Innovation in the UK music festival industry: Analysing the role and impact of knowledge management

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Introduction

The UK music festival industry is currently experiencing a period of growth, with an increase in market value from £1.5 billion in 2013 to an estimated value of £2.2 billion in 2017 (Mintel Group Ltd, 2017). Alongside the rising number of events and attendees the industry competition that music festivals face is also increasing (Anderton, 2009). To compete in an increasingly competitive sector, festivals are required to find ways of differentiating themselves from their competition (Getz, 2002; Faulkner, 2003), to generate competitive advantage.

Though there are a range of methods by which competitive advantage can be sought (Porter, 1990), Porter (Porter, 1990) and Tidd and Bessant (Tidd & Bessant, 2005) note the role that innovation can play in its generation. Grant (1996) suggests that, strategically, knowledge is the most important resource at a firm's disposal; it forms the basis for creating sustainable competitive advantage. Furthermore, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) note how knowledge allows organisations to innovate new products and processes or improve existing ones. This position is built upon by Argote, Ingram, Levine & Moreland (2000) and Binney (2001), who link the successful management of knowledge to the creation of opportunities for innovation, and ultimately to the generation of competitive advantage and long term organisational viability. However, Argote et al. (2000) and Abfalter, Stadler, & Müller (2012) both reflect on the difficulties affecting the sharing of knowledge within organisations as a result of individual company characteristics.

Knowledge can be found within organisations in two forms: explicit, (codified knowledge that can be clearly articulated between users) and implicit, or tacit, knowledge (which is imbedded within individuals and is typically difficult to transfer) (Polanyi, 1966; Singh, Racherla & Hu, 2007). Singh et al. (2007) highlight how the conversion of tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge is key to successful knowledge management and innovation within organisations, as it furthers an organisation's ability to re-use and harness its knowledge resources.

Abfalter et al. (2012) have linked the characteristics of music festivals to that of small business enterprises (SMEs): small central staff teams, high levels of staff turnover and a propensity for individuals to retain organisational knowledge (Nunes, Annansingh, & Eaglesonte, 2006). Furthermore, SMEs have been shown to exhibit non-systematic plans for knowledge management (Hutchinson & Quintas, 2008) and lack structured knowledge transfer processes (McAdam & Reid, 2001); characteristics which are also consistent with music festivals (Abfalter et al., 2012). Abfalter et al. (2012) also note the seasonality of festival organisations, with teams coming together cyclically to work on intensive projects before dissolving again, the consistent presence of strong time constraints, and limited numbers of permanent staff who are consistently required to transfer knowledge to a much larger pool of transitory staff.

While current research has examined knowledge transfer in stable organisations (Lytras & Pouloudi, 2006), where practices can be easily established and maintained over time, there is little study on the management of knowledge in more seasonal and 'unstable' organisations (Abfalter et al., 2012). Abfalter et al. (2012) suggest that existing knowledge management practices will require adaption to work successfully for festival organisations, to increase the potential for innovation.

This essay will look at the role and impact of knowledge management within the music festival industry; examining examples of its use within a range of festivals, and through these examples discuss the potential impact these observations could have on innovation across the wider industry. Due to the lack of research that exists, specifically regarding UK music festivals, this essay is required to look at examples originating from other countries, in this case America and Australia, as well as the UK.

Colorado Music festival

Abfalter et al. (2012) explored the process of knowledge sharing at the Colorado Music Festival (CMF), an event that has been running for more than 35 years. Through 22 semi-structured interviews, with a range of permanent, regular and newcomer seasonal staff, four distinct groups of employees were observed: the core group, the active group, peripheral members and outsiders (Abfalter, Stadler, & Müller, 2012). Individuals were found to reside within particular groups by way of their level of participation, and the interviews were used to identify and analyse the sharing of knowledge both within and between the different groups.

