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Working constraints within the management of knowledge transmission: crossing the point of view of a human resources team and operational workers

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Abstract

Considering knowledge transmission as a way to manage certain societal challenges, such as the ageing workforce, it is important to consider the role that HR plays in managing these issues and under which working constraints. In this scope, we conducted an exploratory study in a Portuguese metalworking company, complemented by an analysis with workers from different professional contexts. We aim to understand the main working constraints of the daily work of the HR team of the company, the actions/initiatives they implement for the management of knowledge transmission, and how these actors are perceived by operational workers.

The results obtained through interviews, collective sessions and the application of a questionnaire, reveal constraints related with work organization and lack of management guidelines that seem to be impacting the possibilities of knowledge transmission management. They also show that the operational workers seem to have little or no knowledge about the HR activity and do not recognize a relevant role in knowledge transmission management.

This study contributes to the further comprehension of the importance of transforming certain working conditions and HR training with regard to knowledge transmission issues as a way to improve the role that these actors can assume in the management of knowledge transmission as a strategy to manage ageing workforces in companies.

Keywords

human resources, management, working constraints, knowledge transmission, ageing workforce

Context

The task of identifying ways to manage knowledge transmission (Thébault et al., 2014) among workers is a concern increasingly in the professional contexts and identified by international institutions as a strategy to deal with societal changes (e.g., European Union, 2011; Organisation internationale du Travail, 2020), such as the ageing workforce. Whereas the European workforce is getting older and is staying longer at work, the knowledge, particularly implicit knowledge, and know-how, that the experienced workers acquire over time and through work activity become essential to transmit to less experienced workers in order to progressively enable their integration and development in the work activity, to preserve health and safety at work, to support a job well done (e.g., Pueyo, 2000; Santos & Lacomblez, 2007; Gaudart & Thébault, 2012; Rémerly, 2022) and also for their own reflection on work activity and development (Thébault, 2013).

In this study, knowledge transmission refers to a cognitive, social, and organizational process between two or more individuals in daily work and considers the implicit/tacit knowledge and know-how of workers that arise from professional experience acquired over time (Delgoulet, 2012; Thébault et al., 2014).

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The review of the studies concerning knowledge transmission and the studies that explore the work of Human Resources (HR) in companies led us to cross the topics (Pereira et al., 2023). This cross-sectional approach led to systematize some reasons why this task can be challenging, namely for practitioners and business managers, in which the HR technicians can be included and are highlighted in this study due to the nature of their function and their importance to companies' development and sustainability (Calo, 2008). First, due to the intensification of work (e.g., overload of tasks, hyper solicitation) and changes in work (e.g., constant changes in the type of work and the way it is carried out; Volkoff & Delgoulet, 2019) that can limit the time available for the introduction of knowledge transmission processes, which often result only from an informal exchange and learning in day-to-day work between workers, thus compromising the preservation of knowledge and expertise of senior workers in the companies. Second, because the HR practices related to knowledge transmission are found to be generally informal (Hamey & Alkhalaf, 2020); focused mainly on the business perspective of "knowledge management" that aims at the extraction and preservation of knowledge within the context (Pereira et al., 2023); and the HR professionals may lack information to properly implement practices to manage knowledge, in particular, on how to value workers' knowledge (Scarborough et al., 1999; Iles et al., 2001) and how to take into consideration the working conditions or workers' perspectives in the initiatives implemented. Third, due to the nature of the HR's function and the demands of HR's own activity. In this context, the HR function implies the concern with the maintenance and construction of the company and the contribution to its sustainability (Crichton & Collins, 1966; Tyson, 1987; Calo, 2008). These professionals thus operate at the interface between organizational charts; functional descriptives ("symbolic order") and the unpredictable realities of everyday life; considering the need to attribute new meaning to the forms of symbolic order (Tyson, 1987; Hubault, 2006). Therefore, they are agents of change, because their function contributes to responding to changes in the company's context (Ulrich, 1997). More recently, some companies have assumed them as "business partners" that is, interlocutors who help drive the company's strategy within the scope of HR issues (Ulrich & Dulebohn, 2015). Besides this, HR professionals are also workers, so they are also exposed to constraints in their activity, just like operational workers who are typically the "target" of studies for the understanding and transformation of work (Grosdemouge & Dugué, 2014; Grosdemouge, 2017) and some authors report an intensification of HR' own activity (spending time dealing with workers' issues and helping their team with tasks; e.g., Metz et al., 2014), that compromises the continuation or follow-up of initiatives over time (Oltra, 2005; Joulain & Martin, 2013). In this context, it is also stated that the spaces and time for discussion about work are rare, and that HR spend little time with the operational areas, limiting the knowledge of local issues (Grosdemouge & Dugué, 2014; Grosdemouge, 2017). Besides this, there is an ambiguity in HR work activity (due to the different aspects of their work activity, e.g., strategic, task execution, concern for workers' health) that tends to characterize organizational changes, the decisions taken, and that has led to the weakening of HR possibilities of action, affecting their work (Barès & Cornolti, 2006).

