

When is Knowledge Mobile?

Social Affinity, Spatial Proximity and Learning

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A core argument emerging from the recent geographical literature on learning within and between globally distributed firms is the idea that relational proximity between economic actors is a necessary condition for effective exchange and joint production of knowledge. Moreover, this literature contends that, with the support of ever more effective organizational and technological innovations, relational proximity can be achieved at a distance. While this possibility seems plausible at first blush, its limits – both theoretical and empirical – have not been fully explored. Under what conditions should we expect relational proximity to be achieved effectively at a distance? In this paper, I suggest that the evidence accumulated thus far is still underdeveloped, drawing on a small sample of sectors and empirical settings. It is also somewhat undertheorized, lacking any systematic attempt to identify critical determinants of relational proximity. I review recent findings from a number of case studies in which distributed teams participating in joint problem-solving projects have attempted to engage in long-distance learning and knowledge translation, with varying degrees of success. Effective distanced learning is shown to depend on the degree of social affinity between economic actors, and this affinity is comprised of several different dimensions: linguistic, educational, experiential, occupational, organizational, industrial, and institutional. The frictional effects of distance are also shown to depend on the types of knowledge supporting innovation in each case, with synthetic and symbolic forms of knowledge the least amenable to distanced learning. I argue that it is through this kind of analysis that we might begin to develop more compelling answers to questions like: under what circumstances will relational proximity be stronger or weaker? What are the conditions that facilitate long-distance circulation of knowledge, or its joint production by distanced actors?