Within groups Abfalter et al. (2012) noted both the use of formal methods of communication, through pre-arranged meetings, training and mentoring, as well as more informal methods, in the form of impromptu meetings and gatherings. These methods facilitated the sharing of not only explicit knowledge but also tacit knowledge between, for example, newcomer seasonal staff and repeat seasonal staff. However, the sharing of knowledge observed between different groups was reserved to explicit knowledge communicated formally through meetings, documentation, emails and information packets. Abfalter et al. (2012) also stated that the single most important factor in the knowledge sharing process was the Executive Director, as they were instrumental in bringing together individuals and encouraging the process. Central to this was the creation of an atmosphere of friendship and trust within the organisation (Abfalter et al., 2012), a characteristic also found within communities of practice (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

The CMF shows similarities with the concept of communities of practice (CoP), which can be defined as a group who share a common drive to an end goal and endeavour to learn how to improve through regular interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Similar to CoPs, the CMF has segregated its members by their level of participation, and the seasonal staffing nature of the CMF mimics the way in which CoPs exist, while the motivation and interest to do so remains (Wenger & Snyder, 2000). Although they share similarities, the CMF does differ from a CoP in a significant way. CoPs traditionally use the levels of participation for learning purposes, with newcomers learning from more experienced members, and experienced members learning from new ideas brought in from members at the periphery (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Observations by Abfalter et al. (2012) do not indicate that the segregation by level of participation was used to facilitate learning at the CMF, but instead simply to segregate the staff and allow the sharing of knowledge within and between groups to be considered and carried out separately of each other.

A number of factors limiting the sharing of knowledge were observed including heavy workloads of central staff, tight timescales within which to share knowledge with seasonal staff, a lack of commitment to the organisation by a number of newcomers, and the formation of cliques by longer serving and returning staff members, resulting in an unwillingness to integrate fully with new staff (Abfalter et al., 2012).

The traditional knowledge management approach, as discussed by Hansen, Nohria & Tierney (1999), indicates the requirement for companies to select either a strategy of personalisation, whereby

knowledge is transferred primarily through direct person-to-person communication, or a strategy of codification, where knowledge is carefully categorised and quantified to enable its storage in databases. Hansen et al. (1999) note that companies which fail to choose a primary method suffer the issues of straddling both, ultimately leading to their loss of competitive advantage. However, the CMF successfully exhibits the use of both of these strategies, with the personalisation approach used within groups and the codification approach between them, supporting the suggestion by Abfalter et al. (2012) that the differences found in festival organisations will require a departure from the traditional approaches.

Observations from the CMF should be considered for their limitations and benefits prior to application to other music festivals. The CMF has been running for over 35 years, and during that time enjoyed relative financial stability and sustained successful leadership (Abfalter et al., 2012). Having said that, these traits are not unique to the CMF, and can be seen within other festivals across the world, suggesting observations of the CMF could be used by other organisations (Abfalter et al., 2012). However, the staffing structure and accompanying atmospheres of friendship and trust which were found as a function of the research conducted by Abfalter et al. (2012) would need to be matched within other music festivals before the findings could be applied more widely. It is also worth noting the small sample size and limited timescale of the research over a single season. Future research could certainly benefit from the application of a longitudinal study, assessing the situation over several seasons.

Abfalter et al. (2012) highlighted a couple of potential areas of improvement for the CMF. First, knowledge sharing activities were typically limited to particular periods during the festival and almost non-existent during the breaks between seasons. Given the strong atmosphere of participation and motivation exhibited during the study, there is scope for the implementation of an IT infrastructure to better capitalise on that potential for engagement, in the form of a web forum or social network application. Second, the increased formalisation and codification of intra-group knowledge sharing could, potentially, accelerate the integration of new staff members.

