
A Taxonomy of Individual Learning Benefits from External Knowledge-Sharing Meetings

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Several knowledge-sharing and problem-solving roundtable groups, composed primarily of marketing executives from Fortune 500 companies, were studied through participant observation, analysis of audiotapes of the meetings, and unstructured follow-up interviews. Ten categories of potential learning benefit were identified through theme analysis: (1) new knowledge, (2) conditions for discovery and insight, (3) colleague resource networks, (4) awareness of information resources, (5) broad knowledge base, (6) new cognitive skills, (7) definition and clarification of terminology, (8) confirmation of thought, (9) awareness of knowledge deficits, and (10) self-comparison of professional competence. These ten benefits were then classified into three major domains (information access, cognitive development outcomes, and self-evaluation) and analyzed for taxonomy development.

Currently, external knowledge-sharing meetings—offered by such organizations as colleges and universities, private companies, and professional associations—are proliferating. All are aimed at providing participants with knowledge and competencies critical to their current performance needs and professional development (Laird, 1985; Piontkowski, 1986; Schrader, 1985; *Wall Street Journal*, 1986; Houle, 1980). These external knowledge-sharing meetings, typically called conferences and seminars (Feuer, 1985), are characterized as organized non-degree-granting programs attended for a specific duration by members of several different organizations, with typically one or only a few participants from the same organization. The design of these external knowledge-sharing meetings ranges from traditional, very structured training sessions (seminars and workshops focused on a specific skill) to very unstructured, less formally organized meetings that provide opportunities for information sharing among participants

(Schachter, 1989). Some meetings, such as professional conferences, feature both design extremes.

Despite the current popularity of these programs, organizations could greatly reduce training budgets, particularly funds for external programs in an economic downturn (Zemke, 1984; Nadler, 1980). Also, some predict that customized in-house programs, whether provided by external consultants or internal resources, will take away a considerable portion of the external training and management development market (Feuer, 1986).

Uninformed decisions to severely limit or to totally exclude external programs could result in unfortunate opportunity costs to an organization in the form of missed valuable inputs. On a much larger scale, these external knowledge-sharing meetings, by their multiorganization nature, represent a collaborative mechanism for promoting learning that often leads to innovation and increased productivity. Collectively, external meetings may contribute to healthy, growth-oriented competition and continued advancement in business and management practice (Lawrence and Dyer, 1983). Widespread decisions among organizations to severely limit participation in external events could in the long run greatly impede the development, dissemination, and implementation of beneficial innovation. Therefore, possible participants and those making key budget decisions must clearly understand the potential learning benefits from participating in external knowledge-sharing meetings.

Previous efforts to identify the benefits of external knowledge-sharing meetings have been based primarily on reports of personal experience and anecdotal evidence (Schachter, 1989; Standke, 1987; Watson, 1979; Crotty, 1974). Or they have focused heavily on benefits that accrue to the organization as a whole, such as building a more satisfied and productive work force or preparing the work force for new positions (Nadler, 1980). Little has apparently been done to systematically identify and classify the potential individual benefits of participating. A more comprehensive, systematic classification framework or taxonomy showing relationships among categories could greatly improve our overall understanding of the professional learning benefits associated with such external programs (McKelvey, 1982; Spradley, 1980).

Empirical studies to date tend to assess only the most salient benefits perceived by those who attend or by those who select or approve external events for members of their organizations (Schrader, 1985; Powell and Davis, 1973). A major limitation of these studies is that their self-report survey methodology may not uncover other important benefits that are less obvious. Studies that include a qualitative methodology, such as participant observation, can be helpful in identifying important data that would normally go unreported (Bailey, 1982; Kidder, 1981). Thus, exploratory observational field studies, which take place in a natural setting and are not concerned about quantifying data to support hypotheses, may be very use-

ful in building a more complete taxonomy of professional learning benefits (Marsick, 1990; Guba, 1985; Bailey, 1982; Morgan and Smircich, 1980; Stone, 1978; Becker and Greer, 1970).

