CHAPTER 1

1 INTRODUCTION

The research described in this thesis report investigates the role of an intranet in knowledge sharing. It adds to the established body of knowledge management research in two ways. First, although earlier empirical studies have considered the role of the corporate intranet in facilitating knowledge sharing, these have tended to provide analyses from an organisational studies perspective, and to privilege the intranet as the artefact of the implementation under discussion. They explain "success" and "failure" according to individual facets of the implementations, and furnish the readership with advice on how to learn from the experience of reported cases (for example, Huysman & De Wit, 2002). In this research, however, the deployment of actor-network theory has permitted the construction of a *social* analysis of the implementation under investigation. This analysis explains how the multiple interactions of a range of human and non-human actors contributed to efforts to manage knowledge sharing in the corporate environment. It takes into account the technical, social, economic and political elements of the knowledge management implementation and their relative importance as accorded by the linked actors. The social analysis reveals the power that externalities can command over organisational initiatives, in this case with reference to efforts to promote knowledge sharing within a single firm. The second contribution of this work is that it considers knowledge sharing with close reference to the activities and concerns of those charged with managing the processes, and to their organisational position. It responds to the complaint that too much emphasis in knowledge management research has been placed on *individuals* as opposed to *groups of individuals* working together (Huysman & De Wit, 2002, p. 4). It also opens up a new area of knowledge management research that has received little attention to date: power relations (Ekbia & Kling, 2003, para 3).

KPMG is a large, distributed, information-intensive multi-national company. Its UK firm served as a site for data collection for the research. The company's global network of professional service firms provides financial advisory, assurance, tax and legal services (KMPG, n.d.-a). KPMG employed approximately 12,100 staff in the UK at the time that this research was conducted (KMPG, n.d.-b). The reasons why the company was particularly attractive as a case study organisation are given in Chapter 3.

The main content of this thesis report is presented in six chapters[1]. Chapter 2 reviews published research on knowledge sharing, with particular reference to information and communication technologies (ICTs) in large, distributed, information-intensive organisations. It also introduces the broader theme of sociotechnical analyses of computer implementations, and opens up a number of methods that may be employed for research such as that described in this thesis.

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[1] These are edited versions of the actual chapters of the main thesis that was submitted for examination in April 2004. On the advice of the external examiners, they have been reworked to provide a report that focuses on the main findings of the work for a corporate audience.

Against this background, Chapter 3 discusses in detail research design for the study undertaken. The decision to develop a case study based on in-depth interviews and the examination of corporate documentation using grounded theory principles is justified, and the processes of data collection and analysis described. This chapter also details how the case study generated two sets of primary data for analysis. In Chapter 4 the first set of research findings on the role of the UK firm's intranet and knowledge sharing as of late 2001 are presented. The detail is generated from data collected between October and December 2001 in interviews with knowledge management staff at KPMG who worked in the firm's business units. Chapter 5 presents findings on the KPMG's plans for the knowledge management implementation, its intranet and knowledge sharing from the mid-1990s to 2001, and how the plans were enacted. The findings are based on evidence from documents held in the company's archive and interviews with members of the firm's Knowledge Management Directorate. In Chapter 6 the findings of the two data sets are discussed. They are reframed to present a narrative of the development of the actor-network that supported KPMG's UK knowledge management implementation in the period under examination, and the role of the intranet in knowledge sharing is determined. The thesis report ends with a statement of the main research conclusions in Chapter 7.