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# The boundary spanner's role in organizational learning: unleashing untapped potential

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Boundary spanners represent a group of employees whose potential remained relatively untapped in organizational learning. This offers tremendous opportunity for the practicing manager to design knowledge processes and technology around these boundary spanners to further promote organizational learning.

## Background

To ensure success in organizational learning, it is not adequate to just understand knowledge processes and associated technology. This is because there are many other factors that are necessary for knowledge processes to occur and the technology to be fully utilized. In particular, there is a need to understand a special group of employees who facilitate these processes and technology.

In recent years, there has been renewed interest in boundary spanning and the employees performing this role. The group of employees engaged in such activities is known as boundary spanners. This group of employees brings knowledge into the organization from the external environment and vice versa. Typically, they include sales and customer service representatives who work closely with customers.

## Organizational boundaries

Organizational boundaries define the limits of organizations and departments within organizations. These boundaries regulate the flow of knowledge between the organization and its outside environment, and between the functional departments. Brailsford (2001) said that these boundaries impede the flow of knowledge and the sharing of ideas. However, whenever problems surface beyond the boundary of an organization or department, there will be activities across the organizational boundaries to find a solution. These activities are referred to as boundary spanning.

Boundary spanning is a phenomenon that takes place at the limits of organizations. This means that knowledge from inside the organization is exchanged with those outside the organization and vice versa. Dollinger (1984) mentioned that boundary spanning is important to organizations because the flow of knowledge it generates helps them better understand the outside world.

## Boundary spanners

Employees who perform such a role are called boundary spanners. Sarason and Lorentz (1998) referred to these individuals as "gatekeepers" while Katz and Tushman (1979) identified them as "coordinators". Boundary spanners frequently communicate across organizational boundaries and perform a variety of activities that may support the organization or link several organizations together. They represent their own organizations to customers and facilitate knowledge sharing across the customer's organization and theirs.



Successful boundary spanners understand market conditions and the practices of all external customers such that reasonable strategies can be developed in collecting and sharing the necessary knowledge. Boundary spanners usually work with external customers, suppliers and other employees to resolve problems. MacDonald (1995) suggested that knowledge is often brought into organizations through informal and individual contacts of boundary spanners. Boundary spanning contacts may develop formally or informally, depending on the type of project. These contacts are usually located in different places, and require the boundary spanners to process knowledge in different ways and for different purposes.

The ability to disseminate knowledge across organizational boundaries is one of the core strategic building blocks of a learning organization. Boundary spanners must be able to acquire market knowledge from key customers and competitors, and disseminate knowledge to internal colleagues. Tushman and Scanlan (1981) mentioned that boundary spanning requires strong external and internal links because it involves obtaining knowledge from outside the organization and disseminating the knowledge to internal users. Thus, in addition to obtaining market knowledge, boundary spanners must also be able to distribute the knowledge across internal boundaries. In this sense, boundary spanners can influence the way employees in the organization perceive the external environment. This is because boundary spanners determine the amount of knowledge that enters the organization and who should receive this knowledge.

Boundary spanners work in areas where external and internal organizational boundaries cross and overlap. They occupy unique positions in organizations because of their work-related competence, and control over the acquisition and dissemination of knowledge. These boundary spanners may be employees, supervisors or managers. Their unique position arises due to their individual motivation more than as a result of their position in the organizational hierarchy.

### Role and selection

Consequently, boundary spanning roles are generally more loosely defined and continually changing than nonboundary spanning jobs. There may exist issues of role ambiguity and role conflict. This is because a boundary spanner usually has to balance internal staff and external customer demands. Most often, trying very hard to compromise between different sets of internal and customer practices creates tensions. On the positive side, because of this uncertainty and lack of clarity of the roles, boundary spanners may be able to act on unexpected opportunities that can bring about improved conditions for the customer.

Boundary spanners may be selected firstly based on their functional areas. Those employees in the areas of sales, customer service and project management are prime candidates for boundary spanning activities. Beyond these functional areas, boundary spanners should preferably exhibit personal qualities such as being sociable and friendly, enjoy new experiences and able to express their thoughts freely. Other qualities include being flexible, adaptable and spontaneous.

### Conclusion

The role of boundary spanners in acquiring, disseminating, and using market knowledge is key to success in organizational learning. This often-neglected group presents a hidden source of potential to be tapped. Managers who wish to enhance organizational learning should focus on this group of employees and design knowledge process and technology around them to support their knowledge activities.

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