The purpose of our exploratory study was to begin to construct a taxonomy of the potential individual learning benefits that may occur in external knowledge-sharing meetings. This taxonomy would be valuable for increasing understanding and improving decisions regarding the use of external programs.

The particular form of meeting examined in this study was the multiorganization professional roundtable, a type of external program occurring with increasing frequency, especially among higher-level executives (Schachter, 1989; Apcar, 1985). This kind of event typically consists of general knowledge-sharing meetings attended by peer professionals from different organizations. Unlike other external programs, the professional roundtable is convened for the central purpose of encouraging participants to share knowledge, problems, questions, and solutions of a general nature. No predetermined body of knowledge is delivered by the trainer or facilitator (Boje and Wolfe, 1989; Schachter, 1989; Vance, 1987).

Method

Two of us served as consultants to the Marketing Science Institute (MSI) of Cambridge, Massachusetts, in its development of five steering groups, composed primarily of high-level marketing executives with a few marketing researchers from major academic institutions. These groups were asked to help identify researchable issues and questions pertinent to improving marketing practice, with subsequent research activities to be sponsored by MSI. The process management model and evaluation of MSI's steering group program have been described in detail elsewhere (Vance and Kropp, 1988), with a particular focus on MSI's primary intended purpose of developing practical knowledge and research for the advancement of the field.

In the course of initial planning, we perceived that the involvement and longevity of steering group participants were crucial to the long-term purposes of MSI. We anticipated that such continuity was possible only if steering group participants and their organizations could clearly perceive the benefits of participating. We suggested that, in addition to participants helping to advance marketing practice, they (and ultimately their organizations) were also likely to receive incidental yet important learning benefits. MSI leadership was very interested in documenting these potential learning benefits for future presentation to steering group members and their sponsoring companies. Therefore, we were asked to examine these potential benefits in the course of facilitating the development and operation of the steering groups.

The meetings of the five multiorganization steering groups were characterized by open discussion and sharing of professional experience, knowl-

edge, and information regarding current issues; thus they constituted a professional roundtable form of external knowledge-sharing meetings. Each steering group typically included three academic researchers and seven to ten volunteer marketing research practitioners from different Fortune 500 companies. These companies were corporate members of MSI, providing direction, funding, and research sites. Participants met approximately quarterly in six-hour sessions, examining and sharing current knowledge on various general topics in marketing, as well as problems, solutions, and perceptions of areas for further research. This work was facilitated through a group process model previously designed by MSI and the consultants (Vance and Kropp, 1988). Both of us served as process facilitators in the actual meetings, and one of us also served as field researcher, gathering and analyzing data and developing a taxonomy.

The data consisted of descriptive notes recorded from three different sources: (1) direct observation of the five initial six-hour steering group meetings, (2) thirty hours of audiotapes of the initial meetings, and (3) unstructured, open-ended telephone interviews with group participants after the initial meetings to obtain individual perceptions regarding learning benefits. These three different sources were selected to generate data as sensitive and exhaustive as possible. Since the purpose of this exploratory observational field study was only to describe potential benefits and to begin to construct a comprehensive taxonomy, no effort was made to quantify the relative importance of these benefits to participants and their organizations nor the frequency with which the benefits occurred (Bailey, 1982).

The notes from the three data sources were recorded in the form of discussion quotes and behavioral observations. These notes were combined and analyzed for evidence of potential learning benefits using procedures of domain and theme analysis in taxonomy development (Spradley, 1980; Carney, 1972). The analysis in this study was restricted to learning objectives primarily associated with the cognitive domain (Bloom, 1956), as opposed to the affective domain or psychomotor skills (Krathwohl, Bloom, and Masia, 1964; Simpson, 1967). Each behavioral observation and quote from the combined notes was assigned a descriptive category of some type of professional learning benefit. These notes were then organized into groups with the same category labels. Some similar category groups were combined under more meaningful and inclusive categories, according to Carney's (1972) "pragmatic reduction," to separate the array of category groups or cells into a smaller number of classification categories. On occasion, labeled notes in a single category group were, upon further analysis, deemed to be sufficiently dissimilar to place them into two separate groups of related but distinctly different categories.