In linking these observations back to their impacts on innovation, this essay notes the findings of Coakes and Smith (2007), who connected the use of CoP as conduits for knowledge, and the significant impact they can have on the aptitude of an organisation for innovation, and, by extension, competitive advantage (Hughes, Jewson, & Unwin, 2007). There is potential that an increased effort to make use of the existing understandings of CoP, such as their use in learning (Lave & Wenger, 1991), may allow music festivals to capitalise on their already inherent staff structure. Furthermore, the successful management of knowledge and its increased codification from tacit to explicit, potentially through IT infrastructure, could generate opportunities for innovation which are currently bound within the individual members of staff (Argote et al., 2000).

Queensland Music Festival

While Abfalter et al. (2012) discuss the concept of knowledge sharing at the Colorado Music Festival, Stadler and Fullagar (2016) focus on the separate practice of knowledge transfer when investigating the not-for-profit Queensland Music Festival (QMF). In the past the term knowledge sharing has been used interchangeably with knowledge transfer (Paulin & Suneson, 2012). However, according to Stadler and Fullagar (2016) and Wang and Noe (2010), knowledge transfer is differentiated from knowledge sharing as it involves a more complex understanding of not only the acquisition but also the application of the knowledge by the recipient.

Stadler and Fullagar (2016) take a different methodological approach, making use of the appreciative inquiry (AI) approach to formulate their research methodology. AI circumvents the problem-solving approach of traditional knowledge management literature by focusing on successful knowledge transfer rather than its barriers, to explore an organisation from a different perspective (Stadler & Fullagar, 2016). Critically, the AI approach does not ignore problems that it observes, but instead focuses on analysing them to reframe them as opportunities for learning (Van der Haar & Hosking, 2004). Although the AI approach has been used for research into a range of organisational settings, including tourism and hospitality (Koster & Lemelin, 2009) and community development (Finegold, Holland, & Lingham, 2002), the work of Stadler and Fullagar (2016) is its first implementation in festival and event management research. The study consisted of a seven-month long survey, involving participant observations as well as 28 in-depth interviews with staff from across the organisation. Particular focus was applied to how the culture of the organisation supported or obstructed collaboration with reference to the festival's specific vision and identity (Stadler & Fullagar, 2016).

Similar to observations by Abfalter et al. (2012), Stadler and Fullagar (2016) witnessed the transfer of knowledge within the QMF occur through both formal and informal work practices. However, it is at this point that Stadler and Fullagar's (2016) work moves beyond the more basic observation of information management approach adopted by Abfalter (2012), to analyse the underlying organisational culture which enabled these transfers. For example, Stadler and Fullagar (2016) observed the practice of regular informal meetings which facilitated the interpretation of newly transferred knowledge by individuals, as well as the creation and nurturing of trust relationships between staff members. This correlates with findings by Zundel (2013) who indicates the importance of spontaneous and informal conversations in the process of knowledge transfer. Furthermore, Stadler and Fullagar's (2016) observations of the management of team's strategic and formal meetings indicated the facilitation of a collaborative culture throughout the organisation. These organisational practices assisted in the creation of a spirit of sharing and creative collaboration within the QMF, which improved the overall transfer of knowledge within the organisation (Stadler & Fullagar, 2016).

There are a number of limitations of this research which must be considered prior to its application to the wider music festival industry. Primarily, the QMF is a not-for-profit organisation (Stadler & Fullagar, 2016), and as such its fundamental identity and strategy will differ from the wider industry, which also includes, for example, purely commercial enterprises and volunteer run organisations (Andersson & Getz, 2009). This correlates with the discussions of Thatchenkery and Chowdhry (2007) who note the need for developing context-specific understandings of the links between knowledge transfer practices and organisational cultures. In addition, given that Stadler and Fullagar's (2016) use of the AI approach is a first in the field of event management research, more evidence of its successful use would add to the reliability of the study. Finally, and similarly to the work of Abfalter et al. (2012), a more longitudinal study of the QMF over multiple seasons would potentially allow more in-depth analysis and insights to be made into the effects of organisational culture on successful knowledge transfer.