Although these contributions support the understanding of some constraints related to the management of knowledge transmission in professional contexts, there is still a lack of studies that address the role that the HR teams can play or actually play in managing this critical issue and under which working constraints, not only from the point of view of HR teams itself but also from the point of view of operational workers that are often the targets of the intentions or the initiatives around the knowledge transmission processes. In this scope, we will focus on an exploratory study conducted in a big Portuguese industrial company (more than 250 workers), complemented by an analysis of a sample of workers from different professional contexts.

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Objectives

Our objective is to understand the main working constraints of the daily work of the HR team of the company, what are their actions/initiatives in the management of knowledge transmission between operational workers in the company (what conditions they create; what support they give to workers, etc.) and how these actors are perceived by operational workers.

The following research questions were posed: i) What are the main working constraints of the HR daily work? ii) What kind of actions/initiatives related to knowledge transmission were implemented over time in the HR department? iii) How is the role of HR in transmission perceived by operational workers (as a facilitator, obstacle, non-existent)?

This study was carried out within a larger research developed under the scope of the contributions of activity-based approaches to human work (Daniellou & Rabardel, 2005) in partnership with the HR team of the metalworking company aimed at understanding how the knowledge transmission occurs between workers and what difficulties are encountered to be able to define future HR management strategies likely to respond to such concerns and to anticipate ways to manage the ageing workforce that the company is facing.

Methods

The study was conducted in a metalworking company established for over 50 years and that works locally and internationally. The main concerns of the HR team that allowed the realization of the research are related to the ageing of workers in the operational areas and the importance it attaches to the transmission processes for the continuity of the company's business; in particular by preserving and transmitting the knowledge of the workers in place.

The participants were the three members of the HR team (female; ages between 30 and 38 years old; and seniority in company/function between 10 months and 12 years) and the department responsible (61 years old; 25 years of seniority in function/department); and the 27 operational workers (male) of the two most critical business areas of the company - lithography (printing lithographers - PL) and metalwork (tinplate metalworkers - TM). The PL (18 workers) are between 25 and 48 years old and seniority in function between 1 and 20 years. The TM (9 workers) are between 23 and 62 years old; and seniority in function between 2 and 40 years old. The data collected by the research team (authors of this article) can be organized in three main phases. In the first phase, data were collected among the HR team. A collective session was conducted with the HR technicians (roughly 1h30min) regarding their main responsibilities, working conditions, and initiatives implemented related to knowledge transmission over time as a strategy for managing the ageing of the company's workforce. And it was conducted an individual semi-structured interview (roughly 1h30min) with the head of the department concerning, among other aspects, the characterization of the RH department; transmission conditions provided in the company and what value is attributed to them; prospects for the future regarding the creation/management of conditions for knowledge transmission.

In the second phase, the perception of operational workers of the two critical areas about the role that HR plays in promoting the transmission of knowledge was collected through semi-structured interviews. These interviews (between 40 minutes and 1 hour approximately) were aimed at understanding the issues related to learning and transmission of knowledge on a daily basis, and in which the participants were asked what kind of understanding they had about the role of the company's HR team, particularly in the field of knowledge transmission (e.g., if they knew what the work of HR was, if they were close to this department).

In the third phase, transversal to the main research, three restitution sessions (a restitution session with each area production top manager; and a final restitution session held only with the HR team) were held with the HR team. Two of them (roughly 1 hour) were aimed at the restitution

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of results specific to each production area (Lithography; Tinplate Metalwork), and the third one (roughly 1h30) aimed at presenting and discussing the final results of the study and reflecting some actions to improve the knowledge transmission conditions between workers.