Ten different categories of individual learning benefits were finally developed: (1) new knowledge, (2) conditions for discovery and insight, (3) col-

league resource networks, (4) awareness of information resources, (5) broad knowledge base, (6) new cognitive skills, (7) definition and clarification of terminology, (8) confirmation of thought, (9) awareness of knowledge deficits, and (10) self-comparison of professional competence. These ten category groupings were then analyzed for similarities across categories and finally classified into three distinct major domains: information access, cognitive development outcomes, and self-evaluation (see Table 1). Contrast dimensions among the categories within each domain were then examined through componential analysis for further taxonomy development. The other authors occasionally reviewed this work to help provide a check on possible researcher bias. This approach is common in similar exploratory observational field studies involving taxonomy construction (Bailey, 1982).

Results

We will now describe and provide examples of each of the ten potential learning-benefit categories that were identified in this study. Commonalities among the categories within each of the three domains will be addressed, as well as distinguishing characteristics or contrast dimensions that make each category unique within its domain.

Information Access. Four major benefit categories were placed in the general domain of information access: new knowledge, conditions for discovery and insight, development of colleague resource networks, and awareness of information resources. These benefits all involve either direct or potential access to knowledge and information, which are frequently equated in training research (Camp, Blanchard, and Huszczo, 1986).

New Knowledge. Probably the most obvious payoff to participants in external learning programs is the new knowledge and information that

Table 1. Taxonomy of Potential Professional Learning Benefit Categories by Major Domain

<i>Information Access</i>	<i>Cognitive Development Outcomes</i>	<i>Self-Evaluation</i>
New knowledge	Broad knowledge base	Confirmation of thought
Conditions for discovery and insight	New cognitive skills	Awareness of knowledge deficits
Colleague resource networks	Definition and clarification of terminology	Self-comparison of professional competence
Awareness of information resources		

they can take back to the workplace. This new knowledge consists of new facts, concepts, principles, and procedures (Williams, 1977) that are obtained through sharing research results and personal experiences.

For example, in MSI's Industrial Services Steering Group, one practitioner asked an academic researcher, "How do you protect yourself when someone comes along with lower prices? You can get nicked and dimed to death." The researcher then summarized the results of his own research and other studies relevant to the question.

In a group discussion about international consumer services, one individual directed a question to another marketing research practitioner: "Just for my education, how do the fast foods do in France?" Another participant remarked, "That's an interesting perspective. I hadn't thought of that." Exchanges like these indicate the potential for sharing valuable information at events that are designed to encourage participation, involvement, and experience sharing.

New knowledge can be assimilated in at least three ways. First, participants may fit the new information into a knowledge gap that they are conscious of and hope to fill by attending events like the professional roundtables we studied. Or they may be unaware of their knowledge gap and fill it as the new knowledge reveals the gap to them. For example, a participant may learn of an important step in a marketing research procedure that he or she had previously neglected. Finally, through active discussion and confrontation, participants may choose to replace inaccurate or obsolete concepts with more useful information.

Conditions for Discovery and Insight. Multiorganization knowledge-sharing meetings provide an opportunity for participants to exchange ideas and experiences. This exchange depends in part on the knowledge the participants bring to the meeting. The fertile and stimulating setting prompts individual reflection and group discussion, fosters impromptu discovery and new insights, and produces knowledge that no one participant held before the meeting (Biggs, 1972; Bruner, 1961). Removed from the everyday distractions of the workplace, this learning environment sparks exploratory, creative thought.

This form of discovery learning is illustrated by the comment of one participant: "It just struck me that the environment is so complicated." In a different group, a participant indicated, "I don't know—and this just sort of came to me as I was listening to the discussion—I don't know if I would put self-service things in this category of service at all." This particular knowledge that "just sort of came" to him during the meeting may not have come to him alone or even in private conversation with another person.

