

**Stretching tacit knowledge beyond a local fix? Global  
spaces of learning in advertising professional service firms**

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## **Abstract**

The 'knowledge economy' is now widely debated and economic geographers have made a significant contribution to understanding of the influences upon the production and dissemination of tacit knowledge within and between firms. However, the continued association of tacit knowledge with practices rooted at the local scale and suggestions of territorially sticky knowledges has proven controversial. Through examination of empirical material exploring the stretching of learning in advertising professional service firms, the paper argues that we need to recognise the use of two different epistemologies of organizational knowledge leverage - 'knowledge transfer' in the form of best practice and 'the social production of new knowledge' - and their complementary yet differentiated roles in organizations and differing spatial reaches. This highlights the existence of multiple geographies of tacit knowledge and the need to be more subtle in our arguments about its geographies. In particular, the paper reveals that tacit knowledge can have global geographies when knowledge management practices focus on reproducing rather than transferring knowledge across space.

## **Keywords:**

knowledge; professional service firms; advertising; globalization.

## **JEL codes:**

D83; F23; J24; L84; M10

# Stretching tacit knowledge beyond a local fix? Global spaces of learning in advertising professional service firms

## 1) Introduction

The role of knowledge pervades discussions of factors affecting the success of organisations (Bryson *et al*, 2000) whilst academics (Davenport and Prusak, 1998) and governments (Department for Trade and Industry, 1998) are preoccupied with the implications of the 'knowledge economy'. Fuelled by this and the burgeoning literature on knowledge management in organizational/management studies (e.g. Brown and Duguid, 2000), economic geographers have sought to describe the geographical influences upon the creation and dissemination of economically valuable knowledges, one of their main contributions being to highlight the 'new regions' and their ability to produce and internally disseminate tacit knowledge (Lawson and Lorenz, 1999; Morgan, 2004). However, for many (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Bathelt *et al*, 2004), and especially Allen (2000), there is concern that such work might reinforce the unfounded association of tacit knowledge, its production and dissemination, with "solely the creation of territorially specific actions and assets – restricted to...regions, places or other such spatial confines". This, according to Allen "is highly questionable and reflects the delimiting vision of a powerful set of discourses" (Allen, 2000, p27), discourses that create a misleading dualism between tacit and explicit knowledge and local and global geographies respectively. Scholars have, therefore, called for better understanding of the **multiple** geographies of knowledge through research of local but also global relational spaces of learning and the different types of knowledge leverage practices that operate in global firms (Bunnel and Coe, 2001; Currah and Wrigley, 2004).

This paper aims to help further dismantle the dualism between tacit-local and explicit-global geographies of knowledge and deepen, whilst also synthesising, the understanding provided by geographers of the spatial influences on learning and knowledge in global organizations. It does this by examining how learning and knowledge is globally stretched in advertising professional service firms (PSFs), a sector where facets of internationalization have been only sporadically studied by geographers (e.g. Daniels, 1995). Knowledge management is vital for such firms because of the intangible, knowledge intensive nature of producing effective advertising and the advantages that can be gained from reconciling the knowledge of individuals located across a spatially distributed office network. Two key arguments are made in the paper about the geographies of knowledge and learning in such organizations.

First, it is suggested that whilst calls to recognise the affects of cultural and institutional influences on the application of economic knowledges and practices and therefore the local stickiness of tacit knowledge (Gertler, 2001; 2003; 2004 Whitley, 2005) provide valuable insight into the challenges of '**knowledge transfer**' in organizations, those who recognise the possibility of spatially stretched learning that operates beyond scale-defined limits (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Bunnell and Coe, 2001, Wenger, 1998) point to an important and alternative form of knowledge leverage, the '**social production of knowledge**'. The paper argues that, consequently, we must recognise a fundamental difference in epistemology between studies of the practice of knowledge transfer and the 'social production of knowledge' in organizations and the different spatial constraints on each practice. This means organizational learning and knowledge management practices have complex spatial dynamics that cannot simply be defined using a local-global binary (Wolfe and Gertler 2004) and that the dismissal of suggestions of global geographies of tacit knowledge might be too hasty.

Second, and related to the first, the paper also argues that strategies in global organisations to exploit, configure and create what are referred to as global practice-based and relational spaces of learning (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Blanc and Sierra, 1999) are central to creating global spaces and geographies of learning in organizations. These strategies decouple the cognitive spaces and socially embedded relations involved in learning and knowledge production from the local scale, therefore suggesting we need more complex arguments about the 'social' characteristics of learning than some scholars arguing for locally fixed geographies of learning (e.g. Morgan, 2004; Storper and Venables, 2003) have provided. The rest of the paper develops these arguments over six further sections.

Section two engages with literature outlining models of organizational learning with, in particular, work on the role of global knowledge transfer and global 'communities of practice' examined in order to outline debates about the geographies of tacit knowledge. Sections three to five then explore the nature of globally stretched learning in advertising PSFs through detailed empirical material. This reveals that globally stretched learning involves predominantly the social production of new knowledge rather than knowledge transfer. It also shows how globally stretched learning is possible in 'practice-based' and 'relational spaces of learning' that are controlled and created by the firms involved in order to allow a degree of 'cognitive convergence' and the development of 'embedded relational networks'. Section six then evaluates the significance of these findings for how we study the geographies of tacit knowledge.

