

HANKEN

Kingpins of the Multinational: Towards a Typology of Boundary Spanners in Multinationals

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Introduction



- » OBJECTIVE:
 - » Examine the characteristics and roles of *boundary spanners* with regards to MNC-internal knowledge sharing

- » BOUNDARY SPANNERS:
 - » Individual employees who are perceived by other members of both their own ingroup and relevant outgroups to engage in significant transactions with outgroup members, facilitate intergroup transactions, and manage intergroup conflicts (Adams, 1976; Callister and Wall, 2001; Richter et al., 2006)



Research Questions



1. What types of boundary spanners can be identified in multinational corporations?
2. What are their main characteristics?
3. What are their key roles, particularly with regards to inter-unit knowledge transfer?

Data and Methodology



- » Multiple case-study of four Finnish MNCs
 - » Headquarters and subsidiaries in China / Russia
 - » Part of a larger research project

- » 145 interviews
 - » Top & middle managers and experts
 - » Headquarters, the focal subsidiaries and HR organization
 - » Supported for other sources of data for triangulation and a deeper understanding of the organizational context

- » The potential importance of boundary spanners emerged as a strong preliminary finding
 - » Explored further with a focus on cultural and linguistic boundaries

Types of Boundary Spanner



1. Liaison officers

- » Engaged in significant transactions with another unit
- » Importance of face-to-face visits: gaining a 'real-life understanding' of the realities of the other group

2. Expatriates and repatriates

- » Gained an insider-view of the goals, practice and discourse of the other unit during their assignment

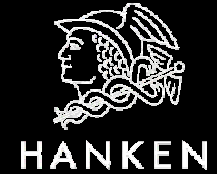
3. True boundary spanners

- » Multimembership: deeply familiar with the culture and language of both units
- » Driven by extensive personal and professional experience from both contexts



Characteristics

Language, Cultural Understanding, Social Capital



Liaison officers

- Fluent in English, but typically not in the other country's native language
- Superficial understanding of the other unit's national and organizational culture
- Limited social capital in the other unit.
- Very limited external social capital to customers, suppliers and institutions in the other country.

Expatriates and repatriates

- Fluent in English, typically some knowledge of the other country's native language
- An improved understanding of the other unit's national and organizational culture
- A relatively high level of social capital in the other unit.
- Still limited external social capital to customers, suppliers and institutions in the other country, although levels may vary.
- High levels of inter-unit social capital within the MNC driven by previous assignments.

True boundary spanners

- Highly fluent in the other country's native language.
- An insider view of both units' national and organizational culture
- A high level of social capital in the other unit.
- Typically high levels of external social capital to customers, suppliers and institutions in the other country, although this may vary based on previous experiences.



Roles

In Intra-MNC Knowledge Exchange



- » These roles were fulfilled to some extent by all boundary spanners, but true boundary spanners were significantly more effective
 - » Due to their language skills, cultural understanding and social capital
- » **Channel of knowledge transfer**
 - » Language node
 - » Cultural interpreter
- » **Trust builder**
 - » Mediating role, drawing upon personal social capital
- » **Change agent**
 - » Transcending indiv. SC to organizational SC (Kostova & Roth, 2003)
 - » Facilitating shared corporate culture
 - » Facilitating dynamic capability in emerging markets



Conclusions



- » Potentially crucial role in intra-MNC knowledge exchange
- » Lack of empirical research on boundary spanners
- » Our contribution:
 - » Typology, characteristics, roles
 - » Boundary spanners can exist at all hierarchical levels