Colleague Resource Networks. The learning that takes place in knowledge-sharing meetings is not limited to case experiences, principles, procedures, and concepts related to a particular subject. It may also include new or increased awareness of the expertise of other participants. Participants be-

come aware that other group members may be new resources for professional information outside the context of the meeting.

For example, at the end of one group meeting, three participants exchanged business cards and told one another of their mutual professional interests. They suggested that all could benefit from one another's specialized knowledge and indicated their intent to contact one another at a later date. One Consumer Services Group practitioner indicated in a follow-up telephone call that he planned to contact another practitioner from a different industry to get information on her firm's experience with a telephone market-assessment technique used in Japan. The new professional networks that arise from external knowledge-sharing meetings can provide valuable information to help address present and future problems.

Awareness of Information Resources. In addition to building an external network of colleagues, participants may become aware of information resources available in the literature, published reports, and other information data bases. For example, at the beginning of one MSI steering group meeting, a company practitioner mentioned some important issues that he thought required research. An academic participant informed the practitioner of research that the academician had been involved with that could possibly answer the questions posed by the practitioner. Later in the meeting, when the academician gave a copy of the research report to the practitioner, two other practitioners expressed interest and received copies of the study. This exchange is a clear example of how an external knowledge-sharing event can lead participants to pertinent information already available in the literature and other data bases.

Category Contrast Dimensions. As indicated in Table 2, two contrast dimensions help to distinguish the four learning-benefit categories in the major domain of information access. These contrast dimensions are (1) directly receiving versus potentially receiving new knowledge and information and (2) nature of the information/knowledge source.

The first contrast dimension points up that only in the learning-benefit category "new knowledge" is knowledge or information actually received. In the other three categories, the potential is increased for receiving new information—whether during the session itself, as with the category "conditions for discovery and insight," or afterward, as with the categories "colleague resource networks" and "awareness of information resources."

Under the second contrast dimension, nature of information/knowledge source, the benefit categories of "new knowledge" and "colleague resource networks" involve an interpersonal source of information. The category "conditions for discovery and insight" involves a participant's internal cognitive processes (Bruner, 1961); the category "awareness of information resources" involves impersonal information sources.

Cognitive Development Outcomes. This second major domain involves the way new information is perceived and processed, so that it provides

Table 2. Relevant Contrast Dimensions of the Information Access Domain Benefit Categories

<i>Information Access Domain Benefit Categories</i>	<i>Relevant Contrast Dimensions</i>	
	<i>Directly vs. Potentially Receiving New Knowledge and Information</i>	<i>Nature of Information/ Knowledge Source</i>
New knowledge	Directly receives new knowledge/information	Interpersonal source
Conditions for discovery and insight	Increased potential	Internal source
Colleague resource networks	Increased potential	Interpersonal source
Awareness of information resources	Increased potential	Impersonal source

cognitive tools and structure to facilitate subsequent learning, problem solving, and decision making (Bruner, 1966; Gagné, 1977). Three benefits were placed in this general category: broad knowledge base, new cognitive skills, and definition and clarification of terminology.

Broad Knowledge Base. An important characteristic of multiorganization knowledge-sharing meetings is the ability to provide a legitimate forum for discussing information at a broad, general level that is pertinent to all the diverse interests present at the meeting. As many MSI practitioners indicated, the involvement of people from varied businesses and industries allowed them to step back from the proverbial trees and gaze with their peers upon the forest. Participants frequently mentioned how valuable it was to “open up the blinders” that they tend to wear because of their deep involvement in their own work.

These practitioners frequently reported that they were able to gain useful new information and validate their own efforts through the sharing of general-level experience and multi-industry research results. They often indicated in the follow-up interviews that, without the broader experience of other firms to draw on, they would be inclined to question the generalizability of their own thinking to other companies and industries. Participants clearly recognized the limitations of their own firm’s single perspective. They were able to assess which knowledge was company- and industry-specific and which was generalizable. They were also able to gain a deeper and more complete understanding of some topics by examining them in a new and different context. Thus the broad, cross-industry nature of these learning experiences provided an opportunity for participants to enrich their cognitive structures and broaden their cognitive maps (Bruner, 1966).