Observations by Stadler and Fullagar (2016) suggest that the creation of a conducive atmosphere can benefit knowledge transfer. This links with findings of Thatchenkery and Chowdhry (2007), who note it is through relationships enhanced by trust and friendship that individuals can be comfortable enough to ask probing questions and provide input into discussions they would otherwise not engage with. This essay proposes that together these factors can create an environment which provides more opportunity for the creation of innovative ideas and approaches.

UK music festival volunteers

Abfalter et al. (2012) and Stadler and Fullagar (2016) primarily discuss the transfer of knowledge between and within the core teams of the festival organisations that they investigate. However, a significant number of festivals are dependent on large numbers of volunteers to facilitate their events (Ragsdell, Ortoll Espinet, & Norris, 2014), such as the 19 major UK music festivals that Oxfam recruits volunteers for, including Reading, Leeds and Shambala (Oxfam, 2018). These festivals are susceptible to the risk of fragmentation and isolation of knowledge within their pools of transient volunteer staff, which typically exhibit high turnover rates (Lettieri, Borga, & Savoldelli, 2004). A study by Clayton (2016), using an interpretivist approach, considered the experiences of 28 volunteer stewarding staff working across a range of UK music festivals, by means of a mixture of interviews and participant diaries. The interpretivist approach aims to provide understanding of the behaviour of individuals and facilitate an interpretation of its underlying meaning (Saunders, Lewis, & Thornhill, 2009).

The study highlighted the link between the motivations of volunteers, the quality of their volunteering experience, and the formation of a conducive environment for successful knowledge transfer. If the organisation is able to satisfy the motivations of volunteers this can lead to an optimal volunteer experience, which in turn generates a positive knowledge sharing environment (Clayton, 2016). Furthermore, Clayton (2016) notes, these positive factors promote repeat volunteering, which increases the organisations opportunities for knowledge retention. Repeat volunteering is also critical in reducing the time and money spent on recruitment and training (Ragsdell & Jepson, 2014). Comparably to Abfalter et al. (2012), Clayton (2016) notes the observation of similarities between some organisational dynamics and communities of practice, including the transfer of tacit knowledge from "old-timers" to new staff, and the presence of both strong group cohesion and displays of trust (Lave & Wenger, 1991).

A number of methodological limitations within the study are evident and are raised by Clayton (2016) including the self-selection of participants, which may have resulted in the documentation of overly positive experiences; the limiting of survey participants to stewarding staff rather than including viewpoints from the wider organisation or other event stakeholders and, akin to the studies of Abfalter et al. (2012) and Stadler and Fullagar (2016), the small sample size and the lack of a longitudinal study. Collectively these factors all limit the wider applicability of the research. However, it is worth considering these limitations in balance with the importance of the stewarding role, as discussed by Holmes and Smith (2009), and the considerable impact the role can exert on the customer experience, and, in the longer term, the wider impact it can have on competitive advantage. Clayton (2016) also notes that despite the potentially flawed process of self-selection the themes that were drawn from the observations were those of consensus across the majority of respondents.

Clayton (2016) highlights, based on observation, a number of areas both for continuation of current efforts, and ones that require the organisations surveyed to improve. Areas where current effort should be sustained include the following: the creation of strong trust relationships between management and volunteers; encouraging the freedom of volunteers to demonstrate their individuality; use of open supervision styles, combined with formal and structured training programmes; and provision of opportunities for social networking between volunteers, both in the virtual and physical space. Despite these areas of current success, Clayton (2016) notes the importance of a range of factors which were not shown to be consistent across the surveyed organisations, including: the importance and provision of a uniform to separate volunteer staff from regular festival goers; face-to-face induction meetings including senior management; fully leveraging

the relationships created through virtual communities and transitioning them into physical communities during the event; and a focus on codification of knowledge, post-event, linked with the more focused utilisation of more experienced repeat volunteers.