## **2) Emerging global geographies of learning**

According to a number of studies (e.g. Gertler, 2004; Keeble et al, 1999; Lawson and Lorenz, 1999; Morgan, 2004), regions/clusters are particularly effective at nurturing the production of knowledge. At the heart of such

suggestions is discussion of the role of regional cultural and institutional frameworks, face-to-face contact and the development of local relational networks. The finer points of these arguments are returned to below. However, it is also important to recognise a rising tide of work suggesting that the knowledge economy, and learning more widely, has global geographies (Allen, 2000; Amin and Cohendet, 2004). Table 1 summarises the key tenets of such work and the practices of global learning that create “a highly integrated, network organisation for the core competencies of the firm” that “allows the firm to benefit from ‘decentralised specialisation’ by coupling islands of localised [tacit] knowledge” (Amin and Cohendet, 1999, 94). These studies suggest that focus should fall on the interconnections of a global knowledge economy as well as the regional ‘hot-spots’ and, consequently, that the development of more intricate conceptualisations of the influence of space and place on knowledge and learning are needed.

[Insert table 1 here]

The concept of communities of practice (see in particular Wenger, 1998; Wenger *et al*, 2000) has gained significant intellectual currency over recent years and has been widely used as part of attempts to enhance the elegance of space sensitive examinations of learning. Within such literatures the existence of globally stretched communities or ‘constellations of practice’ is highlighted with a number of scholars (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Blanc and Sierra, 1999; Wenger, 1998) arguing that the fundamental characteristics of communities of practice that enable learning - the existence of a group of individuals with a shared enterprise, engagement and repertoire that provides a shared context, understanding and way of expressing this understanding – stretch beyond local communities. Therefore as Wenger *et al* (2002, 25) note:

“...many communities start among people who work at the same place or live nearby. But colocation is not a necessity. Many communities of practice are distributed over wide areas. Some communities meet regularly...Others are connected primarily by e-mail and phone and may meet only once or twice a year. What allows members to share knowledge is not the choice of a specific form of communication (face-to-face as opposed to Web-based, for instance) but the existence of a shared practice – a common set of situations, problems and perspectives”.

Blanc and Sierra (1999) exemplify the globality of such communities and learning through analysis of the internationalization of R&D in global organizations. They argue that global ‘spaces of proximity’ allow globally stretched learning because of the existence of:

- **Organizational proximity** (common approaches, language and job roles specific to a firm);
- **Relational proximity** (shared ethos, language and approach to work everyone in an industry shares).
- **Institutional proximity** (shared ‘rules of the game’ specific to a firm or industry); and
- **Temporal proximity** (a shared vision of how things should be in the future and where the industry is at present and ultimately heading).

Such work suggests that, at a theoretical level, there is a strong rationale supporting the possibility of globally stretched learning. However, whilst striving to deconstruct the local-tacit/global-explicit binary, geographers have also been quick to temper hyperbole suggesting globalization results in ‘the end of geography’ and the ‘death of distance’ when it comes to knowledge ‘flows’ (Storper and Venables,

2003). In particular, astute analyses of the socio-cultural embeddedness of many forms of knowledge and economic practice deserve our consideration when theorising the spatiality of knowledge and learning.

Exemplary of this approach is the work of Meric Gertler (2001; 2003; 2004) who identifies the potential importance of 'local' cultural and institutional values in restricting the effectiveness of globally stretched learning. He argues that regions, and the knowledge flows between firms in a region, seem likely to remain the predominant way for tacit knowledge to be leveraged as:

"...firms [in a region] become 'embedded' in...a rich, thick, local-institutional matrix that supports and facilitated the...propagation of new technologies (product and process). The ability of firms in such regions to do so is based on shared language, culture, norms and conventions, attitudes, values and expectations which generate trust and facilitate the all-important flow of tacit and proprietary knowledge between firms" (Gertler, 2001, 13).

Consequently, as "[t]he inevitable geographical variations in institutionally defined local context are endemic to organizations...fully 'knowing' what some key employee, situated in a far-flung corner of the corporation, knows will be all but impossible" (Gertler, 2003, 95). According to Gertler (2004), this is a result of the implementation of best practice and routines developed outside of any one regional space being impossible without an understanding of the locally specific cultural and institutional norms embodied within the practices<sup>1</sup>. A similar line of argument can be found in the work of Whitley (2005) who notes how "[a]s socially

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<sup>1</sup> He illustrates this in relation to how machinery designed in Germany cannot be used in Canada because of the inability of the Canadian buyers to understand German cultural and institutional norms in terms of employee training and job tenure. These are embodied within the machinery's design and therefore affect the skills needed to use it successfully.



organized agents operating in different kinds of societal contexts, firms...are inevitably influenced by the dominant norms and conventions governing the formation of collective actors” (Whitley, 2005, 190). This leads to high degrees of complexity when firms engage in internationalization strategies as “the growing internationalization of investment and management coordination...can be expected to have varied consequences in contrasting institutional environments...the organization of most cross-border transactions is likely to remain influenced by home **and** host economy institutions” (Whitley, 2005, 223, emphasis added). It would seem misleading, then, to assume that all forms of knowledge management in organizations can successfully allow the diffusion of knowledge worldwide.