New Cognitive Skills. As a result of attending the meetings, the participants increase in value to their organizations simply by virtue of the increased knowledge they possess. In addition to the new information they may obtain,

participants may also acquire new intellectual skills and knowledge-building strategies—namely, higher-level cognitive processes or mental operations that help manage participants' perceiving, learning, remembering, thinking, analyzing, and problem solving and thus add to their value within their organizations (Gagné, 1977; Gagné and Briggs, 1979; Bloom, 1956).

For example, in several MSI discussions of consumer service taxonomies and classification schemes, participants not only received the useful knowledge presented in the taxonomies but also learned to more effectively use the classification schemes to better understand ambiguous, confusing, and complicated data. Furthermore, in hearing about colleagues' experiences in analyzing problems and coming up with effective solutions, participants acquire knowledge of solutions to the problems as well as an increased command of effective analytical and problem-solving strategies. Participants' new intellectual skills and cognitive strategies will help them learn, solve problems, and make decisions more effectively in the future.

Definition and Clarification of Terminology. Cultural anthropologists, linguists, and others who study language and social behavior suggest that terminology and vocabulary can have a major influence on thought and behavior (Lyons, 1981). According to the Sapir-Whorf hypothesis, a limited vocabulary can restrict the breadth and depth of perception and conceptual processes (Trager, 1959), which can impede decision making and problem solving.

Clearly, some of the learning that occurred in the MSI steering groups centered around describing, explaining, exploring, and clarifying critical terms. To illustrate, consider the following exchange related to the term *channels of distribution*:

PARTICIPANT A: I'm puzzled by your discussion, because I ranked marketing productivity as number one because I thought it was more what I think you were talking about on distribution and the efficiency of those channels.

PARTICIPANT B: I would agree that there is an overlap between the productivity issue, the distribution issue, and the communications issue, especially in high-tech companies. . . . I think there's a definition problem. . . . We can look at it from a productivity standpoint, we can look at it from communications, or from a distribution standpoint.

Often the lack of a common vocabulary was due to participants' diverse backgrounds. Questions often arose such as "When you talk about distribution channels, do you mean . . . ?" These kinds of encounters force participants to confront their experience-based perceptions and assumptions and subsequently to discover new applications of the concepts represented by the terms. The refined or clarified terms represent new learning tools, new keys that can help unlock new concepts affecting professional performance (Bruner, Oliver, and Greenfield, 1966).

For example, in a discussion of decision-making units (DMU), a practitioner exclaimed, "I'm surprised that [DMU] is so common a term. I didn't know it was so ingrained in the literature." The group discussion of this term may have provided new application insights or emphasized the importance of this term—and could subsequently have altered the thinking and actions of this individual.

Category Contrast Dimensions. As indicated in Table 3, two contrast dimensions help to distinguish the three learning-benefit categories in the major domain of cognitive development outcomes. These contrast dimensions are (1) general versus specific focus and (2) structural versus operational nature of cognitive development outcomes.

The learning-benefit categories "broad knowledge base" and "new cognitive skills" are general in focus, encompassing broad cognitive structures and processes that are applicable across multiple settings and contexts. On the other hand, the benefit category "definition and clarification of terminology" has a more narrow focus, because terminology tends to be used to represent specific concepts in particular contexts.

With regard to the second contrast dimension, both "broad knowledge base" and "definition and clarification of terminology" relate to changes in cognitive structures (Bruner, 1966), whereas the category "new cognitive skills" involves complex cognitive processes and mental operations that can be used to manipulate structural concepts, rules, and principles (Gagné, 1977).

