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Swedish University of Agricultural Sciences

Faculty of Natural Resources and  
Agricultural Sciences

# What Do You Know About Knowledge?

- Perspectives on knowledge and knowledge communication at ICA's department for social and environmental responsibilities

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## **Abstract**

This thesis presents two ways of perceiving knowledge, the post positivistic or knowledge as a “thing” and the social constructivist way with cultivated communities of practice. The post positivistic school of thought views knowledge as a thing that is more or less static and movable. Knowledge can be put down in writing and will be received and interpreted the same by different people. The cultivated communities of practice on the other hand see knowledge as something constructed that is changing depending on the situation and the group. This cultivated communities of practice, are providing organizations with increased competitive advantages according to the researchers Wenger et al. (2002) and Liedtka (1999). Using cultivated CoP will give organizations a structured and inclusive way of managing knowledge that helps them adjust the knowledge to each unique situation. In a time where: *“An organization’s ultimate product is its knowledge in relation to its competitors”* (Kochan, 2004) it is important that an organization starts reflecting over how it views knowledge and what consequences that perspective can have. The social constructivist perspective could argue that the difficulties with the post positivistic way of viewing knowledge is that it is not context specific, and does not take into consideration that knowledge is not static. As the view and way of working with knowledge can affect the organization it is important to reflect over ones understanding of knowledge.

My aim has been to look closer at ICA’s social and environmental (SER) department and study how they are working together and how they view knowledge, and then to see what the possible outcome, theoretically, could be if they would start rethinking knowledge through the CoP lens.

After conducting semi-structured interviews with four members of the SER department I concluded that SER view knowledge, and work with knowledge in a post positivistic way. Their way of viewing knowledge can make it difficult for the staff or the department to share and communicate their capabilities and their skills, internally and externally.

My view is that the SER department would benefit greatly from doing some work on their views of knowledge, and to introduce cultivated CoP. By reflecting on how they view knowledge they can start to develop a more structured way of managing knowledge. If the SER department can start thinking of knowledge as inclusive, contextually dependent and socially constructivistic there could be competitive advantages in the form of faster decision making, more engaged team members that are more aware of their own and other team members’ capabilities. This makes the organization better equipped to work with a variety of skills and situations. Something that is becoming ever more important in our fast paced, information rich and ever changing society.

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## 1. Introduction

As the title indicates this is a thesis that will focus on knowledge. This is not the first thesis to focus on the subject and probably not the last one either. This is, however, a thesis focusing on how members of a practice view knowledge, not a thesis dealing with knowledge as a concept of theories of science. Getting a better understanding of how your organization view and work with knowledge, is an important source of increasing and strengthening the organization's competitive advantage (for a clarification of the concept competitive advantage see section 2.1). Many research studies argue that for a company to be in front of its competitors there are two things that they need to focus on; environmental issues and knowledge management (Chen, 2005, Stigzelius 2013).

When it comes to knowledge management there are many different researchers that claim that this is the one "thing" organizations need to focus on today to successfully compete in the marketplace. But there are almost as many different opinions and definitions of what knowledge is and how it should be managed. There are researchers that describe knowledge as something static and movable that can be used like a spice to just add some more flavor to the company. And there are other researchers that claim that knowledge exist only in, and through, our connection with one and other. This means that we need interaction for the development of knowledge as well as to give us tools to understand it (Nicolini et al, 2003). Depending on what "school of knowledge" you belong to you will interpret ways of sharing, transferring, creating and adding knowledge in different ways. The diverse views and perceptions of knowledge can work different in different organizations, and will have strong impact on how the organization performs.

I spent the last months of 2013 as an intern at ICA and the department of social and environmental responsibility. I took the opportunity to look more closely on how the SER department perceives knowledge and what could be the most beneficial way for them to work with knowledge management. At the same time I conducted, on behalf of ICA, an evaluation of a communication material for "ICA handlare för miljön" (IHFM). My task was to look at how it was perceived by its recipients. It gave me an opportunity to also look for the SER department's view of knowledge based on how it was reflected in the material produced and how this material was distributed and handled.

My assumptions here are that there are more or less fruitful ways for an organization to view and work with knowledge, and it is important for organizations to start to evaluate how they think of knowledge, as well as manage organizational knowledge, to be able to optimize their organization. To manage the organizational knowledge in a more suitable way can provide the organization with increased competitive advantages. I have noticed that there are ways of viewing knowledge that seems to dominate the organizational management literature; this is the post positivistic way. This could be because it is less 'complicated', less complex to introduce and analyze, and at first it might seem more time efficient. But I believe that in today's world, that becomes more and more complex, there is a need for viewing knowledge in a more social constructivist way.

In this thesis I will examine how the people working in the SER perceive themselves, how they work together and how they view knowledge. My aim is to see if their view of knowledge is reflected in what they produce. Furthermore, the perspective "Communities of practice" (CoP) claims that knowledge creation and sharing can work in a relevant and efficient way if the interaction among the members of the practice is organized in a certain

way. I will evaluate how ICA could benefit from working with CoP, and what the effect could be for the organization

### **1.1 Clarification**

This whole thesis builds on the assumption that knowledge management can lead to competitive advantages. It is therefore important to clarify why that is.

If an organization can respond quicker and more efficiently to a problem, solve an issue, it will outperform its competitors. Most problems and issues of today are not alike – but rather different, and that demands of an organization to mobilize the ‘right’ skill set and experience arsenal for each task to effectively solve it. An organization that has a clear understanding of what competencies and knowledge each staff member possess, and that has a clear structure for assembling the ‘right’ mix of knowledge to tackle new issues – will succeed in doing so quicker and more efficiently than its competitors. “*An organization’s ultimate product is its knowledge in relation to its competitors*” (Kochan 2004, 1). An organization hence needs a clear understanding of what knowledge means to them and what knowledge assets it has. In addition it needs a clear method of working that allows context to determine what the optimal team is, and what communication methods should be used, to solve a unique problem.

In our society, which is shaped by speed, change and complexity, flexibility and contextual sensitivity is crucial to organizational success. Managing knowledge in such a way that allows for teams to form, share, learn from each other, solve problems and then dissolve allows for the utilization of knowledge that will meet these new demands.

A clear structure for knowledge management can make an organization more efficient, creative and improve the quality of production (Kochan, 2004). This holds true as each team member’s skill set can be used in a number of different ways through working on a broad variety of projects where the knowledge is valuable in different ways, depending on contextual demands. Also, a structure for knowledge management allows for a regular sharing between team members which allows for the team to learn together.

## **2. Background, purpose and research question**

In this section I will describe what ICA is and what they do and give a short history of their organization. I will also show some previous research of knowledge from an organizational management perspective.

### **2.1 What is ICA and what do they do?**

ICA is one of Sweden’s largest food chains and listed on the stock exchange since 2013. It supplies around 21.000 people with jobs, and for the year 2013 they had a turnover of over 99 000 million SEK, had 2400 stores and supplied over 11 million people with food every week (ICA 1). At the corporate responsibility (CR) department for social and environmental responsibility they argue that if they can change the everyday behavior of their customers, even in small ways, it would make a great change in the world (Interview 1,2,3,4).

ICA is one of the oldest food chains in Sweden; founded in the early 1900. It all started in the middle of Sweden as a wholesaler. Hakon Swenson founded the organization to be able to compete with the other large food chain at the time, the Cooperation (Wickman, 1). Hakons idea was to create a central purchasing place for local store owners so that they could get a more beneficial price due to the large orders. This would mean that the local store managers

would still compete with one and other and could have their local touch on their stores but they could at the same time lower their prices and secure access to goods (Wickman, 2).

ICA is today built on the same foundation and values as it were when it started. Every shop is owned by a store manager and the focus is still that every shop has a unique feeling and touch. But today ICA is a name and all the store managers pay a fee for using the ICA brand. For this fee you get national commercial recognition and the safety that comes with a well known name. The store manager is the one making the decisions on what goods should be available. The store manager is free to alter a shop to local requests and conditions, which means that customers can request specific things and it gives the shop manager the opportunity to change concepts that are not working for that area. However there can be challenges with this freedom. When it comes to working with environmental issues, each store is responsible to make changes towards a more sustainable use of resources. ICA's head office can give advice and make priorities but in the end the store managers and their teams that need to implement them (Interview 4). This can create problems, as an example let me take the scampi discussion that has been going on in Sweden since Svenska Naturskyddsforeningen highlighted the issue that mangrove swamps were being eradicated to make room for scampi farms in 2012<sup>1</sup>. The central ICA purchasing department with support from the ICA head office has stopped its import of scampi. But as each store manager is the one deciding what should be on the shelves in their stores, a central purchase stop does not necessarily translate into that every store stops buying scampi. The same logic applies for other environmental issues as well. The head office might decide one thing, but they have no real power to enforce these decisions in store - they only give recommendations and advice.

