Economic Sociology C

"The Strength of Performative Ties: Dynamics of Network Exchange in a Knowledge Intensive Firm"

Sheen S. Levine, Lee Kong Chian School of Business, Singapore Management University (Singapore)

Although knowledge has grown to occupy a major role in the discussion on firm performance, we know little about how individuals reach and transfer needed knowledge. Drawing on extensive fieldwork in multiple offices of a large, multinational professional service firm, we identify the pervasive presence of knowledge transactions between unacquainted individuals, despite geographical distance, absence of exchange history, or expectations of future interaction. We present the minuitae of such transactions and hypothesize on two boundary conditions for their success: affiliation and status similarity. Highlighting the difference between the observed phenomenon, indirect ties, and complete lack of acquaintanceship, we propose a definition of Performative Ties. We argue that such ties are theoretically significant, have several advantages for knowledge dissemination, and have been observed elsewhere although never explicitly identified. We compare Performative Ties to market, embedded, and community or clan exchange relations to argue that such ties allow wide search of potential exchange partners and intimate transfer once they are found. Thus, Performative Ties combine benefits previously attributed to just one mode of exchange or another. We suggest that Performative Ties allow organizations more efficient use of the knowledge contained in individuals and routines.