

**Critical issues of knowledge transfer in the event network. The case of the
“Universal Forum of Cultures”**

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INTRODUCTION

Events represent strategic moments to ensure an urban and economic development of most destinations (Chhabra *et al.*, 2003; Hodur *et al.*, 2006; Getz, 2008, 2012). The existing literature on event management mainly tends to measure the success of events in terms of their positive socio-economic, cultural, civic and urban impact on the territory through the direct or indirect benefits for the local community, sponsors, all the actors involved, and the territory in general (Baker and Crompton, 2000; Dwyer *et al.*, 2006; Preuss, 2007; Glynn, 2008; Getz, 1989, 1991, 2012).

Research on events is rapidly reaching its maturity with the emergence of several sub-fields, including analysis of mega-events, festivals, business and sport events, and so forth (Getz, 2008). Despite this increasing interest, much attention is still devoted toward the problem of conceptualization of different events and identification of a shared taxonomy (Getz, 2008), so that the understanding on what factors influence event success is still weak.

Some scholars argue that the creation and transfer of knowledge among actors, specific to different contexts and specialized in several activities, represents a significant challenge in the event management (Jamal and Getz, 1995; Getz, 2012). Especially for more important and large scale events, the knowledge transfer becomes crucial in order to support the coordination among the actors involved, allowing to make successful events and to maximize their long-term benefits for the host country tourism. Although the recognized relevance of this issue, very little research on knowledge transfer within event management still exists (Singh and Hu, 2008; Beesley and Chalip, 2011).

The knowledge transfer can be defined as a process where several actors systematically exchange information and skills (Wang *et al.*, 2004). The relevance of this topic in the event management might be explained mainly considering two reasons: the temporary nature of most event organizations and the involvement in the process of numerous and variegated actors. Firstly, many event organizations exist for limited time only and their creation is motivated by the event that must be accomplished. Indeed, for most event organizers, conceptualized as temporary organizations, the task concerning events consists in an activity to perform only once in limited time horizons (Lundin and Soderholm, 1995). Because of their inherently temporary nature (Davies and Brady, 2000), these organizations are not able to provide the required specialized knowledge and specific skills on their own, but they have to import knowledge and any information from the past and from other external organizations, e.g. from previous or other event experiences (Müller and Stewart, 2014;

Grabher and Thiel, in press). Thus, individual learning becomes critical in this knowledge and skills transfer process and operate as a bridge from the past to the future temporary event organizations (Lundin and Soderholm, 1995; Packendorff, 1995).

Secondly, the event management process implies the participation of numerous and variegated actors from public and private sectors and, especially in the case of mega events, from different countries. Knowledge transfer doesn't occur automatically, because of a series of resistances justified by a high degree of differentiation among the actors, based on different technical specialties, which hinder the dialogue and make the knowledge circulation more complex and difficult (Grandori, 1999). The degree of differentiation increases when actors from different countries are involved.

The purpose of this research is to study the knowledge transfer issues in the event management, moving from the analysis of the Universal Forum of Cultures. Our decision to focus on this type of event derives from the acknowledgement that the "Universal Forum of Cultures" is a "new event format that emphasizes intellectual debate supported by arts expressions" (Garcia, 2004, p. 105), that is characterized by a significant level of complexity that may create relevant challenges to its organizers. More specifically the level of complexity depends on its size, as testified by the myriads of public and private actors involved at different levels, on its temporal extension that can exceed the 130 days, and its spatial extension, with the inclusion of multiple settings and locations for each hosting city. Furthermore, the Universal Forum of Cultures – initially held in Barcelona in 2004 and already at its fifth edition to be held in Amman (Jordan) in 2016 – presents another distinctiveness that consists of being organized in the different cities with the presence of an international foundation – the Forum Foundation of Barcelona (FFB) – which ensures the transfer of best practices among all the different actors involved in the management of the local editions. The FFB keeps the property of the Forum format and its brand and oversees all the local organizers to ensure that the original mission, goals, and overall quality standards of the Forum are respected. This makes the forum as an exemplary case of complex planned events to analyze in order to identify the critical issues of knowledge transfer.

Through in-depth interviews conducted with the organizers of the local Forum Foundation working for the fourth edition held in Naples in 2013, we describe which kinds of knowledge flows are relevant, the organizational actors with a key role in knowledge transfer and sharing, and the main resistances faced to knowledge transfer. Furthermore, as a result of our observation, we also seek to analyze and propose some governance mechanisms that can

ensure a correct functioning of planned events, supporting knowledge transfer among the actors.