The challenge of, and urgency to deal with, environmental issues is something that is recognized at ICA's head office as well. ICA has a department for CR questions and one of the focus groups at CR is social and environmental responsibility (SER). For the highest board in ICA social and environmental responsibility is a priority, and the SER is the organizational function put in place to help the other departments to understand and implement sustainability initiatives. The SER is to support other departments in their work and advise them to work in more sustainable matters (Interview 2). To help the store managers with the environmental legalization the CR department came up with the tool and concept "ICA handlare för miljön" (IHFM). This is a control program for the stores so that they remember to do everything that the environmental code of Sweden demands from them. It also includes a communication package so that the stores can show their customers that they are doing things to change the world into something better. The communication package can also help, inform and educate customers to make more sustainable and more environmentally friendly choices in the store.

## **2.2 Previous research about knowledge and knowledge management**

*"Current scientific debates as well as management discussions are characterized by an important shift of attention towards knowledge issues as a major source of corporate success. [...] Today, a discussion on almost any topic eventually turns into a knowledge issue."* (Van Krogh et al, 2000, 13)

There are current debates over what knowledge really is and how it should be viewed. For many years a broad range of researches have put their attention on knowledge, creation of

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.naturskyddsforeningen.se/vad-du-kan-gora/stod-oss/skippa-scampi-radda-mangrove> (2014-05-08)

knowledge and the act of sharing knowledge (Van Krogh et al, 2000, Argote, 1999, Sias, 2009). When writers refer to knowledge it is the knowledge and competence of their employees or partners in a group that they focus on. It can be skills on how to put together a product or it can be skills in how to solve a conflict in the best way. Previous research on knowledge and knowledge sharing often connects with organizational management. (Chen, 2005) Knowledge sharing and knowledge management has been described as: “[...] *the only source of sustained competitive advantage*” (Sherif and Xing, 2006, Wipawayangkool, 2009) But why do companies and organizations focus on knowledge management?

Lately “creating” and “sharing” knowledge has become one of the most important issues for organizations to gain competitive advantages. (Jensen et al, 2010, Lubit, 2001) That is because organizations and companies more often compete on markets that demands constant update of knowledge and knowledge development. It is often good to be the first and to be able to set the standards for the rest of the market. (Sias, 2009) To be the first or the best demands a number of things and one of the most important ones is to have knowledge on what to create, where and for whom. It is hard to be one person and to know all these things by yourself. In a company that consists of many people you can all have different type of knowledge and the issue is rather how to spread it. (Argote and Ingram, 2000)

There are different ways of viewing knowledge and researchers do not agree on what knowledge is and how it is created. Two of the perspectives will be presented in the theory section of this thesis. Even though the perspectives differ in their views on what knowledge is and how it is created, they are similar in the way they describe the benefits that successful knowledge management can lead to. By managing and using the knowledge and competence that exists within an organization the organization can save time, money and other resources, as well as ‘future proofing’ - building a structure of how to handle future situations that needs management (Argote and Ingram, 2000, Liedtka, 1999, Lubit, 2001, Argote, 1999).

“*We are now operating in a knowledge-based society*” (Van Krogh et al, 2000,1) That means that to be able to gain competitive advantages it is important to learn how to manage knowledge so that it stays and can grow within the organization. Research has shown that if an organization can “create” and “share” knowledge within itself it can lower its costs and increase its effectiveness in the long run. (Argote, 1999) That means that for companies and organizations to build stable and competitive organizations it is important to focus on knowledge.

An organization’s view on knowledge will have greater consequences, on its ability to adapt, and compete in today’s market than you might first think. Researchers show that different ways of viewing knowledge will ultimately form the organization and its members. Therefore it is important to take some time to reflect on how knowledge is viewed and managed in your organization and think of what potential consequences this can have (Liedtka, 1999, Lubit, 2001).

### **2.3 Purpose and research questions**

In this thesis I want to look closely at the SER department at ICA. As stated in the introduction focusing on environment issues and knowledge could provide an organization with competitive advantages towards other organizations. Since ICA is well known for its environmental and social engagement, (ICA 2, Interview 3) I think that this competitive advantage is worth developing further, that means strengthening the SER department. I believe that defining and deliberately working on the organization’s views of knowledge and

how to best manage that knowledge will be crucial in doing so. I would like to know how the SER department is viewing knowledge and how this is affecting the way they perform their work and how they feel about their work.

In many of the articles regarding organizational development that I have read the researchers suggests future research with a perspective of CoP (Liedtka, 1999, Iaquinto et al, 2011). In this thesis I want to examine the aspect of knowledge “creation” and knowledge “transfer”. I believe that to change your view and perception of knowledge you first need to recognize how you think of it today. Further there is research that indicates that CoP can be used to gain a competitive advantage (Liedtka, 1999, Iaquinto et al, 2011, Wenger et al, 2002, Eckert, 2006). I therefore want to know to what extent ICAs SER department could use CoP and what potential effects that might have.

My research questions for this thesis are: What is characterizing the practice of SER? What do the members of the practice mean with knowledge and how are they handling knowledge matters? What is the weak point in the practice of the SER department and how can it be improved?

### **3. Theory**

I present two schools of thought in this thesis on how to define knowledge, a post positivistic view and a social constructivist view.

#### **3.1 A post positivistic way of looking at knowledge**

In Patricia Sias’ book “Organization workplace relationship” there is a section regarding a post positivist perspective on workplace relationship. According to this perspective people are objects that can be observed and categorized (Sias, 2009, 5). This means that members of an organization that interact with one another can be observed and the observations can tell something about the relationships of that organization. The post positivist way of looking at reality means that reality is possible to observe and can be perceived and understood in its actual shape (Sias, 2009, 9). For studying organizational relationship the post positivist idea is to observe people, their communication and their language (Sias, 2009, 10). If this approach is transferred to knowledge management you can study the knowledge that is visible and possible to observe, since it is visible it is also possible to transfer from one person or place to one another.

To view knowledge in this post positivist approach is very common (Geller and Vasquez, 2004). When viewing knowledge as something that can be observed and has an “actual shape” it is common that no reflection is made on how the knowledge was created. It became the way it is observed. Knowledge can be described as a box that you can move around and placed where it is needed the most (Johannessen and Olsen 2003, 278). This way of perceiving knowledge can not only be found in a post positivistic theory but also in economy and biology (Nicolini et al, 2003, 6). What is in common for them all is that they view “*knowledge as an object and not as a process*” (Nicolini et al, 2003, 6) the “object” knowledge can then be put into routines or written texts.

A few examples of knowledge as a “thing” are presented here. Linda Argote and Paul Ingram discuss the competitive advantages for firms that can use knowledge transfer (2000). Even though they are concluding that interactions between people are the best way to share and create knowledge they are not reflecting upon how the knowledge was created or what is

categorized as knowledge. The authors claim that you can use “knowledge reservoirs” so that you can create, or replicate the same knowledge in the future. (Argote and Ingram, 2000) This implies that knowledge is something static and means the same thing to everyone. If you can keep knowledge so that more people can use it you assume that you can transfer knowledge from one person or one place and then give it to someone else. Furthermore the authors talk about knowledge as something important and something that can give competitive advantage if you can transfer it. But as said before they do not mention how knowledge is created and how you can set foundations for knowledge to grow. (Argote and Ingram, 2000)

Other descriptions of knowledge in a post positivist way can be found in the article by Karma Sherif and Bo Xing (2006). In their article they offer critique on the post positivist way of viewing knowledge but give clear examples on how it is used. They argue that the research regarding knowledge management focuses on “*capturing, sanitizing, packaging, categorizing, storing, disseminating, and sharing knowledge*” (Sherif and Xing, 2006, 530). That means that you have a view of knowledge as something that you can put into a document and share with others and that they will perceive and understand it in the same way as you did when you wrote it down word by word. The authors criticize this way of looking at knowledge since you are not only missing some deeper understanding for knowledge but you are also missing the knowledge that you cannot put down on paper but that you only have in you: the tacit knowledge (Sherif and Xing, 2006). They claim that if studies only focus on how to spread knowledge as if knowledge existed in small boxes, you will miss the most basic process, knowledge creation. Knowledge is created all the time and in and through the interaction with others, it cannot be studied in its entirety if you do not apply a holistic perspective. What more is, by focusing only on how knowledge is spread, the fundamental aspect of its origin is overlooked.