In a complementary way, a questionnaire (designed to sustain the understanding of the learning and transmission processes) was applied to workers from different professional contexts (210 participants). They were asked, among other questions, if they were exposed to some conditions concerning the role of HR (e.g., gets involved in the creation of knowledge preservation initiatives; creates transmission mechanisms in day-to-day work; knows who the workers with critical knowledge are). And then, whether these items facilitate or hinder the transmission on a daily basis (on a 5-point Likert scale, where 1 is 'makes knowledge transmission very difficult' and 5 is 'makes knowledge transmission very easy').

Regarding data analysis, a synthesis of the participants' verbalizations was created, and a descriptive content analysis of the data (individual interview; collective session; meetings to return and discuss study results) was carried out. The questionnaire data were subjected to descriptive analysis using SPSS software (IBM SPSS Statistics 27 for Windows 10.0).

Main results

HR working constraints and knowledge transmission management

The first phase of the data collected revealed that although the HR team is formed by three technicians who work together, each of the team's technicians is dedicated to certain areas within the HR subjects (training and development; recruitment, selection, and integration of new employees; and labor relations). This work organization tends to create some constraints associated with their work, from which the HR team highlighted: i) size of their team (small team to deal with a large number of employees in the company - approx. 900 operational employees) – “*We have a team size compared to a company size that does not allow us to have direct contact with all operations workers*” (HR Technician, 10 months of seniority in the function); “*After so many years working here, I'm only now getting to know people who have worked here for 30 and 40-something years and that I didn't know because we are always here [in her office]*” (HR1 Technician, 12 years of seniority in the function); “*it is impossible to manage 1000-something people. ... and it is important not to forget that we are only three...*” (HR Technician, 2 years seniority in the function); ii) lack of possibility of planning their work, in consequence of workload and a hyper solicitation mainly from colleagues from other departments; iii) and, workload related to each HR area - “*the demands today are double what they were before. Before, I could spend a year just managing temporary workers, for example, but today I have to do a thousand things at the same time and attend to requests from other colleagues*” (HR Technician, 12 years of seniority in the function); iii) lack of alignment between the strategic guidelines they receive from the company's management and the urgencies/types of activities they are asked to develop on a daily basis: “*We end up being almost like firemen here. And we end up giving priority to more administrative things that don't add value, but that have to be on time. And projects that actually add value, like this one [the present investigation], end up in the background. Even though there are higher directives that say this is a priority, on a day-to-day basis we have to be firefighters.*” (HR Technician, 2 years of seniority in the function).

About the initiatives related to knowledge transmission between operational workers, there were none implemented throughout the existence of the HR department (only one initiative mentioned related to the preservation of knowledge in the context and directed to office workers). However, in the sessions to discuss the research results, the HR team referred that are some initiatives (perceived as initiatives of/to support knowledge transmission) planned to be implemented in both critical operational areas. For example, on-the-job and off-the-job technical training with external trainers; a “new employee integration” project; and the transition of HR

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team to Business Partners, aimed at ensuring their allocation to different operational areas and their weekly presence so that operational workers get to know the work of HR department. These sessions also showed that the HR team is concerned with knowledge transmission management, recognizes its importance for the future of the company's business, and believes that transmission occurs naturally in everyday life among workers. However, they are aware that it is not yet a priority in the actions/objectives of the department or of the company strategy and that their working constraints limit the time to dedicate to knowledge transmission, leading them to prioritize the tasks and needs related to their own HR area (like salaries; recruitment; training).

Operational workers' perceptions of the role of HR in knowledge transmission

The role of HR in knowledge transmission management is perceived by the operational workers of the company participant in one of two ways: there are workers who lack information about what the HR does, considering not having any contact with this department – “*I can't even tell what they do... I don't think I've ever gone there to talk to them*” (PL, 13 years of seniority in the function); and workers who consider that the HR work is mainly focused on salary management and recruitment - “*I know that HR is the one who hires people...*” (TM, 40 years in the function). It is based on this perception that workers understand that when there are needs, concerns about knowledge issues, they approach their team leaders/production middle and top managers and not the HR team: “*these knowledge issues are with my boss [production managers; supervisors]. He is the one who tells me when I need to teach someone*” (TM, 32 years of seniority in the function). These data illustrate the perception shared by the operational workers (PL and TM), which is positioned on the understanding that HR does not put into practice knowledge transmission actions.

