

Knowledge Angels

Seeking Creative People in Knowledge-Intensive Business Services

—
Observations from Canada, China, France,
Germany and Spain

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Bureau
d'économie
théorique
et appliquée
(BETA)
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 **Fraunhofer**
ISI

Emmanuel MULLER
Francis GOSSELIN
Andrea ZENKER

Introduction

Introduction

- Starting point : innovation in KIBS
- If knowledge is the core asset for KIBS' activities, competitive position and basis for their development :
 - how does this core asset emerge ?
 - how is it being generated?
 - what is exactly “happening” within KIBS?

Core hypothesis : there are specific individuals within KIBS who assume a significant role in innovation-related issues.

Introduction

- **Basic assumption:** fundamental factor leading to competitive advantage in (higher) services is **creativity**: new ideas support innovation implementation through various networking/interfacing actions.
- The analysis focuses on **creative individuals** in KIBS (i.e. individuals suspected of playing a role with respect to innovativeness)
- We call these specific actors ***knowledge angels*** by analogy with business angels.
 - Whereas business angels play decisive roles in development of innovative firms through financial support...
 - ... we assume here that specifically gifted persons can be the knowledge “catalysts” within KIBS.

Introduction

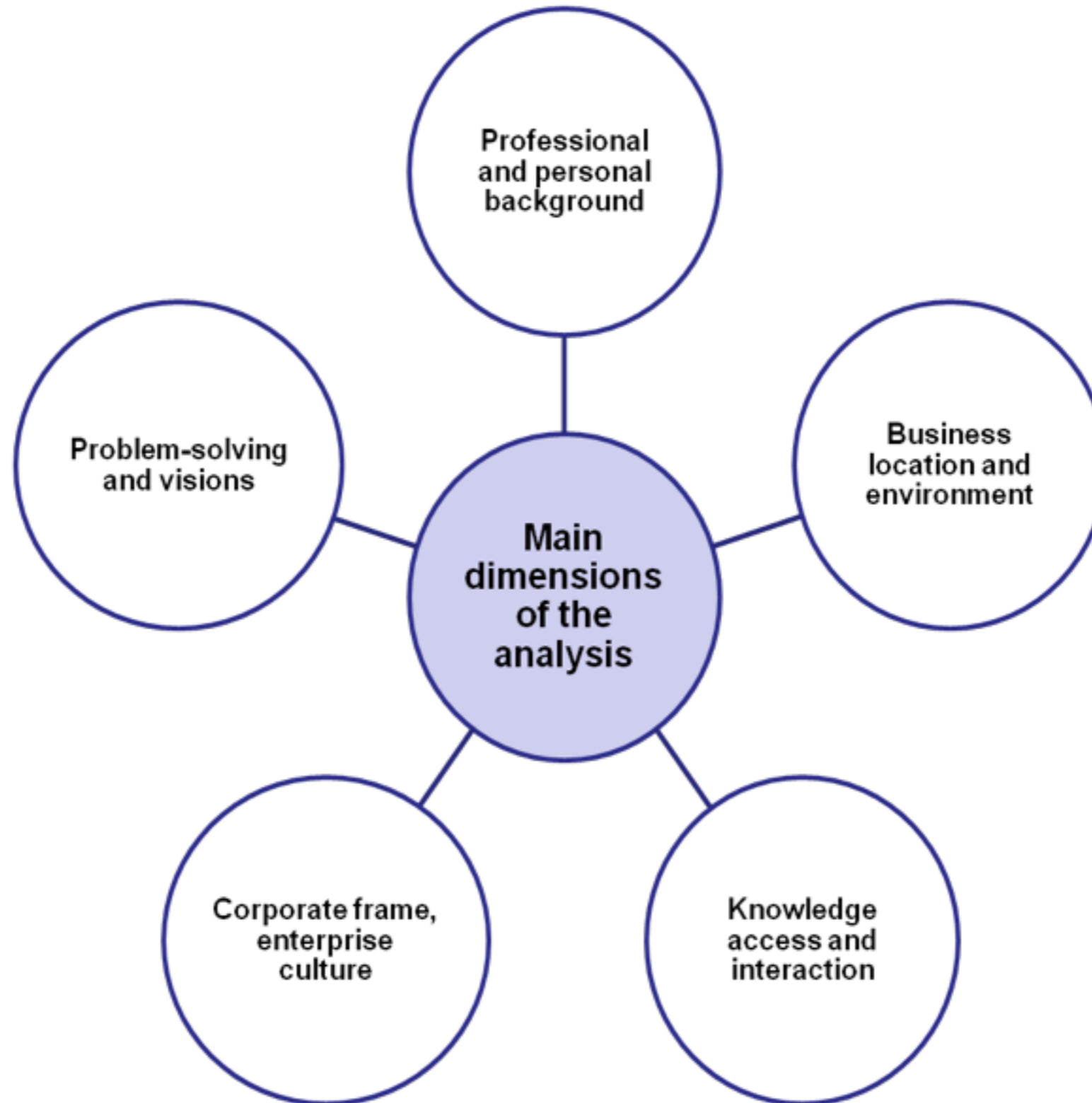
- According to our assumptions, knowledge angels are (or may be) specific individuals, who:
 - typically act as **consultants** (but not necessarily exclusively);
 - may have the talent to “**sense**” **things** before they happen, or make them “happen” (from the subjective point of view of an external observer);
 - **make a difference** in the way knowledge is created, organized and flowing within the firm and between the firm and its partners.