Sherif and Xing (2006) gives example of one a writer who uses the post positivist way of describing knowledge, Linda Argote. In her book “Organizational learning – creating, retaining and transferring knowledge” (1999) she identifies that organizations goes through different learning curves but do not mention how learning and knowledge is created, she rather indicates that this learning curve peaks when the process has been running for a while (Argote, 1999, 28). This shows that knowledge is perceived as something that takes place without any control or support. Later on she describes how organizations learn. The most effective ways seems to be to create documents and make sure that people follows routines to make sure that the knowledge is spread and understood. She then identifies that everyone learn in the same way and, once again, that knowledge exists and can be transferred as you like and with predictable outcomes (Argote, 1999, 182).

In this chapter knowledge has been perceived as something real and something that you can move around to where it is most needed. This is an established way of thinking of knowledge and knowledge management in many organizations. (Jensen et al, 2010) There are other ways of perceiving knowledge, ways that describe knowledge as something constantly shifting and something that is created in the interaction between people. In the next chapter this way of looking on knowledge will be presented.

### **3.2 Communities of practice - knowledge as a social construction**

“*Companies discovered the hard way that useful knowledge is not a “thing” that can be managed like other assets.*” (Wenger et al, 2002, 8) The basic idea here is that knowledge is not a box or a package that you can fill and pass on. Rather knowledge is something that we

create through interactions with one and other (Wenger et al, 2002, Charon, 2004). This way of looking at knowledge is a social constructivist view.

This way of thinking can be found in the theory of symbolic interactionism (Charon, 2004). Benzis and Allan (2008) argue that there are three assumptions in symbolic interactionism; we can connect them with knowledge and knowledge creation. First they state that “*people [...] act on the basis of the meanings that things have for them.*” (Benzis and Allan, 2008, 544) That means that people are not receivers of knowledge but rather that they are giving meaning to the things that they are involved in. Knowledge is therefore not something that “exists” but something you create and act upon depending on what meaning you have given to things. Secondly, you create meaning of things through interactions. This means that you are not just transferring meaning or knowledge from one person to another. You need to give this message meaning together and mutually agree on what something should mean. And thirdly, because you are together creating meaning for things the meaning can constantly change and take other definitions depending on who defines them (Benzis and Allan, 2008). This way of looking at creation of reality is the basis for the social constructivist way of looking at knowledge.

If you use the social constructivist way of thinking you will not reach an organizational competitive advantage just by transferring knowledge as if it was a box, the members of the organization need to together create the knowledge, come up with and define information. It is the group and the process that provides the “knowledge” meaning (Wenger et al, 2002). There are a few theorists and researchers who have integrated this way of thinking and organizational development. One of these perspectives is communities of practice (CoP):

*“Communities of practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interaction on an ongoing basis”* (Wenger et al, 2002, 4)

Community of practice stems from the theories of practice based and situated learning, that means that knowledge and learning is not only something that takes place within a members mind, but that it is rather something that needs social gatherings to take place (Nicolini et al, 2003, 3). That means that “knowing precedes knowledge” (Nicolini et al, 2003, 3) and that knowing and knowledge takes place when you are involved in a practice and learn by social construction. From this situated and constructed idea of knowledge came the concept of Communities of practice that was developed by Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger 1992 (Nicolini et al, 2003, Wenger, 1998). They claim that knowledge is context dependent and what is seen as knowledge in one group can be meaningless in another. They state that new knowledge is socially constructed in groups that share a common goal or interest, so called communities of practice (Nicolini et al, 2003, Wenger, 1998).

Given that we think that people are and needs to be active agents when it comes to creating knowledge, CoP provides us with an explanation how these communities are created and what can be the best way for cultivating them.

*“Communities of practice emerge in response to a common interest or position, and play an important role in forming their members’ participation in, and orientation to the world around them.”* (Eckert, 2006, 1).

This quote shows that CoP emerge when people have something in common and unite in sense-making. This sense-making can concern the entire organization or just a peripheral

question, the important thing is that there is a mutual interest. The interest makes it easier for the group to work together and it also provides the group with a sense of belonging. Eckert argues that CoP plays a great role in shaping the understanding and actions towards the world around us (2006, 3).

Wenger et al, (2002) argues that to create a CoP, the members do not need to work together on a daily basis but that they need to have a continuous and ongoing collaboration as long as the question or questions are relevant. “[...] they typically share information, insights and advice. They help each other to solve problems. They discuss their situations, their aspirations, and their needs” (Wenger et al, 2002, 4). The CoP might create documents and tools but the most important thing is to develop knowledge in the interaction among one and other, to share experience and to take part in other peoples understanding. The author’s claim, as mentioned in the previous chapter, that we are living in a knowledge based economy and that managing knowledge has become a key factor for success (Wenger et al, 2002, 6). However in this new digital world where documents can spread so quickly and priorities can change so fast it is important to have a firm strategy on how to share information and how to create new knowledge. Symbolic interactionism claims that we are interpreting the information we get based on our previous experiences and our experience of the situation we are in. Based on this school of thought it would not be fruitful to think that you can create a document, see it as knowledge and send it out in the organization. To be able to understand and take in the information, Wenger et alt. (2002) claims that your organization needs to be constructed as a CoP. To cultivate CoPs gives the organization a security in new knowledge creation and it can also keep the talented people in the organization. This is because people feel as if they are a part of a group and their ideas are being listened to (Wenger et al, 2002, 8p).

Researcher Jeanne Liedtka acknowledges this in her article “Liking competitive advantages with communities of practice” (1999). It is argued in the article that CoP provides organizations with tools to rapidly adapt to changes due to their developed collaboration through the organization (Liedtka, 1999, 6). Working with CoP can also provide the organization with an increased interaction between “*working, learning and innovation*” (Brown and Duguid, 1991, 40). CoP can thus be a link in creating a competitive advantage for organizations.

The perspective of CoP makes a few important points on what knowledge is and these are important to remember in the analysis; Knowledge is something you learn by practicing it, not just by reading or listening. Knowledge is both tacit, that we have a “feeling” of what we should do, and explicit, that we can tell how to do it. There is collective knowledge, things you know together and individual knowledge that you know by yourself. Knowledge is constantly changing; it is not a static thing. Knowledge can be managed by different social structures (Wenger et al, 2002, 9-11, Brown and Duguid 1991, 41-42). The perspective of knowledge as social constructivist is a thought that has been picked up by many other researches. In the book “Knowing in organizations: a practice based approach” (2003) edited by Nicolini, Gherardi and Yanow you can read many examples of how people, by working together in a group with a common goal and understanding for their work, create effective and well functioning organizations. The organizations described create everything from flutes to advanced cooking, and what happens in all the groups is that they find their way of understanding how they should work by working together, and that they share knowledge by interactions rather than through more conventional ways (Nicolini et al, 2003). They learn by taking part in the practice and through meetings and by being a trainee in the organization.

More conventional ways would have been to read documents and perhaps watching video recordings on how things are done. What can be problematic with this is that things might not be done in the way that they are reported in the documents, there might be a document way of doing things and then a real world way of doing things.

With all this said, it is important to remember that the perspective of CoP is not originally developed as a success story or to help organization to gain competitive advantages (Nicolini et al, 2003). CoP was from the beginning a description of a group of people who “*share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic*” (Wenger et al, 2002). This group of people can be a destructive group; it can be a street gang or the mafia. It can be a group of people that are doing bad things in society and share an understanding for solving problems with violence (Wenger, 1998). It can also be a group of people who are stuck in destructive patterns and are not helping each other to grow and develop; the CoP can hold people down in not so productive manners (Wenger, 1998, Wenger et al, 2002, Nicolini et al, 2003).

At the beginning of 2000 the concept of CoP started to be used in a “consultant” way. To cultivate CoP was meant to help organizations with their structure and increase their capacity. This was done by providing organization with tools for creating routines and structures concerning knowledge management and by focusing on what knowledge meant to the organization. For the remainder of this thesis when I write about organizational development I will refer to “cultivated CoP” when I write about CoP. Cultivated CoP is a positive influence and it is important that it is separated from the original meaning of the concept that can be destructive and hold people down.

Wenger et al, (2002) state that “Knowledge has become a key to success” within organizations and therefore it is important to make sure that the existing knowledge is taken care of. The cultivated CoP offers a structured and systematic way of working with knowledge management that includes different competences and engages people and workgroups around focus questions of their interest. This makes the knowledge more accessible and easier to understand and apply. Cultivated CoP can also provide a way of understanding knowledge within the specific situation where the perception of knowledge as a “thing” might fail to explain why that knowledge is valuable in that situation (Wenger et al, 2002). This failure can happen since the information that you get is not specific for that situation that you are in and can therefore be hard to translate, cultivated CoP can offer a more situation dependent understanding of knowledge that could be easier to understand.