Nevertheless, it is also acknowledged by authors such as Gertler and Whitley that ignoring the existence of globally stretched knowledge networks in firms is equally misleading. Wolfe and Gertler (2004, 1086) recently described how “we have uncovered instances of both local and non-local learning relationships across our range of case studies. However, one of our most notable findings to date has been that non-local learning relationships appear to be more significant than the existing literature would have us believe”. Therefore, building on the argument reviewed above, they argue that if “institutions are the hidden glue that holds clusters together, the implicit question is whether the institutional structures relevant to cluster dynamics are exclusively found at the local level” (Wolfe and Gertler, 2004, 1079). It is suggested here, however, that before concerning ourselves with the geography of institutions, it is important to acknowledge the affects of different epistemologies of knowledge management and learning on the geographies of tacit knowledge, in particular differentiating knowledge **transfer** in the form of best practice (as studied by Gertler, Whitley and others) from the social production of **new** knowledge where social practice and interaction produces new knowledge (the approach of Amin, Wenger and others). This is proposed as a way of developing more intricate explanations of the

spatiality of knowledge and learning. Whilst both Gertler (2004) and Whitley (2005) are quick to point out that knowledge gets reconstituted when transferred across space, it is argued here that in some cases knowledge management attempts **not** to transfer culturally inflected practices across spaces as a form of knowledge, but to foster social practice that develops new knowledge and understanding<sup>2</sup>. The latter form of knowledge management means tacit knowledge can be uncoupled from the supposed 'local fix' Gertler and others describe. This point is returned to later in the paper.

### *Embedded learning networks*

The importance of understanding the spatial influences upon learning is further illustrated when we begin to explore the role of socially embedded relationships in knowledge production. For example, Morgan (2004, 5) draws our attention to the well recognised fact that "body language and face-to-face communication convey as much as (if not more than) verbal communication". Consequently, he suggests that uncritical readings of the growing role of globally stretched learning networks might "conflate **spatial** reach with **social** depth and

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<sup>2</sup> For example, reviewing the examples used by Gertler (2003, 91-95) to examine the geographies of knowledge reveals an exclusive focus upon processes of knowledge transfer (not the production of new knowledge through social practice). He refers to: (a) differences in governmental and organizational forms – the 'J-form' in Japan versus Anglo-American firms and the inability to transfer one form of organizing into another cultural context; (b) the transfer of labour and technology practices between manufacturing plants in different countries; and (c) failed attempt to transfer knowledge across institutional boundaries within a firm (between and R&D site and headquarters). In each case, whilst knowledge was being reconstituted during the transfer process, Gertler's focus is upon the impediments to deploying knowledges away from their place of production, rather than producing new knowledge through spatially stretched social practice.

hence fail to recognize that it is the latter, with its wider scope for social reciprocity, which is the essential prerequisite for deep [tacit] learning” (Morgan, 2004, 5, original emphasis). This reminds us that the trust and mutual understanding, produced through face-to-face encounters, have increasingly been seen as a prerequisite for learning and that, therefore, analyses cannot simply describe the inert architectures involved in stretched learning but must also get to grips with their social constitution and, where relevant, the mitigating practices that make up for the loss of embodied interactions (Henry and Pinch, 2000; Storper and Venables, 2003). Amin and Cohendet (2004), therefore, argue that more refined theorisation of the spatial characteristics of learning and knowledge should be based on a ‘distanced sociology of learning’ that interrogates the role of **relational** space. They highlight how learning “includes, yes, face-to-face meetings, sociality, and casual contact...but it also draws on distant objects such as drawings faxed between offices around the world, global travel to form temporary project teams, and daily internet/telephone/video conversations” (Ibid, 110). The ‘networks’ of learning in global organizations should, then, be unpacked as socio-technical constructions, not simply as pipelines for knowledge flows.

The rest of this paper draws on these insights to consider how the increasingly important role of globally stretched learning and knowledge networks in organizations can be explained. It does this through the analysis of empirical material collected through 29 interviews with advertising executives working for global advertising agencies in London and New York<sup>3</sup>. Interviewees held a range of positions and levels of seniority and represent 11 global agencies. An interview schedule was used that probed the nature of: the architectures of learning that enable individuals in different offices to learn from one-another; the problems

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<sup>3</sup> Such an approach is well rehearsed within economic geography where studies of PSFs have consistently used case-study based empirical material gleaned from interviews (e.g. Leslie, 1997)

associated with such learning and commonly used solutions. Interviews were conducted in early 2004 and lasted between 35 and 90 minutes. To maintain the anonymity of interviewees the quotes used are anonymous with interviewee number used for identification purposes.

### **3) Geographies of knowledge in PSFs**

The work of all PSFs (advising clients in relation to their business problem or need) is only possible when the tacit knowledge of experts is harnessed and exploited (Weiss, 1999). No two projects are identical for these firms with, instead, the specific whims of the client tended to and the nuances of any project central to determining the nature of the advice provided (Alvesson, 2004). The key strategic challenge for any PSF is, therefore, to ensure the knowledge needed to produce their services exists (in the form of skilled employees), is retained (by stopping employees leaving to work for rivals) and is leveraged (through knowledge management) (Lowendahl, 2000). At the same time, these firms also 'lubricate' the process of globalisation through the creation of global PSF networks that aim to provide integrated and seamless services through the 'development and diffusion worldwide' of knowledge. As Lowendahl (2000, 152-153) comments:

“...global presence may enable the firm to develop broader 'experience records' and shared knowledge, because of the access to a broader set of knowledge development sources...In PSFs the competitive advantage, if achieved, results from the ability of the firm to continuously tap into the knowledge developed in all relevant centres of the world...You may even gain competitive advantage from being located in a place where the market is not profitable at all, if the learning from these projects adds more value to other markets”.