The findings by Clayton (2016) resonate with those by Stadler and Fullagar (2016) with regards to the creation of a positive atmosphere for knowledge transfer, and the impact this could have on increasing opportunities for innovation. In addition, Clayton (2016), this time resonating with a suggestion by Abfalter et al. (2012), observes the potential benefits the application of a technological solution, such as a forum or social networking tool, could have to the generation and maintenance of an atmosphere of collaboration, which in turn could increase the potential opportunities for innovation.

Conclusion

Exploration of the three studies of Abfalter et al. (2012), Stadler and Fullagar (2016), and Clayton (2016), allow this essay to draw a number of conclusions in relation to knowledge management and innovation within the music festival industry.

A clear link has been displayed between knowledge, knowledge transfer, innovation and the creation of competitive advantage (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Grant, 1996; Argote, et al., 2000; Binney, 2001). Successful management of knowledge transfer has the ability to effect change on the ability of music festivals to innovate, which in turn allows it to generate competitive advantage, and compete effectively in an increasingly competitive industry (Anderton, 2009).

The translation of tacit knowledge, imbedded within festival organisation staff, to explicit knowledge, which can be actioned more readily, is crucial to organisational innovation (Singh et al., 2007). Tacit knowledge is typically intuitive and learned through collaborative experiences, which aids in its inimitability and readiness as a source of competitive advantage (Shaw & Williams, 2009). The use of a combination of formal and informal methods of communication, as well as a non-traditional blending of the approaches of personalisation and codification (Abfalter et al., 2012) have been observed to improve knowledge transfer practices, which in turn can lead to more innovation opportunities. The task of knowledge transition from tacit to explicit is also linked to the retention of staff, in the case of festival organisations, from season to season. Improving the retention of seasonal staff or volunteers reduces the resources, both financial and organisational, spent on training (Clayton, 2016), and increased levels of retention can allow organisations to minimise the wasted cycles of relearning, and increase the resources allocated to generating and supporting innovation (Ragsdell et al., 2014). Following on from both of these themes, the creation of a suitable organisational atmosphere (Stadler & Fullagar, 2016), capable of promoting knowledge transfer, generating optimal staff experiences and supporting staff retention, has the potential to positively affect and prepare the stage for organisational innovation (Thatchenkery & Chowdhry, 2007).

The potential for use of a technological solution to capitalise on the motivated and engaged groups of staff in the 'off-peak' periods surrounding festivals has also emerged as a theme (Abfalter et al., 2012; Clayton, 2016). Although the nature of this technological solution would certainly require adaption to the specific characteristics of the organisation, and the type of knowledge being shared (Swan & Galliers, 1996), the potential is certainly there to facilitate increased participation and innovation in periods that are currently under-utilised (Abfalter et al., 2012).

Finally, this essay suggests a number of potential avenues for future research into knowledge management within music festivals, which may shed additional light onto its role in innovation. There is potential to learn more from comparison of the music festival sector with knowledge

management and innovation research done in the wider events industry (Muskat & Deery, 2017); e.g. sporting events (Schenk, Parent, MacDonald, & Therrien, 2015), and other types of festivals (Ragsdell et al., 2014). The music festival industry may also have lessons to learn from outside the events sector. Examination of research conducted in other sectors, such as hospitals (Leal-Rodriguez, Roldan, Leal, & Ortega-Gutierrez, 2013), footwear firms (Marques, Leal, Marques, & Cardoso, 2016), hotels (Salem, 2014), or biotechnology and telecommunication (Palacios, Gil, & Garrigos, 2009), has the potential to reveal approaches, and influences, previously unconsidered within events specific literature.

While Clayton (2016) predominantly reviewed the positive experiences of festival volunteers, it could also provide interesting insights into the study of more negative experiences of seasonal staff, understanding what factors caused them to disengage, and what affect this may have on training or the creation of a more inclusive organisational atmosphere. In addition, each of the studies examined within this essay were limited to a single event season, and a more longitudinal study would likely provide additional insights into retention and development of communities of practice between seasons.

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