### **3.3 Comparison of the perspectives**

Advocates for the post positivistic school of thought relating to knowledge would accuse cultivated CoP of being time consuming and complex. Whereas cultivated CoP would say that post positivistic is non inclusive and fail to create knowledge that is contextually sensitive – leading to costly and time consuming mistakes.

Cultivated CoP is based on team engagement, which demands of team members to come together and in an organized ways reflect on issues and problems to be solved. Shared understanding allows the team to create knowledge together. This process might be time consuming before proper structures for such work processes have been put in place and before team members are familiar with the process. Over time however the team will be better and better equipped to handle ever more complex problems at speed.

The persuasive argument of time efficiency and simplicity that the post positivistic view would have to argue its case however falls flat in some cases when judged on outcome efficiency. Let's think of an example; there is a need to produce information material in ICA to educate consumers to choose more sustainable product choices, to get them to feel inspired to buy organic, and to boost ICA managers in making their store more appealing to consumers looking for sustainable choices. Information material that is intended to spread 'knowledge' might take many days to produce. The person that produced the material might be very knowledgeable. But the material is not used or put up in the stores, consumers do not feel inspired to buy organic but judged for not buying organic, and the signposting is not raising awareness and purchase frequency for sustainable product choices. Why is this? According to social constructivism, that is the foundation for cultivated CoP, the explanation is that people create and interpret reality all the time - we have different understandings of situations and we will perceive information in different ways. By just using a post positivistic way of viewing knowledge we might fail to take these different perspectives into consideration – and what was an intended outcome fails to deliver. ICA consumers' and ICA managers pre-understandings of reality led to interpretations of ICA's communication material that has meant that ICA managers feel unsure of how and why to use the information material, and consumers report feeling judged in their choices when not buying organic and sustainable.

By using a more inclusive way when creating and sharing knowledge there is room for direct questions, which will expose pre-conceptions, pre-understandings and interpretations. I would argue that the more complex issues and organizations tend to be, the more important it is to solve issues and work with knowledge management so that more interactions take place, more perspectives are exposed, and a richer more internalized knowledge is created in the organization and its teams. What could look like an unnecessarily time consuming endeavor to begin with could pay off in the end, with less misunderstandings and unexpected interpretations, and with decisions that are more grounded in the organization.

## **4. Method**

### **4.1 Collecting and processing data**

I have collected data in three different ways, (data triangulation); by interviewing members of the SER department, by myself being a "member" of the department through my internship, and by analyzing material produced by the SER department.

#### **Interviews**

I conducted semi- structured interviews with four of the people working in the SER department (more about the semi-structured interviews in section 5.2). I conducted the interviews one on one and only one interview a day. I used a recorder so that I could focus on follow-up questions and giving attention to the interviewee rather than writing down their answers. If there were some extra good quotes I wrote them down. I then transcribed the interview and sent the transcript to the interviewee so that they could go through the material and see if they felt as if they approved. When all the interviews and transcriptions were done I put the material aside for a few weeks to be able to analyze it as "fresh" material later on.

#### **Internship**

I had the opportunity to be a part of the SER department for 10 weeks during the end of 2013 and the beginning of 2014. This internship made it possible for me to investigate the organization from an inside perspective and give me a deeper understanding for how the

group is working together, and how they are working as a group within the larger organization of ICA. I was a part of the group I can therefore go to myself and my own experience of how things are done and what kind of rules and agreements that was in play.

### **Taking part of material**

I have done an evaluation of communication material for the concept “ICA handlare för miljön” that is produced by the SER department. The SER department is the initiators of this concept. By analyzing the material I have got a feeling for how the group is working with knowledge, “creation” and “transfer”. I have looked at if their way of viewing knowledge can be reflected in the communication material they produce and how they suggest that it should be used.

### **Analyzing the material**

To take some time in between interviewing and processing the material made me able to see things in the material that I did not see right after the interviews. At this point I also had a deeper understanding of the theories and had formulated the research question that I was working on and could therefore analyze the material in a new light. When went through the material I looked for answers to the following questions; Do you as a group work together? How do you work together? How do you view knowledge? How do you learn? How do you share your skills? When do you learn new things? How do you think that people in your surrounding learn new things? When is it important to learn new things? How do you build/keep knowledge in the group? What is a group? What defines a group?

I have categorized the answers that I have got from the interviewees as post-positivistic or social constructivist. When I have categorized it as post-positivistic I have used the categorization mentioned by Sherif and Xing (2006). They claim that a post-positivistic way of categorizing knowledge is to focus on “*capturing, sanitizing, packaging, categorizing, storing, disseminating and sharing knowledge*” (Sherif and Xing, 2006, 530). This means that I have been categorized it as post-post positivist when knowledge has been described in any of these ways. I have categorized it as social constructivist when it has focused on creating and recreating knowledge and when knowledge was describes as something fluctuating and constantly changing.

I was part of the SER group only for a short period of time. As such I have been able to develop an understanding for their way of working and yet had the possibility to keep a distance. Keeping a distance towards the material and not put too much of my own interpretations in to the interviewees’ answers has been difficult at times but very important to stay objective. To be able to keep the distance I had to write down my own reflections from the internship and then put some time between the interviews and my internship. In doing so, I could go back to my own reflections after the interviews and make sure that what they had said was actually their words and not my own interpretations.

## **4.2 Qualitative interviews**

People define their situations in their own way. “*If you define situations as real, they are real in their consequences*” (Trost, 2010, 12). That means that in interviews I have tried to get an understanding of different peoples’ perspective, in this case concerning knowledge. Since people are defining their situation, and later on act upon this reality, it has been important to do open interviews with people to get a hold of their perspectives (Trost, 2010, 12).

When I came up with my questions and planned the interviews I used the method of Jan Trost, he writes about qualitative interviews that builds on social interaction and symbolic interactionism. He argues that all communication comes from interactions either by body, mouth or both. (Trost, 2010, 14) My main believes in this thesis is that peoples understanding of themselves, what they ascribe meaning to, as well as how they interpret their surroundings are the key ingredients we need to understand if we successfully want to fine tune and change communication. Therefore I thought that the method of qualitative interviews was the right one for this purpose. I have tried to understand how people perceive their reality today so that I can give suggestions on how that can be done differently in the future. (Trost, 2010, 24)

I used my questions as a starting point and then I let the follow-up questions come along as the interviewee told their story (for questions see appendix 1 and 2). With open questions I have tried to avoid to steer the interviewees and what they should talk about and rather gave them the opportunity to themselves judge what they thought was important in their story (Trost, 2010, 13). I have for example asked “Tell me about yourself, what happened that made you end up where you are?” that is a question that has provided me with a variation of answers, in comparison with asking a question like “How did you get this job?”.

I have chosen to do qualitative interviews as I wanted more complex and full answers (Trost, 2010, 25). I do not believe that a quantitative study would have given me the same depth and understanding. I also chose the qualitative perspective since that goes well together with my theoretical perspective of CoP (Trost, 2010, 33). The interviews were conducted in seven stages; thematize, design, interview, transfer to writing, analyze material, result and reporting (Trost, 2010, 50-51).

The qualitative interviews make up the base material in this thesis, however it has been necessary to combine the interviews with a literature study to provide me with a deeper understanding of previous research; as well as theoretical perspectives that could be used to analyze the material that I have.

#### **4.3 Methodological constrains**

A few possible constraints are important to highlight in relation to my chosen method and the fact that I have been a part of the group that I interviewed. Being a former intern at the SER department it is possible that I have asked too complex questions, however I tried to ask the kind of questions that I had when I first came to the department and did not know anything about how they worked. I do believe that it has been an advantage for me in the interviews to have known the people I have interviewed; it has led to a more open atmosphere with more trust and openness than I think would have been possible if it was the first time we met. The fact that I know the organization a little has also given me the opportunity to ask more in depth questions since I had the background story already explained to me.

Another possible constraint has been the number of people I interviewed. I have conducted interviews with four people working at the SER department. The department is made up of six people, but one was on sick leave due to a broken wrist at the time the interviews were conducted, and the other person was located in a different city. I wanted the interviews to take place face to face, and therefore I chose to only conduct interviews with the remaining four people at the department. To make sure I have got the same “quality” of the interviews I have had a clear interview guide that I have wanted answers to. But since the “in between” questions have been different there has not been one interview that has been the same as the rest.

When interviewing people about their work and work environment, an environment that I myself am familiar with it was difficult to avoid mixing my own pre-understanding of the situation at the SER department with the understandings/perceptions described by the interviewee, I have by the above mentioned precautions tried to avoid this from happening. I have also had in mind that we are always in some sort of connection with the people we are interacting with and that this can create a problem with objectivity. To deal with this we can work with clear interview guide and thereby guide the interview so that all the questions you have in mind gets an answer.