Self-Evaluation. Three benefits were placed in this major domain, which involves much more idea testing and self-analysis than the other two domains. These benefits were confirmation of thought, awareness of knowledge deficits, and self-comparison of professional competence.

Confirmation of Thought. Several practitioners indicated in follow-up telephone conversations that the external multiorganizational setting greatly helped them confirm the accuracy of their own thoughts and perceptions. Such thought validation consisted primarily of comparing one's position

Table 3. Relevant Contrast Dimensions of the Cognitive Development Outcomes Domain Benefit Categories

<i>Cognitive Development Outcomes Domain Benefit Categories</i>	<i>Relevant Contrast Dimensions</i>	
	<i>General vs. Specific Focus</i>	<i>Structural vs. Operational Nature of Cognitive Development Outcomes</i>
Broad knowledge base	General focus	Structural
New cognitive skills	General focus	Operational or process-oriented
Definition and clarification of terminology	Specific focus	Structural

with the general position. One practitioner stated, "These meetings provide a way of checking in to see if my assessment is in line with that of others."

Several practitioners also found that the steering group meetings helped to release the tension of their own insecurities over solving knotty company problems. They frequently learned that they were not alone in facing those perplexing problems and that their uncertainty was not unusual. A debilitating paranoia seems to creep in when one believes a difficult problem must surely have been resolved effectively by peers, especially when those peers work for the competition.

Awareness of Knowledge Deficits. External validation can point up the accuracy of one's thinking as well as the inaccuracy, which was described by Mark Twain as "that which we think is true but ain't so." Participants sharing ideas, perceptions, and experiences may unexpectedly become aware of the limitations or deficits in their own knowledge. Participants may also learn that what is true in one business or industry may not be true when generalized across industries. For example, one practitioner in an MSI steering group pointed out the inaccurate generalizations suggested by two others: "You two are in very different markets. What's happening in the food market is . . ."

At one point in a steering group meeting, one participant stated that he was learning several things from the meeting that he didn't know before—things that he thought he knew but didn't and things that he hadn't known even existed. Furthermore, statements like "I'm beginning to wonder" suggest that individuals may arrive at a point of uncertainty about particular issues. The old saw "Ignorance is bliss" applies here, for uncertainty can be disquieting to heretofore certain executives. Yet participants who are uncertain or ambiguous regarding certain issues are further ahead than those who continue to possess erroneous thoughts that they deem accurate. Increased awareness of personal knowledge gaps can serve as a strong stimulus for participants to seek more information (Festinger, 1957).

Self-Comparison of Professional Competence. This learning benefit is similar to "confirmation of thought" but much more personal. Several participants wanted to assess their performance as professionals relative to other group members. In addition to desiring feedback about the accuracy of their ideas or the direction that they were taking, some participants expressed a need to obtain an accurate appraisal, via external peer social comparison, of their own professional performance effectiveness (Festinger, 1954).

Although not as readily reported by participants as other benefits, probably because of its potentially ego-threatening nature, this form of feedback was consciously anticipated and desired by some participants. One practitioner said, "It's gratifying to see that others don't have the answers either. It confirms that I'm not behind the power curve." Thus, a benefit for some participants was the opportunity to compare themselves with peers.

Category Contrast Dimensions. As shown in Table 4, three contrast dimen-

Table 4. Relevant Contrast Dimensions of the Self-Evaluation Domain Benefit Categories

<i>Self-Evaluation Domain Benefit Categories</i>	<i>Relevant Contrast Dimensions</i>		
	<i>Anticipated Versus Unanticipated Self-Evaluation</i>	<i>Validation Versus Invalidation</i>	<i>Locus of Evaluation</i>
Confirmation of thought	Anticipated	Validation	External, impersonal locus
Awareness of knowledge deficits	Unanticipated	Invalidation	External, impersonal locus
Self-comparison of professional competence	Either anticipated or unanticipated	Either validation or invalidation	Internal, personal locus

sions help distinguish the three benefit categories in the major domain of self-evaluation: (1) anticipated versus unanticipated self-evaluation, (2) validation versus invalidation, and (3) locus of evaluation.

