and
exchange their knowledge derived from experiences.

A literature review of similar and contrary measures
in the development cooperation branch shows the
opportunities and limits of inter-organizational
knowledge exchange (see, e.g., [8], [20]). National and
international organizations maintain and provide
information via databases. This information can be
relevant to enlarge the internal database. Furthermore,
KM instruments are increasingly common within the
development cooperation branch. This offers scope for
better collaboration, but also intensifies the
competition between knowledge-based organizations.

The studied organization’s CKO estimates the
willingness to collaborate within the branch as
fluctuating. While collaboration is fairly easy on a
functional level, strategic cooperation is more difficult
with regard to contents and strategic objectives.
Furthermore, the organization’s KM structures differ
for historical reasons.

Consequently, in the globally dispersed
environment in which development cooperation
organizations operate, there is a special need for
knowledge transfer. The problems have been identified
and processes described which could optimize the
transfer of knowledge.
5. KCs for globally dispersed teams

The problems of and potential processes for knowledge transfer in globally dispersed teams were identified in the previous sections. The next step of our research was to identify potential process owners who could conduct the knowledge transfer processes. These process owners are responsible for the maintenance of knowledge transfer. The business unit in charge of KM processes is usually the organization’s KM initiative, which – in case of the examined and other organizations – lacks resources. By conducting a benchmarking study of professional services firms on the dimensions of KM, as determined by Riempp [33], we found that KM initiatives often suffer from a lack of capacity. Consequently, we propose that an organization’s KM initiative should be the primary structure of a framework for knowledge transfer processes, while people who or units that are not part of the KM initiative should maintain these processes.

Based on the previously presented results and on the interviews with the organization’s CKO, we developed a blueprint for designing KCs for globally dispersed teams. This blueprint is based on Riempp’s model of integrated KM [34]. However, a KM strategy is a prerequisite for the blueprint, as there has to be an organizational coordination of the knowledge processes. Figure 2 illustrates the most important elements of the KC’s blueprint (see next page).

The KC consists of the three dimensions strategy, processes, and systems, as well as of the surrounding culture. The KC is considered a part of the KM strategy, which follows the business strategy. Achieving the strategic and KM objectives depends on critical success factors, which are operationalized and made measurable through KPIs and target values [34]. Consequently, the KC’s objectives have to be aligned with the KM strategy.

On the next level, the KC processes support the organization’s business and support processes. In the decentralized environment, both external and internal suppliers deliver the required input. KM instruments, such as lessons learned or practice sharing by either the KC or other business units, collect this input. The business and support processes’ tasks initiate KC processes, which produce a KC service. These services can be the web-based self-search in databases/catalogues, research services, and proactive information. These processes are similar to the knowledge transfer processes identified in section 2.3 and can thus be considered specific occurrences of KM processes. We identified more potential processes, which can be added as extended KC services. Examples of such services are the creation and maintenance of contacts and networks, as well as the support of learning and innovation, which can include supplying teaching and learning formats, as well as the briefing and training of consultants. The KC processes consist of tasks conducted by employees with specific KC roles and contribute to the realization of the KM objectives.

The results of the processes are either internal or external offerings, or both. A KC can therefore be a service unit for internal knowledge markets as well as for other organizations.

On the third level, systems in terms of applications, information bases, and IT infrastructure support the execution of the processes within the KC. These KC-specific systems need interfaces to other existing information systems to enable the exchange and integration of information gathered by the suppliers. The information has to be structured according to a taxonomy used within the organization. This allows the model’s various pillars, which underlie the different levels, to be structured and integrated.