DIMENSIONS OF KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN THE EVENT MANAGEMENT

Wang and colleagues (2004) describe knowledge transfer as a process where several actors systematically exchange information and skills. Drawing from this definition, we conceive the knowledge transfer in the event management as a process in which the involved actors actively interact and share their expertise, competences and information about the event to plan and manage. We propose two relevant dimensions of knowledge transfer in the event management: temporal and spatial.

The temporal dimension refers to the knowledge transfer process in time, on the basis of actors' past experiences, which create knowledge for current or future events. In each territory a vast amount of tacit knowledge¹ on event management develops drawing from previous event experiences; this precious knowledge represents an organizational memory that tends to be accumulated in permanent entities, which contribute to transfer and re-use it for future planned events. These actors represent the worth holders of this knowledge on event management because they enrich and retain the memory; consequently, an effective inter-organizational dialogue may activate a learning process among all the event organizers of the hosting country also avoiding those dysfunctions which have been expressed in the past experiences.

The spatial dimension of knowledge transfer refers to the interaction and dialogue among actors across geographic borders. Event organizations, when involved in mega-events, have to manage relationships and perform activities across national borders, interacting with different geographically distant organizations. Because of the geographical distance among the actors from different countries, the knowledge transfer may be negatively affected by the cultural and social differences (Kostova, 1999).

The knowledge transfer in both spatial and temporal dimensions may develop according an implicit and explicit form. Implicit or tacit knowledge concerns routine and informal processes not easily transferable and coded (Polanyi, 1975; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Easterby-Smith et al., 2008), while explicit knowledge consists in knowledge expressed in manuals or documents, clearly coded and accessible through consciousness (Nonaka et al., 2000; Nonaka and von Krogh, 2009).

The nature of knowledge, implicit or explicit, may impact on both temporal and spatial knowledge transfer and on the mechanisms able to support these processes. For example, implicit knowledge is subjective and embodied in the individuals (Polanyi, 1966), thus it cannot be transferred by other ways than personal interaction. Whereas, codable knowledge can be put down in written instructions, and it can thus be transferred and shared independently of personal contacts. In this direction, if knowledge is mainly implicit, geographical distance creates difficulties in transmitting it. In other words, implicit knowledge travels easily over small distances, but far less easily over longer distances (Caniëls, 2000).

RESISTANCES TO KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN THE EVENT NETWORK

Studies have used several theoretical frameworks to investigate event management, such as the resource-based theory (Stokes, 2006; Dollinger et al., 2010), and the knowledge-based theories (Barney, 1995; Grant, 1996). Others relied on the stakeholder and network theory (Freeman, 1984; Donaldson and Preston, 1995; Mitchell *et al.*, 1997; Jawahar and McLaughlin, 2001), that provide a valuable understanding of the role and the functions of the myriads of internal and external stakeholders involved in the organization of an event (Carlsen, Ali-Knight and Robertson, 2007; Ensor, Ali-Knight and Robertson, 2007; Hede, 2007, 2008; Getz, 2012).

In this article we adopt a network perspective to identify and investigate the main resistances faced by the knowledge transfer for planned events that involve many actors establishing numerous relationships.

Network approach plays a relevant role in the study of knowledge transfer in tourism (Brass et al., 2004; Inkpen and Tsang, 2005; Shaw and Williams, 2009), leading to recognize in a planned event a network form, referring to a set of nodes and relationships, which connect them (Fombrun, 1982). In this perspective, the actors of a network are intertwined establishing strong interactions, which tend to produce knowledge transferring and sharing processes among the actors, creating the premises for an inter-organizational cooperation. Individuals and organizations face many challenges in transferring and sharing their knowledge (Grandori, 1999; Kostova, 1999).

These resistances tend to develop in both the spatial and temporal dimensions of knowledge transfer process. In the spatial dimension, for example, the high degree of

¹ Tacit or implicit knowledge concerns routine and informal processes not easily transferable and coded (Polanyi, 1975;

differentiation among the actors, based on different technical specialties, cognitive orientations, project organizational form, and geographic distance, hinder the dialogue and make the knowledge circulation more complex and difficult. The degree of differentiation increases within a transnational network, where actors from different countries are involved. Indeed, organizations from different countries face relevant barriers, namely the different institutional profiles of the home countries and behavioral models, culture and social systems, and cognitive frames, which make more difficult and complex the knowledge transfer and the inter-organization cooperation (Kostova, 1999).