All three learning-benefit categories differ along the first dimension. The benefit category "confirmation of thought" is primarily characterized by an anticipated, conscious, purposeful effort to evaluate one's currently held knowledge and ideas. The category "awareness of knowledge deficits" tends to be a more unplanned, fortuitous form of learning. In other words, participants attend the sessions more in anticipation of the useful knowledge and information they will gain than of the newly created knowledge gaps they'll take back or, preferably, fill while at the meeting. The third category, "self-comparison of professional competence," can be characterized by either unanticipated or preplanned (anticipated) self-evaluation outcomes.

All three benefit categories also differ along the second contrast dimension, validation versus invalidation. One's knowledge, ideas, and practices are validated in the category "confirmation of thought," invalidated in the category "awareness of knowledge deficits," and either validated or invalidated in the category "self-comparison of professional competence."

In the third dimension, locus of evaluation, both "confirmation of thought" and "awareness of knowledge deficits" involve a more external assessment of one's ideas or knowledge and less of an internal assessment. The focus is more on impersonal ideas or knowledge of facts than on self. And one's knowledge of facts and ideas can be readily changed, replaced, or altered to better meet performance needs. On the other hand, the category "self-comparison of professional competence" involves a more enduring, internal attribution of professional ability (Weiner, 1974).

It should also be noted that the categories "confirmation of thought"

and “awareness of knowledge deficits” can lead to either a positive or a negative self-assessment in “self-comparison of professional competence.” For example, when a participant concludes that his or her ideas and practice represent the state of the art, a favorable assessment of professional competence is likely to take place: “I stack up favorably compared to my professional colleagues.” On the other hand, if the experience yields an increased awareness of one’s deficits in professional knowledge and practice, especially when compared with other participants, a more negative assessment may take place: “My professional performance is lacking—I need to catch up.”

Discussion

This study has identified and described learning benefits that may accrue to individuals and ultimately to their organizations as a result of involvement in multiorganization knowledge-sharing meetings. The resulting taxonomy is particularly important for helping organizations select the most beneficial events.

Participants in such meetings can receive several learning benefits within the major domains of information access, cognitive development outcomes, and self-evaluation. The ten benefits identified and described here are new knowledge, conditions for discovery and insight, colleague resource networks, awareness of information resources, broad knowledge base, new cognitive skills, definition and clarification of terminology, confirmation of thought, awareness of knowledge deficits, and self-comparison of professional competence. Of course, many of these learning benefits may pertain to internal training and knowledge-sharing programs, especially in organizations that are highly decentralized and where participants are from very different divisions or departments with little usual interaction (Vance, 1990). It would be interesting to examine the applicability of the present taxonomy to internal programs in organizations differing in size and structure.

The external validity of the present taxonomy, which was constructed exclusively from observations of a marketing-professional roundtable, may legitimately be a matter of concern. Similar research on external knowledge-sharing meetings in other contexts (such as a more structured university-based, eight-week certificate program for product engineers) might identify additional learning benefits. However, any reservations about this taxonomy should relate to its completeness, not its relevance to other knowledge-sharing contexts. This is a taxonomy of *potential* benefits, and each benefit can obviously be applied in other business contexts and to other forms of external programs.

The inherent limitations of this study are its specific context and its reliance on a single observer-researcher for data collection and analysis. To

improve the general taxonomy presented here, future research should therefore analyze other kinds of external knowledge-sharing events within other business contexts and use different methods to help identify and describe other potential benefits. The use of multiple observers and raters could help provide more quantitative data on learning-benefit category frequency, as well as measures of reliability and internal validity. Other exploratory replication studies using different qualitative methods would further help assess the soundness of the present taxonomy. It would also be useful to present this taxonomy to active consumers of external programs to assess their perceptions of the validity of the learning benefits that have been identified, awareness of other benefits, and perceptions about their relative importance. This further research could also provide very useful practical guidance for those who design, market, and select external programs.

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