Table 2 highlights how global knowledge leverage is increasingly possible for global advertising PSFs through their ever-growing number of offices worldwide. It also draws our attention to the role of the global media groups these agencies are part of<sup>4</sup>. In the most important advertising market - the USA - the five leading groups (Havas, Interpublic, Omnicom, Publicis and WPP) received three quarters of advertising spending (Advertising Age, 2003). A specific mandate of both agencies and groups is to engage in successful knowledge management. One group (WPP) suggests that “across the group there are knowledge communities working in particular sectors or with particular skills which share non-confidential insights, case studies and best practice” (WPP, 2005). Similarly, Young and Rubicam argue:

“For us, globalization has to mean more than dots on the map. We believe that real global reach means making real connections – or paying the price for not doing so. The language of brands is becoming universal. So the ability to transfer knowledge and experience from one part of the globe to another is not just about efficiency, it’s exponentially more powerful” (Young and Rubicam, 2003).

However, despite this rhetoric, advertising knowledge could be seen as archetypically ‘local’ in nature. As Daniels (1995, 283) notes in relation to global advertising agencies, it is the “[n]etworks [which] are the most effective way to service clients which have globalised product development but still sell locally, and

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<sup>4</sup> The leading groups emerged between predominantly in the 1980’s. Interpublic was the forerunner of this model (born in 1961) whilst others followed as globalization presented new challenges: Havas in 1975; Publicis in 1984; WPP in 1985 and Omnicom in 1986. This industry structure of ‘global groups’ with several agencies within them was, in particular, a response to the restrictions newly globalizing agencies faced when serving firms that were rivals in the same industry. The structure allowed one group to serve rival firms but through separate agencies, thus avoiding conflicts of interest and widening potential client and profit bases.

therefore need local advertising... As long as this is true it will be necessary to have agency networks (Daniels, 1995, 283). The direct 'transferability' of advertising knowledge could then, drawing on Gertler's (2001; 2004) terminology, be described as 'culturally and institutionally embedded' at the point of production because of local market nuances and reflexive customers (Lash and Urry, 1994). On top of this, two other factors give the work of advertising agencies an apparently 'local' nature:

- The need for face-to-face contact and trust rich relationships. Advertising agencies principally deliver their services to the marketing managers of the world's largest TNCs through trust-based, face-to-face relationships (Halinen, 1991);
- The importance of 'local, regional' spaces of advertising knowledge production in city-based clusters (e.g. Leslie, 1997; Faulconbridge, forthcoming).

[Insert table 2 here]

Nevertheless, it has been noted that global advertising agencies are linked into important global knowledge networks. Grabher (2002) provides an exemplary examination of such stretched learning by unpacking the way advertising agencies operating in London benefit from what he describes as an 'heterarchy' that facilitates learning both from physically proximate rivals and distanced overseas colleagues based on shared areas of interest, competitive flair and ideals. More recently (Grabher, 2004) he describes how project ecologies allow advertising executives to benefit from being part of 'epistemic collectives' – groups of individuals working for the same firm (but not necessarily in the same office) that

interact and develop novel advertising approaches. We can further delve into the nature of this process through the work of Perry (1990, 42) who notes the important role of 'globally aligned advertising accounts' for corporations such as Exxon or Coca Cola. These are based upon "the transfer of successful marketing strategies between locations". However, "[a]n aligned account does not mean the same campaign is replicated in every location or even more than one geographical region". Instead, in the vast majority of cases market-specific advertising that draws on the knowledge and ideas of advertising executives from throughout the firm is produced. This is not to say globally uniform campaigns do not exist or that the transfer of best practice between offices does not occur. Rather, it begins to tease out the complex interweaving of different knowledge management practices in the global networks of advertising PSFs.

Below, the way global advertising agencies engage in the 'development and diffusion worldwide' of knowledge is further explored through an instructive empirical case study. This deepens our understanding of the practice of globally stretched learning in advertising agencies by highlighting and differentiating the use of both best practice transfer and the social production of new knowledge in the designing of locally tailored campaigns. In particular, it shows that whilst cultural and institutional embeddedness of knowledge is important, it is not always an impediment to globally stretched learning.

#### **4) Global 'social' learning in PSFs**

To unpack the nature of globally stretched learning in advertising PSFs it is important to develop the epistemological distinction noted previously between 'knowledge transfer' (Gertler, 2003; Whitley, 2005) and what is referred to here as the social production of knowledge' (c.f Amin and Cohendet, 2004). Whilst both of these practices are relevant in advertising PSFs, best practice transfer often (but

not always) relates to agency 'management' rather than advertising campaign production. The growing need for locally tailored advertising that responds to reflexive and differentiated consumers (Lash and Urry, 1994) increasingly means that, in relation to knowledge for advertising campaigns, "[t]he flows are not of products but of people and of ideas" (Rubalcaba-Bermejo and Cuadrado-Roura, 2002, 42). This means ensuring practices are in place to allow ideas and insights to be shared that can be learned **from** and built **upon** by individuals in the organisation so as to inform the future thinking of advertising executives.

Several scholars have pointed to the importance of differentiating between **transfers** of knowledge and globally stretched **social learning**. Amin and Cohendet (2004, 8) suggest focus should be placed on "knowledge as a process and practice, rather than a possession, on the pragmatics of everyday learning in situated contexts". This builds upon the work of Cook and Brown (1999) and recognises the importance of a 'generative dance of knowledge production', an idea described well by how they discuss the value of conversation for learning:

"When Emma says to Andrew 'I've been doing it this way', Andrew not only adds that knowledge to his own experiences, skills and sensitivities, and the like (and vice versa when Andrew makes his reply). By placing Emma's knowledge into Andrew's contexts, the conversation can evoke novel associations, connections, and hunches – it can generate new insights and new meaning...In this way, conversation affords more than an exchange in which the net sum of knowledge remains the same; it dynamically affords a **generative dance** within which the creation of new knowledge and new ways of using knowledge is possible" (page 393, original emphasis).