## **5. Perspectives of knowledge communication at ICA**

The following chapters will outline the answers from my interviews with the SER department at ICA. Chapter 5 is divided in four parts that will deal with how SER works as a group today and how they perceive knowledge. Chapter 6 will see how the SER department could work with CoP, potential benefits and constrains. Last but not least is chapter 7 with some final reflection and conclusions.

In this section the different perspectives from the interviews at ICA will be presented. The first three subsections are based on the interviews I conducted in January and February with people working at the SER department. The last subsection, 5.4, is based on the interviews I conducted in stores to review the communication material. In addition the chapter contains reflections from my own experience as part of the team at ICA during my internship. The interviews are codified by numbers and since there is no grammatically correct word for the Swedish “hen” I will use she in all the interviews.

### **5.1 The SER practice and how can the SER CoP be described?**

The purpose of the SER department is to be a supporting function for the rest of ICA. That means that when the marketing department has questions relating to environmental issues or issues on social responsibility they can consult the SER department (Interview 1). The broader purpose of the group is to contribute to positive environmental and social development in the world (Interview 1). The SER department has as a goal for ICA to have the most sustainable retail stores. ICA has a bank function and real estate responsibility as well. The SER department supports them too (Interview 4). Even though the overall goal is to contribute to a better world it is important to know that we can only act in the world that we are living in, we need to make things better where we stand (Interview 1). Interview 2 states that there are other purposes to the department as well. One of the most important tasks of the department is to make sure that ICA follows the standards and priorities that they have set up for themselves. *“We need to make sure that ICA keeps their promises”* (Interview 2). Interview 4 states that the purpose of the group is to support the rest of the organization on matters big and small.

*“Sometimes we can support them so that they are ‘heading in the right directions’ and other times we need to be the ones that provide them with glasses and show them what road to choose. Sometimes that is not good enough either and then we need to push them to do the right things”* (Interview 4).

To be someone’s glasses means that you are the one that points out to them where they should step, you are the one that helps them to see where to go. To be the “oracle” on all environmental questions as well as questions regarding social responsibility for that the whole of ICA holds might not be an easy task. It demands a lot of competence and specialization.

The SER department is formed today by a group of specialists that are working towards the same goal, to create a better world and to help ICA provide to that better future.

In the SER department there are many “*experts in their own field*” (Interview 4). The group is constructed so that it can handle all kinds of questions and all types of issues that might come up. This kind of specialization is a good thing when it comes to a ‘deep’ competence but it can cause problem with structures of working together. If you focus on your own special area and the issues that are related to that, there is not as much incitement to work together with others. This can lead to missed opportunities in learning from each other and getting other perspectives than your own.

The problematic nature of understanding or working together on each other’s issues is something that all the interviewees brought up during the interviews. For example Interview 4 puts it like this:

*“That we are not working together on all things is a bit of a weak spot. Even though we are placed here to be specialist and that we are all the best people on our area, it is still a good thing to let the other people in the group know what you are working with. But on the other hand, I do not believe that anyone is that interested in me holding a 2 hour lecture on my area of expertise. But we could use our competences in different ways, no one will be as good as me in my special area but we could use each other’s experience in more recurrent ways. Because even if you know that you have the details in the case, someone else can give you a method for how to tackle a situation”* (Interview 4).

With that said she thought that they had become better and better on this, to use each others’ strengths but she stated that they can always improve (Interview 4). Interview 3 claims that she is not working that much together with her colleagues. She can turn to them for help and to get advice on things, but there is no structured way in how they should work together. This is confirmed by Interview 2. Initially interview 1 claim that she experienced that she is working together with the whole department (Interview 1, Interview 2). After a while however interview 1 changed her mind and said that she is only working regularly with one or two other people. Neither interview 1, Interview 3 nor Interview 2 thinks this is a problem when the question is posed first. They see that they could have use for the other expert knowledge but there is a time restriction that makes this difficult (Interview 1, 2, 3).

It should be mentioned that the group has department meetings every month, with time allocated to bring up things that they want to discuss, or have problems with. This is the time that all four of the interviewees agree on that they have a joint session and can discuss what is going on. But from both Interview 1 and Interview 2 it is clear that there is not always time to bring up things that you would have liked to bring up. The overall sentiment from the interviews is that the people working in the department really like their jobs and that they feel as if they can bring things up with one and other. However there are some difficulties in knowing what other people at the SER department are up to and that their competence perhaps could be useful, even though they never get the chance to try it out. This can be put down to two things primarily; lack of time and lack of frameworks for how this work could be done (Interview 1, 2, 3, 4).

A cultivated CoP can be described as group of people who somehow take part in and engage in a common interest. They do not necessarily have to work at the same place or live close to each other but they will come together and engage in activities regarding a joint interest (Eckert, 2006, Wenger 1998, Wenger et al, 2002). From the interviews we can see that the

SER department today is a group of experts that are driven by their passion and engagement for social and environmental issues. In some cases it has been their passion for environmental issues and social responsibility that led them to ICA, and other times they already worked in ICA and the organization gave them the opportunity to work with issues that mattered to them. The SER group can be described as a CoP because they seem to identify themselves with these questions. This means that they are already today in some way working in a CoP, but as Wenger et al (2002) points out, there might be groups that look like CoP but are not driven by the same values as a cultivated CoP. They can therefore not enjoy the same benefits in form of structure and repetitiveness that a cultivated CoP can do.

## **5.2 What views of knowledge can be found at the department?**

In the theory section above two ways of looking at knowledge is presented. During the interviews I have not posed direct questions like “what is knowledge to you”. Rather it has been an interpretation of their responses that has been used to find out the different views of knowledge. Since no direct questions have been posed there will be a mix of answers from the respondents. None of the interview persons has given a clear and consistent definition of knowledge in relation to the two perspectives presented in the theory section but rather a stronger or weaker influence from one perspective than the other.

For Interview 3, I knowledge is often something that you can get and “transfer”. This becomes clear in the way that she describes how new “knowledge” and priorities comes in to the group. In her daily work she gets input from colleagues in the form of “knowledge” regarding different issues that might concern her tasks. They provide her with their “knowledge” and she processes it and can bring it into her work life. The monthly meetings is not described as an opportunity to learn from one and other but rather for transferring information about priorities and new strategies to the rest of the group. This way of describing knowledge can be found in Johannessen and Olsens (2003) text, they write that explicit knowledge can be written down and then transferred from a sender to a receiver. This means that according to Interview 3 the times when the whole group get together to talk, they do so to transfer knowledge like messages and she does not look at this coming together as an opportunity to build knowledge together (Wenger et al, 2002) There is not really a structure for how to use each other’s skills when dealing with new issues. Interview 3 does not think that this is so strange, since the different tasks are so different, why should they work together if they do not have a common ground. This does not mean that she can’t take input from others but it is not necessary according to her if they are not working on the same thing. Therefore knowledge becomes something that you can transfer and tell other people about but not something that you perhaps create together.

On the other hand, she claims that the strategic plans for the whole group are created by the whole group together. One time a year they all sit together and put together a plan from their different areas of expertise.

Interview 1 on the other hand describes knowledge as something that you can get through personal engagement and through passion. But on the question how the competence she possesses can reach out to other people it becomes clear that she perceives knowledge as something that you transfer and that people can read it and then they have it. This is the idea of knowledge as a box. When she describes the SER communication material, and how it should be used, knowledge is described as something that is necessary to make people change behavior. But the communication focuses on delivering messages instead of how to interact with people with the purpose of together creating the knowledge and understanding. This puts

the focus on the explicit knowledge that can be transferred and then understood in the same way as it was meant from the sender. If people do not enter situations with similar pre-understandings this can be difficult to do. Johannessen and Olsen (2003) talks about transferring knowledge as a box, but they are at the same time explicit about the fact that people can only understand and make sense of the knowledge if they have similar understanding of the situation from the first place (2003, 278) Interview 1 states that since she is the only one on this expert position it is her knowledge that is important and can be seen in the communication that takes place. To be able to create change it is important to “give” that knowledge to other people, mostly through writing or lecturing.

When Interview 2 describes how she gets new perspectives in her daily work, she claims that it is mostly through information leaflets, newsletters, papers and the knowledge from other colleagues that she can ask. The respondents continue with describing that when she gives advice to her colleagues she will first ask them to go through the written material that they have on the area. She is also used to work on her own and to then “collect knowledge” by reading information in books, articles and online.

Neither Interview 2 nor Interview 1 thinks that the SER’s way of working with knowledge is something that needs to be changed or more structured. They rather see that they have access to the other people’s knowledge when they need it and they know that they can always ask when they have questions.