The results applied to the group of workers from different professional contexts indicate that the role of HR is perceived as non-existent for 44% of workers from different professional contexts. In the case of the workers who report that they assume a role (56%), this role is considered as a facilitator for 27% of the workers (mainly by being available to listen to suggestions from workers and by recognizing their work) and an obstacle for 22% of the workers (by not being involved in building measures to identify and preserve essential/critical knowledge in the company and, by the absence of development of mechanisms/transmission moments that allow for transmission over time). Only 7% of the workers consider that it is neither an obstacle nor a facilitator.

Discussion/perspectives

The working constraints of the HR team complement what the literature has already evidenced, namely regarding hyper-solicitation and workload (e.g., Metz et al., 2014; Grosdemouge, 2017). However, the reflection in this exploratory study goes further and allows us to anticipate the role that working constraints assume when we reflect on the conditions for the transmission of knowledge as a strategy for managing the ageing workforce: the fact that the HR team recognizes the importance of the topic and have even allowed and accompanied this research to be conducted to find out the conditions under which the transmission currently occurs has not been sufficient for the implementation of actions. The data showed that although the theme is perceived as important, it is neither urgent nor considered critical, which prevents it from being present on the agenda/objectives of the department and the company leaders and from being a priority. We anticipate that the working conditions of the HR can be a reason for the lack of initiatives on knowledge transmission management: it is known that working constraints tend to hinder or condition action to what is strictly necessary (e.g., meeting defined goals; Barès & Cornolti, 2006), which we anticipate is also the case here. Furthermore, about this, we can also reflect as reasons in this regard, the absence of top management demand or clear directives/policies for knowledge transmission to be a clear goal of the HR team. As long as

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transmission is not properly recognized as a strategic path by HR (and decision makers/top management) it will continue to be omitted from their work agendas. This could have an impact on the possibilities of health and safety preservation and risk prevention at work by these keyplayers (Daniellou, 2010) and will continue to make HR teams disengage from the transmission, continuing to assume it as a day-to-day naturalness, in the absence of superior directives. Concerning the discrepancy between the understanding of training and transmission of knowledge, in the identification of initiatives in the scope of knowledge transmission the HR discourse was centered on the perspective of training as being equated with transmission. This is an important finding, as it helped to understand that the comprehension about knowledge transmission of researchers' own knowledge and the knowledge of HR and operational workers are distinct, thereby resulting in distinct representations (Lacomblez, 2018). This leads us to the consideration of a necessary construction of a common language: a space of communication between different interlocutors involved in the analysis of work as a “non-place” (Augé, 1992) but which can progressively become a place due to the construction of a common language, leading to a shared appropriation of the concept of transmission (Re, 2013). To this end, it could be important to think of extended moments of discussion, with HR about what characterizes the transmission of knowledge, situated from the concrete data obtained in this context, and with a view to the appropriation of the concept and the crossing of perceptions, constraints, concerns of both sides regarding the activity of production and transmission. We also reflect on the possibility of these moments being supported by the co-design perspective proposed by D tienne (2006), which crosses multiple perspectives. This considers the establishment of a common ground, the clarification of perspectives of different individuals, and the elaboration of convergent mechanisms around the topic, in this case about knowledge transmission and how to consider it in their work practices and work activity.

Besides this, training and transmission aim at different forms and outcomes for workers' learning and development. So, an intervention at this level would be important to adjust better HR actions related to knowledge transmission. It could be, for example, training the HR team on principles and necessary conditions associated with both ‘strategies’ to promote learning and development. Finally, the operational workers' perceptions on the role of HR in knowledge transmission should be reflected. Despite the relevance of the HR area in a company, partly for being responsible for the development and training of employees (Calo, 2008), all of the workers participants from the company and part of the sample of workers from different professional contexts are unaware of the HR role in the creation of conditions for transmission. This may contribute to the continuity of the distancing between HR and workers and perpetuate the non-seeking of HR by the workers when faced with difficulties concerning their knowledge transmission possibilities and learning. The underlying intention, and shared by the HR team, is that workers can get to know the work of HR (not necessarily that HR can get to know the real work in operations). However, this “approximation” to the field, assumed as a way to improve the conditions of transmission by HR, actually adds little to the improvement of the conditions of transmission, because the activity that gains visibility here is that of HR professionals and not of the operational ones.

This study provides insights on the work of HR and its constraints crossing two points of view. It contributes to the understanding that there is still a way to go in terms of training the HR technicians about what the transmission of knowledge is and how to manage it and create the conditions for it to occur among the workers, and in terms of reflection and improving their own working conditions. An intervention at this level would contribute as one of the pieces to properly address knowledge transmission as a strategy to manage the ageing workforce.

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