Andrew benefits because of the **new** understanding that emerges as he interprets the ideas of Emma. This reflects a growing body of work that recognises that



“there may be value in a perspective that...focuses on the knowledgeability of action, this is on **knowing** (a verb connoting action, doing, practice) rather than **knowledge** (a noun connoting things, elements, facts, processes, descriptions)” (Orlikowski, 2002, 250, original emphasis). Under this rubric, the idea that knowledge “increases with use” emerges – the idea that an individual’s knowledge and understanding is enriched when involved in social practices that allow cognition to be influenced and shaped (Davenport and Prusak, 1998, 17).

By recognising the importance of such ‘social production of knowledge’, it is possible to remove the problem of knowledge and best practice being culturally and institutionally embedded. Gertler (2004) acknowledges that all knowledge forms are dynamic and reconstituted when applied away from their place of origin. However, the social production of knowledge as a practice is not about adapting existing practices to suit local conditions, but using social interaction to inform understanding and develop new logics. As Alvesson (2004) notes in relation to PSFs, ambiguity dominates the type of knowledge that informs the production of services where “ambiguity means that a group of informed people are likely to hold multiple meanings or that several plausible interpretations can be made”. Consequently, it is necessary to ensure individuals have the ability to develop their thinking and interpretations (their knowledge) so that their understanding of such ambiguous issues is, whilst never right or wrong, likely to allow them to provide successful advice to clients<sup>5</sup>. The aim of PSFs is, then, to put the conditions in

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<sup>5</sup> Alvesson (2004, 176-177) describes how knowledge management strategies in PSFs are normally conceptualised as being based on: (a) codification where knowledge is stored in databases (e.g. as a best practice) and exploited through economies of reuse that do not result in the development of new ideas; or (b) personalization where social interaction is encouraged to develop new understanding and solutions. Typically an 80-20 split is used, normally in favour of personalization because of the ‘ambiguity’ of the issues addressed.

place where the social production of new knowledge is possible, whilst not ignoring the complementary role of 'best practice transfer'.

### *Practices of learning in PSFs*

In the advertising agencies studied the complementary yet differentiated nature of knowledge leverage by transfer and the social production of new knowledge was clearly exemplified. All agencies, despite its recognised limitations, used the 'global advert' approach. This was usually in response to requests by the client to exploit the economies of scale such adverts offer. However, for all interviewees this was not the preferred way of producing adverts. As one interviewee described the inherent problems with such a global transfer approach:

"With [client y] it [the lead office] was in New York. And local offices had ideas about how the advertising should look and feel and were saying that doesn't feel right for our market. However, the power was really in New York and the response was 'well no actually, we've got global mandate and you'll have to do it like this'. I thought that in that particular instance rolling out the brand across markets might make sense financially but in terms of local cultural sensitivity it was totally wrong and probably left consumers in some countries totally mystified about what the advert was trying to say about the product" (A17).

This shows the perils of knowledge transfer in terms of the potential cultural and institutional fixity of advertising knowledges. Consequently, interviewees unanimously agreed that global knowledge management/leverage that focuses upon the social production of new knowledge is preferable. This is in large part based upon telephone-mediated conversations that allow fellow professionals

located throughout the world to exchange ideas, insights and experiences and learn **from** one-another. As one advertiser argued, “it’s not an exact science where you can go away and say ‘this is the right answer’ - because there isn’t necessarily a right answer and there certainly isn’t a right answer that fits all countries – so rather than ask people for the answer you listen to their ideas which then shapes your thinking. So the ability to compare and talk about it is what’s essential” (A13).

Interviewees suggested they engaged in such ‘learning’ conversations with overseas colleagues several times a day with the knowledge produced used to develop innovative and tailored solutions to clients’ problems<sup>6</sup>. A number of examples of when such learning occurred can be extracted from the interview data, principally in relation to knowledge about the content of an advert. First, account planners and managers often gained insights into strategic ploys that can be used in a campaign and the strengths and weaknesses of various approaches. As one account planner described such an advantage:

“...for example we’ve just done a thing for a financial services client and we sent out a thing asking people to tell us what was the most interesting [strategy] innovation they’ve used for banking in their market...so you build up a body of knowledge on a type of business and share that with colleagues, you share your insights with them and they return the favour...There is a cross fertilisation of ideas across the different cultural boundaries that is vital which means not replicating what they did but learning from it, using it as a spur for innovation” (A12).

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<sup>6</sup> These principally occurred between advertising executives in London and New York as well as between advertising executives in London, New York and other offices in Western Europe, South East Asia and Australia.

Secondly, both planners and creatives (although see the caveat in appendix 1 about creatives) can have their 'blue skies', innovative and creative thinking guided by insights from conversations with overseas colleagues. As one creative noted:

"I don't know if I approach these things thinking I'll get their experience. It's normally that there is a grain of an idea that you can embellish, develop, and its not that I go to them thinking, lets get his experience, but its more, I wonder what he will say about this new situation. And that is based on his experience but what is interesting to me is the new thing... I guess the point is that the encounter between the experience thing and the new situation can only happen in one person's head... it has to happen in your head. So you give them an issue and they react with whatever they come up with in their head, a thought, and that helps develop your thoughts. So, for example, when I was trying to come up with a way to sell [food product x] I phoned several of my colleagues and talked about what they'd done in the past on similar projects or with similar problems and why they did that and what sort of things they thought my work. And I came up with an idea none of them mentioned, but I'm sure they triggered the thought and influenced my thinking" (A16).