Interview 4 mentions the informal way as one of the most effective ways of working at ICA and to get your voice heard. She mentions the importance to work together to be able to learn but also to use as many ways as possible to spread messages. Her preferred way of spreading knowledge is that someone stands in front of you and lectures about their special area. That shows a view of knowledge as if it is a box and something that you can transfer from one person to another when you think that they need more information on something. To look at knowledge in this way is common within organizational structure, (Argote, 1999) but can create problems when you want to foster an engagement among a group of people. It is important to see that we learn from each other and that one person’s knowledge can be more powerful or valuable when shared with others (Wenger, 1998). New inputs and ideas are described by interview 2 as if they come from above, from the board at ICA, and then flows all the way down in the organization. This highlight that there is a view, a common understanding that knowledge can come from one source and travel to another and that the message will look the same from the sender all the way to the receiver (Johannessen and Olsen, 2003).

When talking about senders and receivers, the next part aims to discuss how knowledge “transfer” or “creates” in the group.

### **5.3 How does the SER department work with ”knowledge transfer” and ”knowledge creation”?**

What is brought up in all the interviews on how to create or transfer knowledge are two things; the monthly meetings and the “waterfall principle”. The monthly meetings are put in place to get to know if there is any news at the department and if there are any new priorities that need to be addressed. It is also a forum to bring up things that concerns the whole group and provides a forum for asking for help. This is how the monthly meetings are described to function in theory, however most of the interviewees states that the meetings goes so fast that there is not time to bring up all what they would like to discuss. (Interview 1, 2, 3).

The waterfall principle is there to spread information within ICA. The head of the different management departments and the board have meetings and all the managers at the different departments are then responsible to pass on the information. That means that information comes down to the different departments at ICA from the management, and that the managers at each department bring with them opinions from the different departments up to the management. At the department meetings the information from the management is then taken into consideration if it will affect the special competences of the group. These are the recurrent occasions that the whole group can take part of information and in a joint group sit down and discuss matters.

Apart from these more organized events both Interview 2 and Interview 1 claim that they ask people if they want to know something. If it is a project that they feel that they need help with, they know what the other peoples' areas of expertise are and then ask them for help. They both state that they do not do so very often due to the fact that they already have a heavy workload and that consulting others takes time. But they feel comfortable in knowing that the help and expertise is there if they need it (Interview 1, 2). Within the group Interview 3 feels as if she can turn to people if she need inputs on things, but that mostly the others work is not overlapping with hers. My experience from my internship is that a lot of communication and sharing of experience takes place during lunch hours.

Since the SER department is a support function they are not only transferring or creating knowledge within the group. Their highest priority is to share and support knowledge with other people in the ICA building, other departments and functions. As a support function, much of their time is used to motivate others. That can be to convince people to fulfill ideas and project that they themselves see as important, or it can be that they need to apply the lens of social or environmental responsibility to a project. In that sense it is important to show different arguments to the people that they are trying to convince and to provide them with tools how they could conduct the projects. The SER department provides this by using documents and answering questions that are posed to them.

The members of the SER department are also all part of informal or formal groups within the ICA house and in those groups they can bring up and discuss areas that need focus. When informal groups are shaped, they are often built on a common interest and a strong commitment to an issue (Interview 4). People in the group then bring their different perspectives in to the group and new projects can start to take place. Interview 1 describes how it is natural for a support function to work together with other departments at the company rather than just within the SER department. *“That is the whole purpose with being a support function; you need to be out where it happens”* (Interview 1).

#### **5.4 Reflection of knowledge in the communication material and from my internship**

My task the past couple of weeks was to investigate how the target group of the communication material, produced by the SER department, for “ICA handlare för miljön” (IHFM) perceive it. The SER department had a feeling that the concept IHFM did not get as much attention as they had hoped. They wanted to understand how the material was perceived and what could be done to make the communication more efficient. I conducted interviews with four people working in different stores who all have had the responsibility for IHFM in that store. I also conducted 43 interviews with people shopping in the stores to get their perspective of how they perceive the material. The result from that investigation is presented in a separate document that was handed to ICA.

Through the evaluation of the material a few tendencies towards a specific view of knowledge has become clear. First of all; the material is written material that provides short information text to people. The aim is partly to inform people of what is being done in the store and partly it is information with an aim to influence people's buying habits. The layout and format of the communication material indicates that the SER department feel that the knowledge presented in the information material is seen as something that can just be passed from one person to another and that it will be interpreted in the same way by all people. One example of this is a sign that provides customers with information of how the extra money that you pay for ecological eggs are spent. A few (5 customers) interpreted that sign as a negative pointer and felt judged in their choice of eggs if they didn't choose organic eggs – something they did not feel happy about. At the SER department on the other hand the team is very proud of the fact that they have come up with material that is "light" and not judging (Interview 4).

Another aspect of knowledge that should be discussed is the creation of the material and the subsequent distribution out in the stores. A few of the members at the SER department did not feel as if they were a part of the creation of the material, that they had no input into what was produced. That had resulted in that their knowledge and perspectives were not taken into consideration. It also has resulted in among others things that some of the signs are not produced in a way that fit the shelves, and produced using material that does not work in the daily life in the stores. As an example there are floor signs that lose their color if you wash them and there are paper signs that are too big for the shelf and break if they are touched by too many customers. The communication material was produced in collaboration with the ICA communication department. It was the experience of the communication department that had the most influence over the process. The way of working when you let one "skill set" be the leader in a process and do not use the multiple skill set's that are available can and did lead to a bad fit between desired outcome, usability, and customer adoption. It is demonstrated here that the communication department at ICA had skills in how to produce the material, but they did not work together with people that knows how the work takes place in the stores. This lack of a structured way of working with knowledge management has led to that much of the communication material is not used or used and now broken. This demonstrates how much time and effort you can save if your members with a variety of skills and experience work together.

The distribution of the communication material is the responsibility of "ICA qualitative coaches"<sup>2</sup> for each store. Their job is partly to provide the store management with information regarding what IHFM means. That means that the coaches first need education and knowledge of what they should tell the store managers. The SER department provides this information, and does so by talking the coach through the background of IHFM, how to implement it and how to do follow-ups. This means that one person in the SER department sent out the message and the coach had to "receive" it. Knowledge was sent out as a box. This has resulted in that the four IHFM managers that I interviewed in the stores were not sure of how to use the material or how to order it. What has become clear through my research is that the information that was passed on from the SER to the coach and from the coach to the store managers was not the same. Furthermore, time constraints on the part of the store managers made the adoption of the IHFM concept less than optimal. It can also be that it is hard to

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<sup>2</sup> ICA qualitative coaches are employees that travel among the ICA stores and help the store managers with implementing rules for food security and also for implementing and using the tools for IHFM.

implement since the store staff belongs to other communities of practices, with different focus and different ideas of what is important.

The view of knowledge in the SER department as being something you can possess and then transfer was clear also in the use of instruction videos for new entrants; when I first came to work for ICA I had to go through a few instruction videos on how to act and behave in the building and at ICA. It was a good thing to do, but when I later on looked at how people actually behave, people were not acting in accordance with the information video. This shows that even if you think that you can educate people and provide them with information, you can perhaps not affect the way that they act (Ham et al, 2009). What became clear to me was that it was the informal meetings and information sharing, that influenced department's knowledge and ways of working, just as much as the official information material.

One of my main tasks during the internship was to produce information leaflets for customers and internally. These leaflets should provide people with knowledge and information regarding ICAs work with different prioritized areas, according to my employer. This type of thinking regarding knowledge and awareness creation is part of the post-positivist way of looking at knowledge creation.

## **6. Strengthening ICAs CR work with communities of practice**

In the previous chapter knowledge management is mentioned as a competitive advantage Sherif and Xing, 2006, Wipawayangkool, 2009. In other sources cultivated CoP is mentioned as a competitive advantage and therefore recommended by several authors to be ahead of your competitors (Liedtka, 1999, Eckert 2006, Wenger et al, 2002). As the SER department is not competing with other departments at ICA one could wonder why they should bother to look in to the possibilities to cultivate CoP for their competitiveness. My logic for this is as follows; one of the most effective ways to gain market shares is to be connected with and effectively work with environmental and social issues (Stigzelius, 2013). This means that trying to cultivate a working CoP within the SER department could be beneficial for the whole of ICA, as the organization as a whole would more effectively be able to address these issues.

The previous chapter highlighted that the SER department has some sort of CoP today. The group is working with the same type of issues, they see themselves as a group and are identified by the fact that they are working with the issues concerning social and environmental issues. Therefore CoP is not a totally new perspective that needs to be developed but rather it is a concept that needs to be elaborated on further so that it happens due to good management, not as a coincidence – something that just happens. Today the post positivist way of viewing knowledge guide how the department handle and share knowledge. Examples of this is that knowledge is seen to be successfully transferred from one person to another, different experts in the group have tasks that in theory overlap each other - they are not working together on the tasks.