These functional pillars are divided into four categories, which form the KM processes’ background. The content pillar describes knowledge artifacts, such as documents or media files, which can be structured into different kinds of knowledge. In our case study, cumulative knowledge about countries and projects played an important role. The next pillar describes the collaboration between employees, networks, or communities, all of which change knowledge in keeping with their specific competences. One of the additional tasks of a KC can be the creation and maintenance of networks and communities. By means of expert files or yellow pages, competence forming – the next pillar – can be part of a KC. This will not only allow a KC’s employees to provide information, but also to provide people and networks with contacts. In addition, the KC itself can build up certain expertise, for example, in the form of search competence or topic-related know-how. The orientation pillar contains functions, like search, navigation, and administration, which all the other pillars require. The search function mainly supports the technical side of queries, while navigation supports the orientation within the internal content.
The surrounding culture dimension is essential for a KC’s design and scope. Culture can either be considered self-created and influenceable, or given and non-influenceable [29]. According to Schein’s three-level model [37], culture consists of basic assumptions regarding ambience. On the second level, collective values that represent the way things should be influence the employee’s behavior. On the level representing the surface, there are visible behavioral patterns and other physical artifacts. The culture is important in respect of employees’ willingness to transfer knowledge, therefore influencing the KC’s possible processes. Consequently, the KC or the responsible KM initiative has to take cultural elements in the form of critical success factors into consideration.

A KC’s underlying structural organization is strongly linked to the KM organization. While KM mainly organizes the general framework for knowledge exchange, the KC maintains several of the above-mentioned knowledge transfer processes. Within the organization, roles like those of researchers are required by the KC as well as by KM (knowledge officers, etc.).

The case study reveals that some of a KC’s elements are already present, while others still have to be implemented. For example, the organizational structures are already in place, but need to become more consistent and aligned with the KM strategy. The results show that there is a need for some of the basic processes as well as for additional ones. The surrounding culture level seems to be very important, as most of the interviewees emphasized personal contacts and networks. Consequently, the collaboration pillar carries great weight.

The potential benefit of creating a KC is improved knowledge transfers, which could be measured by means of response times and the quality of research services. Furthermore, communities’ relevant figures and results could increase due to a better KC-supported network. The system-based monitoring and analysis of the communities’ networking activities could retrieve metadata on the strength of relationships and the nature of expertise. In addition, could be possible to identify more KC potentials on a higher level of data manipulation and abstraction. For example, a “Google-like” search engine could extract metadata from search index data to deduce salient topics, related topics, and persistence of topics. Another example is to develop credibility indexes based on reviewers’ ratings of contributions (cf. Amazon’s product ratings).

On the whole, employees in multinational and decentralized teams could be better supplied with appropriate knowledge or contacts. This would enable the employees to improve their work quality. The integration of decentralized employees could also help to reduce temporary knowledge gaps due to the high employee turnover.

6. Conclusions, limitations, and further research

This paper achieved its goal in that it successfully identified knowledge transfer problems in globally
dispersed development organizations and presented a possible solution. By conducting interviews and by discussing the results in a project-internal setting, the demand for specific knowledge, as well as the relevance of specific knowledge transfer processes was evaluated within the examined organizations. Since KM initiatives alone cannot close the gap in knowledge demand or supply sufficient information, for example, through instruments like lessons learned or knowledge maps, we propose the implementation of a service unit. Consequently, the discussion on KCs was renewed. Early concepts were readopted and a scientific foundation was presented in the form of a drafted blueprint, which refers to Riempp’s integrated KM model [34].

The KC is outlined as a KM initiative’s service unit. Therefore, the KM and KC strategies and processes have to be aligned. The final decision on which processes a KC should provide, depends on the general organizational conditions and the available resources. As the discussion concerning KCs is not new, this research is a first approach to create a design blueprint, which can be regarded as an extension of KM initiatives.

In practice, especially in globally dispersed teams like those within the development cooperation branch, KC services can amalgamate the demand for and supply of knowledge as identified by a KM initiative. Therefore, a KC can be the contact point for inquiries and can be a multiplier of emerging knowledge.

This study has certain limitations, which should be addressed in future research. Since there is very little empirical work on KCs, the concept has to be differentiated from other organizational service units, such as research centers or help desks that offer knowledge transfer processes. Furthermore, the relevance of the organizational characteristics and the KM organization has to be further researched to identify possible capabilities and modifications. In addition, the blueprint for designing KCs has to be validated and possibly modified by research into other organizations of the same and other branches.

7. References