All of the advertising executives quoted above were well aware of the cultural differences that exist between advertising markets. However, they were also aware that sharing insights and ideas was valuable when individuals learn **from** conversations and do not try to replicate an approach in London or New York that might be successful, for example in Germany. The key to success was the ability to gain stimulus and ideas from colleagues that could inform thinking and feed into sense making. As one advertising executives suggested, "...in a discussion which say might be with you French colleagues and how French woman's attitudes to [product x] are different to British woman's and that is incredibly productive. And with my American partners we talk about new design evolution in the business,

campaigns we've done so I'm always talking to someone elsewhere in the world and benefiting from it. But what I do is learn from it, feed it into my judgement I suppose. I wouldn't try to copy it, that just doesn't work" (A22). Another described a similar process:

"I got a report written by this guy in Belgium, and I think we were doing some work on kids for [client x's] children's wear. But that didn't really help me much. What did help was when I spoke to him on the phone, and he filled me in on the real context, the insights. And I couldn't replicate what he did in Belgium, consumers don't relate to clothes in the same way. But it did give me some ideas and it triggered my thinking about a certain way to develop the brand" (A11).

There is, then, a fundamental difference between this type of 'social' learning and practices of knowledge transfer. The description of 'best practice transfer' attended to by some examinations of the geographies of learning (e.g. Gertler, 2004; Whitely, 2005) focuses upon what Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998) would call an international strategy (where best practice from one part of the organisation is implemented in another) whereas in the 'social learning' described above a transnational approach is used (everyone learns from one-another). It is argued here that recognising this difference between the transfer of best practices and the global stretching of the 'social production of knowledge' can be used to understand how knowledge and learning can, in many cases, have global geographies that are less impeded by the cultural and institutional embeddedness of economic practice<sup>7</sup>.

Below, the empirical findings from this research are used to further develop this argument and unpack the way globally stretched social learning is used in

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<sup>7</sup> Gertler (2004, 141) acknowledges that an alternative epistemology of learning to the transfer-based model exists and should be explored to further develop understanding of the geography of learning and knowledge.

advertising PSF as a strategy for knowledge leverage. This again highlights how the knowledge informing adverts themselves is predominantly leveraged through a process of social learning. This relies on the existence and management of practice-based and relational spaces of learning that provide both the 'cognitive' and 'social' contexts for learning.

### **5) Global practice-based spaces of learning**

This section of the paper begins to unpack the mechanics of globally stretched learning in advertising PSFs. The global stretching of knowledge relating to an advertising campaign is possible because of the macro-level similarities in advertising executives' work throughout the world. This means that, although there is the need for the local tailoring of adverts, it is possible to identify globally standard approaches and elements of advertising strategy that can form the basis of the conversations involved in the social production of new knowledge. As one interviewee commented, "Its very easy to get on with people, very easy to share stuff. Although there tends to be quite fundamental differences between markets' relationships with a brand or product there are useful approaches to a certain extent that are shared and can be used to target consumers anywhere in the world" (A8). Another noted that:

"We all watch the same TV programmes, face common issues in our day-to-day lives, have similar ideas. Now there are idiosyncrasies, but the basic processes are the same everywhere and you talk about those" (A10).

This idea is reinforced by research commissioned by Young and Rubicam entitled '*There are seven kinds of people in the world*' (Young and Rubicam, 2004). This is used as both a promotional tool to suggest that the firm can produce advertising to

influence audiences in any part of the world, simply by understanding which of the seven categories they fit within, and also acts as a valuable form of best practice, encouraging employees to analyse the consumers they target using pre-defined approaches and categories<sup>8</sup>. Most significantly here, it shows how advertisers often use the same generic strategies and approaches regardless of the product or market for which the advert is being developed. This does not deny that there are 'locally-specific' influences on any consumer's behaviour, but instead acknowledges that practices and approaches for creating feelings of empathy, sorrow, desire or lust, for example, have global commonality. Advertising executives from all of the agencies studied suggested their main aim was to learn from overseas colleagues about such shared challenges and approaches to advertising and to use the insights gained from conversations to guide sense-making and thinking.

Such learning is facilitated by what is termed here a '**global practice-based space**' of learning. When the 'social production of new knowledge' is taking place focus falls on exchanging insights into globally common practices such as 'how to inspire feelings of desire towards a product' or 'how to revitalise the image of a product that is viewed by consumers as old fashioned', rather than region-specific or ambiguous discussion of, for example, how advertising for shower gel works. As two interviewees further described the characteristics of such a shared space for learning:

"I think one has to be careful when one talks about ideas. If you start by talking about a strategic idea, an insight, then it is not too problematic. And today we are

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<sup>8</sup> Indeed, the importance of global best practice should not be underplayed. In the agencies and groups studied standard global approaches were used for a range of business management activities including: client procurement and relationship management; expenses and financial management; agency budgeting; and, human resources.

very fortunate in that the English language has become so prevalent, even language issues seem to have gone away. But at the strategic insight driven level there are not too many problems of core insights crossing borders. However, when you get creative executions, that's when you begin to see national differences really coming to the fore" (A21).

"...it's amazing, there is a very common language and thought process ... I think it has to do with the fact that there are some basics associated with how you arrive at a strategy that are the same no matter where you are and what you're doing...So there's a common language, a common view, there are some questions and answers that typically happen pretty much regardless of where you are in the world" (A25).