Etienne Wenger was one of the founders of the concept of communities of practice. In one of his first books he describes what CoP actually is and how it evolves (Wenger, 1998). After a few years Wenger brought the concept of CoP into cultivated CoP and more into a “world of consultants” (Wenger et al, 2002). In this thesis the consultant perspective works well. I will here present a few guidelines and steps for the SER department to take to cultivate communities of practice inspired by Wenger, McDermott and Snyder.

But first Liedtka (1999) gives suggestions on seven criteria's that needs to be fulfilled in order for CoP to be able to grow. Before I present some of the steps that SER could take towards cultivation of CoP I will go through the criteria's by Liedtka to point out the underlying principles upon which the department needs to work in order to be a cultivated CoP. Some of these principles might already be fulfilled. This means that there is a difference between Liedtka's (1999) seven principles and the steps that Wenger et al, brings up. Liedtka's principles are the foundation for a cultivated CoP to grow and could therefore be picked out from this thesis that concerns ICAs SER department and places into another organization that are interested in cultivated CoP. The steps recommended by Wenger et al, are shaped specially for the SER department.

Liedtka (1999) points out;

**1,** *“A shared sense of purpose and meaning making that flows from the personal to the organization [...]”* (Liedtka, 1999, 10) A passion and interest is something that the SER department has. In all of the interviews there is a big and shared interest demonstrated for social and environmental questions. What could be done is to sit down and talk about what social and environmental issues means for everyone at the department. That would create a sense of shared meaning that is put in to the words. That would also create space for the members of the department to jointly explore what meanings they share and what they do not share so that the differences can be dealt with in an open environment. To create a CoP it is important to really dig deep into what the purpose and meaning of one's task is.

**2,** *“A view held by each individual of themselves as embedded within a larger system of value creation for the customer [...]”* (Liedtka, 1999,11). When the interviewees explain what the purpose of their work is, everyone mentioned that it is to create value for the company and to make a difference. But they are also defined by their own title and role of expertise. This is something that would be good to address further. The SER department should together sit down and talk about what the larger purpose of the organization is and to place themselves in the larger system and what their role is in creating change to a positive future.

**3,** *“An emphasis on business processes, rather than on hierarchy or structure boundaries, take on less consequence”* (Liedtka, 1999, 11) The structure of the department was not something that became clear in all the interviews. But from my experience of the organization; there is a clear focus on the process rather than on the hierarchy.

**4,** An increased focus on learning and the individual growth within the organization. It is important that this development is something ongoing all the time (Liedtka, 1999, 11). My impression from the interviews and my own internship is that there is not much focus on this area since there are constantly other things that need to be dealt with.

**5,** Clear and functioning foundations form continual dialogue between members of the community. There needs to be a strong focus on listening to one another and to be open with sharing thoughts and ideas (Liedtka, 1999, 11). People at the department claim that there is enough openness for them to have a dialogue between them. But on the other hand, they state that there is seldom time and that they do not feel as if they need to have a dialogue ongoing if they are not working on projects that overlap one and others.

**6,** *“Local decision making [...]”* (Liedtka, 1999,11) The structure of ICA does make this potentially difficult. The SER department can focus on special things, but on the other hand they need to make sure that the will and perspective of the board gets implemented and

running. This means that the SER department is not an own organization that can do what they please. In many ways they have control over what can be done and how they should do it. But ultimately they are ruling under the board at ICA and if they say that the SER department are not allowed to do things, then they are not allowed. As Interview 2 stated, our task is to make sure that ICA follows their promises and rules.

7, “*A sense of commitment and ownership among the organizational members that includes a level of trust and optimism about their relationship with each other.*” ( Liedtka, 1999,11). During the interviews I got the impression that this is something that the department feels as if they have. It would however be good to go through the department’s capabilities and strengths in a structured way to even further provide a sense of commitment in the group.

These were the foundations that need to be in place for an organization to start thinking of cultivating a CoP. But the most important aspects for the SER department to focus on are some other things as well. After the interviews it became clear that the departments do not have a structure for how to talk about and develop their view of knowledge. To start reflecting on this in an organized way could give the department a deeper understanding for how they could work together and how the other people in the department perceives their work and their goals. If SER should start organizing their views on knowledge and find out what the other members think they could be organized in new ways. I believe that the best way of doing that is by using some of the steps towards cultivating a CoP. By doing so they would get a structure on how to share and talk about their view of knowledge and at the same time develop some of the competitive advantages that can come from organizing a group of people in a cultivated CoP – stable foundations to solve problems, access to other peoples experience and a dynamic group that are prepared to deal with a variety of situations. These steps could help the SER to get a structure of their knowledge management and further to strengthen their position since they are working as a team regarding their knowledge development.

*“Design for evolution and learning”*<sup>3</sup>

It is important that the community feel that they have a purpose that is alive and constantly able to deal with new situations that turns up. In the book “Knowing in organization” by Nicolini et al (2003) the authors deals with issues related to how learning takes place within a group. They discuss explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge (Nicolini et al, 2003). Explicit knowledge is something you can explain to people, instruct them how to do. The tacit knowledge is something that you “just know”. In the book it is best described with flute makers. In a factory for making flutes every person has a task to do, cut the cane, drill a hole or carve a perfect shape. Your performance is judged by the person after you, that person needs to feel if the flute feels good in their hand for them to be able to continue with their task. That means that that knowledge is not something that you can explain or really pass on, you just need to practice many times and then get the feeling of the task (Nicolini et al, 2003).

The thought of tacit knowledge is integrated into the concept of CoP. If we think of knowledge as a social phenomenon and something that we create together rather than just a movable thing the concept of tacit knowledge can be put in a context. We all possess knowledge that we are unable to explain we “just know it”. It is therefore important that we create opportunities as teams to work together. By working in a community we can share knowledge with each other and we’ll learn from one and other in ways that we do not do if we

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<sup>3</sup> Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, 51

are working by ourselves (Wenger et al, 2002). By working in a community on specific issues you can benefit from getting many different perspectives. Knowledge is also constantly changing. It is something dynamic - not static, and will differ depending on the situation and group of people you are in. A broader range of perspectives, and expertise will make the team better equipped to solve tasks. Cultivated CoP can become a way to facilitate this interaction of people and teams, and a way to secure successful knowledge creation and management. You will secure new perspectives on old problems; you will increase that the work happens cross boundaries and link new sets of ideas to the daily work (Wenger et al, 2002) In this way of working it is possible to be free and discuss things openly, that way of working can create a creative atmosphere that includes learning for every member in the group. And by working together you are not only able to take part of other members explicit knowledge you can also take part of their tacit knowledge.

*“Open a dialogue between inside and outside perspectives”<sup>4</sup>*

It is important that the group have a well functioning communication within the group so that different perspectives and ideas can grow. But for this to happen it is important for the group to be able to handle perspectives that comes from outside the group. The group needs to make sure that these perspectives can be dealt with in a creative way.

Through the research I found that the main purpose of the SER department is to be a support function for the rest of the ICA organization. If a new project is about to start, if a new article should be sold, a new concept for ICA should start or a deal with a new supplier is to be made, the SER department is the function that people can turn to for help and support related to their questions and concerns related to social or environmental impact. However, they also have a responsibility to increase the focus that ICA puts on social and environmental issues. That means that they have to communicate, and proactively enhance awareness of these issues within the organization at large – not only when people come to them. Doing this demands knowledge management. To be able to respond to their task in the best possible way it would be good if the SER department had a structure for how to share knowledge. Since the department consists of a lot of experts it is easy that an issue gets ‘stuck’ with one of the experts and do not reach out to the other people in the group, since that person know the question the best. What you will miss here is the opportunity to find out the other members perspectives on the issue. New perspectives within the group, or from outside can help solving the problem more efficiently and in a more diverse way.

The SER department succeeds on its task when it can overcome the obstacles of sharing knowledge in such a way that a person/staff member from a different department with different reference points, can easily make sense of the SER information, understand how it fits with her context – how it’s important to the tasks she perform, and hence integrated in her knowledge.

*“Focus on value”<sup>5</sup>*

In a cultivated CoP it is important to focus on the value that is created in the group. It could be that it is hard to see why the group would gain anything from creating a forum where they can exchange ideas with one and other. Therefore it is important to create mechanisms that make it easier to focus on the value that is created from this way of working together. It is important to focus on the value creation instead of focusing on the time loss for example.