Methodology

Methods

- So far studies focus on characteristics of KIBS and consequences of these innovations, but only superficial knowledge was gained about internal dynamics
- Unit of analysis: single individuals who might reveal themselves as knowledge-angels in their entrepreneurial environment (KIBS).
- (New) **explorative** qualitative research design.
- 50 personal in-depth interviews between 2008 and 2010, in 5 countries (chronological order : Germany, France, China, Canada and Spain).
- Interview guideline covering five key dimensions.

Dimensions of analysis



Core characteristics of knowledge angels (vs. business angels)

Type of angel	Business angels	Knowledge angels
Characteristics		
Core resources	Money and business experience (and to a lesser extent ideas)	Ideas and visions (and to a lesser extent business experience)
Strongest motivation for action	“Fun factor” and financial interest (and a willingness to support younger entrepreneurs)	Quest for freedom and self-realization (and a willingness to support co-workers)
Main forms of knowledge support	Supporting already existing knowledge creation processes and situations	Initiating new knowledge creation processes and situations

Results (first-wave)

Empirical Results: Professional and personal background

- Degrees in higher education
 - Solid working experience in their own company or in other companies
 - professional trajectories as an accumulation of knowledge and contacts provided by previous experiences
 - Often (but not always) experience in founding their own businesses
 - Current position in their company:
 - management positions (China)
 - also engaged in project-level, besides their management tasks (France and Germany)
- = > They often describe themselves as knowledge brokers (Germany), idea givers (France) or solution providers (China).**

Empirical Results: Business location and environment

- Most interviewees pleased about their location.
- In FR and DE, individual success and creativity could have been generated elsewhere (?).
- Current location of company results from educational and personal trajectories of the founders.

- Contrasting results in China : Most believe, they are successful because they are located in the capital region of Beijing.
- Beijing provides more opportunities for personal and organisational development as well as a pool of talents.
- Change of location is often not desirable because of *Guanxi*.

Empirical Results: Knowledge access and interaction

- Knowledge base enhanced via internal and external sources: employment of students, staff qualification measures, brainstorming sessions, exchange of experiences.
- Different patterns appear in France/Germany and China.
- France and Germany:
 - Knowledge generation from external partners very important with strong differences in the “strengths” of these relations
 - Learning on a horizontal level is important
- China:
 - Knowledge access mainly from internal resources
 - Willingness to internalise external knowledge
 - Learning from higher hierarchical levels is important

Empirical Results: Problem-solving and vision

- Problem solving
 - France and Germany: joint discussions (participative approach), *bricoleur* approach.
 - China: mostly top-down process, based on intuition and accumulated experience rather than theory lead, lead by customer needs (provision of useful solutions to the clients)
 - Vision:
 - Most interviewees characterize themselves as being able to « see » or « feel » things before they happen and to have ability to « bring the right people together ».
- = > Key characteristics: self-motivation, autodidactic learning abilities, ambition, flexibility and communication skills**

Empirical Results: Corporate frame and enterprise culture

- Companies active in market niches, offering highly specialized services.
- Active in creative environments, like to handle challenging projects
- Future plans: moderate and stable growth of their company in FR and DE, whereas in China mostly dramatic growth is expected.
- Maintain and enlarge their market position and avoid excessive risks.
- Key advantage: capability to react to new and changing market conditions with new innovative services.

Results (second-wave) yul+bcn

YUL

- Most have worked in large creative firms prior to launching own initiatives
- Current situation the result of a thorough and 'rational' process
- Sense of 'co-evolution' with the local (Montreal) environment
- Less reflection in that aspect ; "choices you make without thinking"
- Certain sense of renewal, or lack thereof : are the best years behind us ?
- Knowledge-access is largely based on professional / coaches, etc. (North American influence ?)
- A migration towards less risk-taking with time ? ; From *bricoleur* to engineer ?
- Willingness to remain small and to have a general view of things.
- "Knowledge management" perceived as a major issue by most (too much tacit, too little systems)



BCN

- Entrepreneurial activity largely attributable to desire for freedom, self-development, etc.
- Significant number of consultants, advisors / consulting-related functions
- Proximity to network and family both keys to success
- Predominance of "small-to-medium sized" cities in terms of preferences : "the absence of crowds encourages creativity"
- Notion of "brand cities", Barcelona as a touristic location
- Partnerships with University (selection bias or cultural differences?)
- HR is based on quality of life and flexibility rather than on high wage. A highly externally-oriented structure also provides incentives for network creation, etc.
- Combination of bricoleur / engineer-type individuals as other areas
- Risk-aversion really low, eclecticism, enthusiasm and "positivism"



Conclusion

Results at a glance : Is there an angel?

- Based on 50 individual profiles on 5 dimensions identification of 20+ people, which qualify most probably as knowledge angels.
- Knowledge angels are found in each of the five countries (characteristics seem to depend on the cultural context).
- Knowledge angels act as internal and external knowledge intermediaries.
- Knowledge angels seem to benefit from their capabilities mixed with personality traits that allow them to develop visions.
- Knowledge angels work in positions that allow them to implement their visions.



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