The first quote highlights that, whilst the execution of adverts is affected by local cultural specificity, the strategies, practices and approaches associated with the main advertising challenges have a high degree of global commonality. An advertising executive in London might discuss with a colleague in France how they inspired feelings of cleanliness in an advert for shower gel. This then influences their thinking and sense making and, in the future, guides the way they develop an image of cleanliness to sell domestic cleaning products in the UK. This involves, then, not reproducing or even adapting the strategies used in France but, instead, using the knowing and understanding developed and influenced by the conversation to help deal with the ambiguity of creating feelings of cleanliness. Further examples of the type of learning facilitated by practice-based spaces are outlined in table 3.

[Insert table 3 here]



### *Managing practice-based spaces*

The value of such 'shared spaces' only truly emerges when they are **exploited** and **configured** by global organisations and, where necessary, **constructed** through 'network management strategies' (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001; Jones, 2005). Firms **exploit** practice-based spaces through strategies that aim to draw the attention of all employees to the importance of sharing insights with overseas colleagues. As one interviewee who held a senior management position commented, "...where there is an issue then any account team worth their salt will trawl and bring in a relatively big cross sample from across the agency. And its our policy that on any project the team members must consult with their colleagues both in this office but also worldwide to find out what they can learn from them" (A21). Whilst not all agencies had such a clear 'exploitation' policy, it was generally recognised by interviewees that engaging in a global consultation process was valuable, normally through a network of inter-personal relationships with overseas colleagues.

The use of practice group formations is equally valuable and helps **configure** practice-based spaces. In global advertising PSFs it is common to group employees into global practice groups based on their job role. For example, in two of the agencies studied global planning practice-groups existed that brought together individuals with a shared interest in the problems attached to account planning. This effectively created a 'constellation of practice'; the global community that allows globally stretched learning. As one member of a practice group commented:

"There's an international planning group called [group x] that try to help each other out with case studies and ideas when we're doing something and that becomes very useful because you get different perspectives...it's really useful to know who's

doing the same thing as you but say in London and [group x] brings us all together so we can feed each others experiences into our thinking about the way we approach a project” (A29).

In addition, advertising PSFs also found it important to **construct** practice-based spaces to further enhance the global stretching of learning. This is a good example of how the transfer and ‘social production’ of knowledge can be synergistic. To construct practice-based spaces seven of the eleven advertising agencies studied had some form of global communication and branding model (what they often refer to as a tool). This is used to help share ideas and strategies between offices and is, in effect, a form of best practice transferred to all offices from headquarters. Table 3 gives two examples of such corporate models/tools and how the agencies describe them. Each is based around a number of ‘modules’ or ‘components’ that have a corporate language associated with them. These describe processes and strategies for dealing with the common issues in any advertising campaign. To maintain the anonymity of interviewees the firm-specific languages are not reproduced here. However, a hypothetical example that renames a number of the phases can be given. So for example, a module covering issues associated with the initial phases of a project named ‘first day’ might detail the challenges associated with moving a client’s aims for a campaign towards a number of potential lines of strategy that target certain consumer groups. A component called ‘solidification’ within this might detail how strategies can be translated into several ideas for the types of place, cast and story-line in the advert. Advertising executives throughout the world are familiar with and can learn from one-another about the difficulties of ‘first day’, the best way to apply ‘solidification’ and the globally common techniques and procedures used to help deal with these challenges. The following comment from an advertiser further highlights this point:

[Insert table 4 here]

“I can get a call from the Middle East and they’ll say to me ‘we’re doing a [activity x] and we’re doing this and I know immediately what a [activity x] is and what they’re going through, what they need. And so there are processes in place that make it easier and they make it easier to get on the same wavelength. That process is an important way to make sure that every office in the network has a basic way of understanding basic things” (A2).

As this quote shows, advertising executives value such tools that are, in effect, forms of best practice, because of how they make misunderstanding and confusion less of a problem when engaging in knowledge leverage through the social production of new knowledge. This is possible because of the stable, ‘artificial’, ‘practice-based spaces’ of learning constructed. Having such shared understanding is vital and brings us back to the first quotes used in this section of the paper. These highlighted the role of shared understanding, actions and practice in facilitating learning, and the ‘corporate tools’ described here provide an additional way to develop such cognitive convergence. As one interviewee commented:

“...ideas are really difficult things for people to understand...And [corporate tool x] is just a really good global tool and what’s cool about it is that the methodology is done in such a way that you could compare any brand to any brand anywhere and you can compare brands by country so its an incredibly flexible tool and you can usually pull a story out. And it can be hard for me to understand where a brand is in any other country’s brandscape, but [corporate tool x] is a really good way of me getting a grip on that, brilliant at helping you understand...It doesn’t help us

develop the strategy but it helps us share it, if you like it's a common language that you can use between offices" (A11).

This highlights, then, the complimentary role of best practice transfer and the social production of new knowledge in organizations. Of course, the exploitation, configuration and construction of practice base spaces is not as straight forward as conveyed in this brief description. Appendix 1 therefore fleshes out in more detail the complexity of this process and some important caveats to this argument.

## **6) Global relational spaces of learning**

In addition to managing 'practice-based spaces', it also emerged that the global organisations studied were effective at managing the global 'learning networks' needed for global knowledge leverage. As a range of scholars have noted (Amin and Cohendet, 1999; Dicken, 2000), the globalisation of economic activities has resulted in firms that operate as complex socio-spatial networks. For example, various forms of transnational community have been shown to allow the global stretching of learning because of the reciprocity, mutual understanding and trust that emerges (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Bunnell and Coe, 2001; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001). Orlikowski (2002, 255) provides an instructive empirical example of the way management in a global software company implemented various strategies to ensure employees "constitute a sense of knowing their colleagues, of knowing their credibility in and commitment to specific issues, and of knowing how to collaborate with them...in a globally dispersed and complex product development environment". This involved both virtual and occasional face-to-face contact, something that emerged as critical in the advertising PSFs studied here.