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<sup>4</sup> Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, 54

<sup>5</sup> Wenger, McDermott and Snyder, 2002, 59

I see the post positivistic view of knowledge as problematic if the aim is to create an organization with a structured and reflective knowledge management. I believe that we are creating our reality all the time through the interaction with others. I think that we are making sense of situations we face in different ways depending on what backgrounds and previous experience we have. I believe that this can be applied for the creation of knowledge as well. I believe that since we are constantly shaping and reshaping our reality our “knowledge” varies depending on our situation – it is personal and contextually bound (Sharon, 2004). When applied to organizational development or management this view of knowledge is more time consuming for the organization to work with, but I believe it will be more effective than tapping into the organization’s “reservoir of knowledge” that Argote and Ingram discuss (2000). To build up a reservoir of knowledge you make sure that the organizations have a lot of explicit knowledge ready to use in different constellations in different projects. But by working more closely together as teams and as organizations, and by solving new and sometimes problematic situations together, over time you are not only using the capacity of your colleagues but you are also creating new ways of thinking in the group and you can also take part of members tacit knowledge. People in the team will be aware of each team member’s strengths and knowledge and how to best combine these to solve new work tasks. This creates a greater value for the practice. At the same time there are opportunities to discuss and share what value each member of the organization applies to their work. This is something that interviewee 2 brought up, that she takes great pride in performing her task. By managing the organizational knowledge you can also get hold of the value that other people apply to the organization as a whole and the work that you do, this can work as a motivation.

## **7. Final reflections**

In this thesis I have outlined that there are different ways of viewing and perceiving knowledge, as well as many different views on how to best manage knowledge. The way you view knowledge will affect the way that you handle situations and organize your work. Depending on the purpose of your task or organization different views of knowledge will work in different ways, and be more or less successful when aiming to strengthen the organization and collaborate within your team. My reason for focusing on the SER department was that I believe that through suggesting a structure on knowledge management they would increase the competitive advantages for the department. That would lead to an increased competitive advantage for ICA as a whole since a stronger and successfully implemented environmental focus is a competitive advantage in itself (Stigzelius 2013).

Some parts of the interviews highlighted that certain elements of knowledge was viewed in a social constructivist way but the absolute majority of the answers from the interviewees suggested that the SER department viewed knowledge in a post-positivistic way and as if it is something transferable - like a box. What also became clear was that the department is not focusing on how they understand knowledge or how they share knowledge among each other.

A change in views of knowledge from a post-positivist view to a social constructivist view could enrich the SER department and lay the foundations for more a productive team and stronger connections among the staff members. Many of the benefits of using CoP is mentioned above but one of the most important ones is that when you stop looking at knowledge as a “thing” and instead see it as something social constructivistic, you are empowered to change it. That means that when you understand the way that you think of knowledge you are able to change it. It is only when you start reflecting on how you are acting that you can have a chance to change. When the members of a practice can look at their

view of knowledge at the same time the whole department can change. Your unique skills and competence can then be placed in arenas and situations that you did not know they were suited for. This can create a dynamic and creative group that will take on new problems and situations and solve them together. By understanding each other's view you will know where to turn for help or guiding and by creating a clear structure for knowledge creation the group can still be individual experts but will always have easy access to each other's competences and perspectives.

Change can be frightening. But a shift from post positivistic views of knowledge to a cultivated CoP I believe can open the door for powerful and empowering transformations. For the staff members of the SER department this could mean that their unique skill sets could be used in new ways, leading to a stronger and more dynamic and creative team that is better equipped to perform its task.

There can be internal conditions that make CoP harder to cultivate. There can for example be prestige in being an expert that you are afraid to lose if you share your thoughts and experience. There can be insecurity in going out from one's original role and becoming part of something larger than your tasks. There can also be a lack of resources in form of time.

The third thing that can make CoP difficult to cultivate can be the thought that "we have always done this; we should continue doing it this way". I believe that if you can stand open for working in new ways and also set the foundations for working together, with many perspectives on situations you as an organization stand more ready for facing whatever situations or problems that might come up in the future.

My experience is that the communication and sharing of experience that is required in CoP partly takes place during lunch hours. This reduces recreational opportunities and is also exclude colleagues of departments not located in the same geographical area. To make sure there is time allocated for these discussions on 'work hours' would increase recreational time that the lunch hour provides. Many of the interviewees also stated that perhaps it takes a little longer when you are doing something together, but you save the time you otherwise spend on clearing up misunderstandings and corresponding through e-mail.

I see great potential for the SER department to start reflecting over their view of knowledge and knowledge management and by this start reviewing if they think that their perspectives of today is what they want to keep for tomorrow.

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## Appendix 1 - Interview guide

Intervjuguide:

*Hur ser ICAs CR avdelning på meningsskapande, sitt uppdrag och kunskapsbyggande?*

### Bakgrund:

- Hur hamnade du där du är nu?
  - Vad var din föreställning om arbetsplatsen du är nu innan du började?
- (Det leder mig in på din arbetsplats, berätta mer om... →)

### Arbete/uppdrag:

- Berätta hur du ser på ditt uppdrag? (Vad är meningen med ditt uppdrag)
- Hur är ditt uppdrag formulerat?
- Vart kommer uppdragen ifrån?
- Vad skulle du önska att ditt uppdrag gick ut på?
- På vilket sätt är ditt uppdrag meningsfullt?
- Hur ser du på möjligheten att utföra ditt uppdrag?
- Vad har du själv för förväntningar på vad du skall kunna åstadkomma?

(För att kunna åstadkomma saker kan man ibland behöva ny input, hur upplever du denna grupp... →)

### Gruppen:

- Hur upplever du den grupp du arbetar i?
- Vad är det som gör er till en grupp?
- Hur jobbar ni ihop?
- Hur lär ni er av varandra?

(En uppföljningsfråga på det är, hur lär ni er nya... →)

### Syn på kunskap/meningskapande:

- Berätta om hur ni lär er nya saker
- När ni har möten, vad är syftet med mötena?
- Hur känns det när du kommer ut ifrån ett möte?
- Hur tar ni upp nya projekt i gruppen?
- Hur jobbar ni med kunskapsöverföring?
- Skulle den överföringen kunna se annorlunda ut? (Varför jobbar ni med överföringen på det sättet ni gör?)

(Kunskapsöverföring gissar jag kräver kommunikation, när ni/du kommunicerar, Vem riktar sig... →)

### Kommunikation:

- Vem riktar sig kommunikationen till?
- Vad har kommunikationen för betydelse?
- Vad kommer den kommunikationen ni skapar att leda till? (Hur tror du att kommunikationen bearbetas)
- När sker kommunikationen?

(Kommunikationen kan vara ett sätt att berätta vad du/ni gör för uppdrag, Hur upplever du att... →)

### Sammanhanget:

- Hur upplever du att andra ser på dig (inom och utom organisationen)?
- Hur skulle du beskriva att andra ser på er som en grupp?
- Vad har du för möjligheter att utträta din roll?
- Hur ser ditt drömscenario ut när det kommer till din roll?
- Vad är det som hindrar att det ser ut så?
- När upplever du att förändring skapas?

## **Appendix 2 – Interview questions**

### **Bakgrund:**

- Berätta om dig själv -
- Vad har du för bakgrund?
- Berätta hur hamnade du där du är idag?

### **Arbete:**

- Vad arbetar du med?
- Vad handlar ditt arbete om?
- Har du ett uppdrag uppifrån?
- Hur ser det ut?
- Har du något inflytande över ditt uppdrag?
- Har du försökt att ändra på arbetet någon gång, hur gick det?
- Vad tycker du om ditt jobb? Vad är svårt? Lätt? Roligt? Tråkigt?
- Hur når din kompetens andra kollegor?
- Hur når din kompetens ut till allmänheten?

### **Gruppen**

- Vilka samarbetar du med?
- Vilka är dina närmaste kollegor?
- Hur fungerar samarbetet?

### **Kunskapsöverföring och meningsskapande:**

- Vad får du ut av att jobba i gruppen?
- Är samarbetet stimulerande? Hur?
- Vad skulle kunna vara annorlunda med samarbetet?
- Har du försökt ändra på saker i gruppen?
- Hur gick det?
- Pratar ni i gruppen om saker ni skulle vilja ändra?
- Ändras de då?
- Finns det saker ni inte pratar om, men som du vill att ni ska prata om?
- Är det lätt eller svårt att få in er grupp i nya tankebanor?
- Hur gör ni?

### **Sammanhanget:**

- Hur skulle du beskriva att andra ser på er som grupp?
- Vad tror du att andra upplever att ni gör?
- Hur når ni ut med der ni gör?
- Försöker ni ändra andras bild?
  
- Vad har du för möjligheter att uträtta din roll i sin helhet?
- Hur skulle ditt drömscenario se ut när du utövar din roll?
- Vad är det som hindrar att det ser ut så?