In the temporal dimension of knowledge transfer, the temporary nature of event organizers also can make more problematic the knowledge transfer, because of difficulties to keep expertise and competences from previous event experiences, creating an organizational memory. Much of the unique experience, gained by the event organizers, can be lost, leaving future organizations with limited knowledge of the unique aspects of the event (Singh and Hu, 2008). Temporary organizations do not have the chance to create a strong bridge with the future organizations with high risks to miss knowledge and expertise (Lundin and Soderholm, 1995).

METHODOLOGY

This research is grounded on an in-depth investigation of the Universal Forum of Cultures case, with focus on the fourth edition held in Naples in 2013/2014. The case study methodology has long been applied in tourism research (Xiao and Smith, 2006). Case studies are useful to investigate a phenomenon separately from its context so that the attention is paid on specific variables (Yin, 1981, 2014). This allows observing the peculiarities of complex phenomena, such as planned events, especially mega and/or hallmark events, and identifying the factors that can influence the knowledge transfer for their success and/or failure.

The study was executed in several stages. After carrying out a literature review on planned events, we conducted 25 semi-structured interviews with key actors of the local Forum Foundation in Naples in order to discuss with them the relevance of the knowledge transfer and its dimensions identified; that is in general, we aim to understand which factors might facilitate the knowledge transfer and, consequently, make planned events successful. Further, we had access to the documentation (official reports, official and unofficial memos, newspapers, event plans, and so on) illustrating the organization of the local Forum

Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Smith et al., 2005).

Foundation and organizing committees and relationships occurred with the headquarter of the FFB. Lastly, we had the opportunity to directly observe several meetings of the local foundation and organizing committees of Naples.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

Our analysis shows interesting results. In particular, thanks to the interviews some relevant challenges have been evidenced such as the significant conflicts occurred between policy makers and executive managers.

The Naples experience, compared to the previous Forum editions, highlights relevant criticisms: a one-year delay in the timing schedules, the existing conflicts among the government institutions (as reported in numerous articles of local daily press), the absence of information and interest among citizens about the Forum. According to the interviews, many problems and dysfunctions depend on the difficulties in the knowledge transfer and sharing among the actors, making difficult the cooperation in the various stages of the Forum management process. Interviewees consistently referred to knowledge transfer as a challenge for their experience in the Forum event management process. They mentioned cultural barriers, differences in the working style, and addressed communication difficulties. During the interviews, most individuals outlined the lack of useful and effective tools to make the Forum management process successful; in fact, they mainly faced difficulties in transferring their knowledge or developing their skills related to the Forum event. Also, they complained about the absence of useful training programs able to support and enrich their skills and competences in the event management process. Otherwise, some interviewees, especially policy makers and tourism agencies, outlined the lack of trust as a basis for the development of effective collaborations, especially between public and private organizations and the local community.

THEORETICAL AND MANAGERIAL IMPLICATIONS

This paper can contribute to the existing literature because it provides, adopting a network perspective, a depth investigation of the knowledge transfer in the event management, already recognized with a crucial role but still under researched. Indeed, we clearly conceive the event management as a network form with all the related implications.

Our study presents relevant managerial implications, suggesting effective tools to the event organizers, in order to successful plan and manage events. Thus, coordination mechanisms are proposed to support the knowledge transfer within the event network, overcoming any

cultural or institutional barriers and supporting the actors in the systematic exchange of information and skills. Four relevant coordination mechanisms have been considered crucial in the Forum network: norms, integration roles, authority and procedural standards. Indeed, they may significantly facilitate knowledge transfer among the event actors overcoming the existing resistances, especially related to the geographic distance and cultural and social orientation.

CONCLUSIONS

In this article we adopt a network perspective to investigate the knowledge transfer into planned events, recognized as a crucial factor in the event management. The network perspective provides the theoretical basis to analyze the event management process, in which many actors are involved establishing numerous relationships. This study can extend the previous theoretical and empirical contributions on planned events, focusing on aspects usually underrepresented in the existing literature, such as the knowledge transfer and the coordination mechanisms to face the resistances.

This study presents several limitations, mostly related to the qualitative nature of the research and the focus on a single case study. However, these limitations provide room for further research to develop the network analysis model, with the identification of coordination mechanisms, in the management process of other relevant planned events, in order to identify the successful key factors.

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