The importance of 'socially embedded' relationships for learning has been made clear by geographers (Storper and Venables, 2003; Morgan, 2004) and, for interviewees, 'embedded' global relationships facilitated the global stretching of the social production of new knowledge when coupled with the practice-based spaces described above. In particular, interviewees described the value of having a number of what were commonly described as 'close contacts' or 'trusted colleagues' working in overseas offices. As one interviewee put it:

"...to give you an example of [client x], there is a global account planner based on New York and he's a chap I've worked with before, and I'm quite happy to call him and had it been a different person who I didn't know I might not have been as ready to do that.... depending on the people, I was quite happy to talk to [person x] because it was [person x] and I know him, you feel less exposed. If it had not been him I'd have been less willing to enter in to a discussion...you trust them and feel, don't take this the wrong way, able to expose yourself to them!" (16).

This quote exemplifies, then, the value of having 'embedded' relationships with colleagues and the way trust, mutual understanding and well nurtured friendships smooth conversations involved in producing knowledge. This ensures all involved feel able to openly and honestly express ideas and beliefs whilst, at the same time, trusting and believing the ideas expressed by others. Establishing and sustaining such relationships with overseas colleagues creates what is referred to here as a **global relational space**. Table 4 further outlines the benefits of such a 'shared space'. These relational spaces are, however, like practice-based spaces, in part at least the result of the network management strategies of global advertising PSFs and the groups they are a part of.

[Insert table 5 here]

### *Managing relational spaces*

For advertising executives, global relational spaces are **constructed** and **configured** in two ways. First, within advertising PSFs a significant proportion of work has a global dimension. The clients of these firms are some of the world's largest TNC's (table 2) and the most profitable projects involve producing advertising for several world markets. As has been noted by others (e.g. Grabher, 2002), advertising agencies use project team architectures which involve creating a team of individuals in offices throughout the World dedicated to meeting the needs of a single client. Consequently, a number of global professional network relationships are **configured** between counterparts on a project in several offices. Individuals talk to overseas team members on a regular basis by telephone (often daily or at minimum once a week) and discuss problems and exchange ideas about potential solutions. In doing this a rapport and collegiality begins to develop between individuals in different offices, something that begins to foster reciprocity and trust. The comments of one interviewee described this idea well:

"If you work on a global account you have a network of people and you get to know them. Once a week you have a conference call, what's going on. You'd e-mail out every week so people knew what you were doing. And its up to the guy running the account globally to make sure those contacts work and that people are talking, preferably every day, getting to know each other, developing the friendships that make things work" (A6).

Key to this configuration process is the role of management in global PSFs who are able to 'network' individuals and create 'social capital' (Gupta and Govindarajan, 2001). As one director commented about his role, "I'm always saying to those guys out there, pick up the phone and talk to Germany, to Holland,

all the time. They're on the phone all the time and I stress that they need to develop a rapport and good working relationship" (A18). In addition, the management of the careers of advertising executives also helped construct relational networks. As one senior account director describes, moving individuals between teams on a regular basis is essential for developing relational spaces and networks, "...the more years you have in the business the more brands you work on and you kind of build up a portfolio of relationships. That's why we encourage people to work on several different accounts and so in my 10 years of account management I probably worked on 25, 30 different brands and you build up a real network that way by meeting and working with people all over the World" (A13).

The processes described above configure relationships – develop 'know-who' (Grabher, 2002). In addition, the managed global mobility of employees in PSFs and the occasional face-to-face contact facilitated by business travel also helps **construct** the relationships through which globally stretched learning occurs. Such mobility further nurtures and reinforces the trust, reciprocity and mutual understanding that already exists in relationships formed through virtual means. This business travel principally involved flows of individuals between the London and New York offices themselves and also between the two cities and Western European (Milan, Munich, Paris), and East Asian (Hong Kong and Tokyo) offices. Visits normally last between three days and four weeks and are first and foremost organised so individuals can attend formal events such as project meetings or practice group conferences. However, all interviewees agreed that it is the social events organised afterwards and the opportunity they provide to spend time with overseas colleagues in a social setting, playing golf, eating a meal and often most importantly getting drunk, which allows relationships to be 'strengthened. As one interviewee described the value of such encounters, "There are formal comings together, there's a global conference coming next month where literally

representatives from all the worldwide offices will be there. There's presentations about the business but there is a social side to that so that we are gelling as a network rather than just being pins in the map" (A5). Another noted that:

"...you tend to have a person who you rely on in that office and you do build a relationship with that person and quite often it will take a while and then you'll meet [face-to-face]. So you get to know that person and its really important to meet them because you always have an easier phone relationship once you've met face-to-face and you have a better sense of them...And I guess the people I get on with best are those I've spent time with, enjoyed a night out with" (A8).

As these quotes suggest, the face-to-face encounters facilitated by global mobility build on the pre-existing foundations of friendships formed through telephone-mediated interactions. This leads to the type of trust-based relationships that are vital for learning. Such an argument is confirmed by the comments of an interviewee who was new to the firm they worked at, having arrived within two months of being interviewed. He/she noted that "it's really difficult at the moment because I don't know anyone apart from by their name on a list. So my suggestion to my boss was that we get them over here to help us so I can meet them and get to know them" (A28). Similarly, another interviewee who worked for a firm that had recently merged with a rival described the difficulties of having to establish new global professional networks but also 'nurture' them. As he/she suggested, "...because we only merged [x time] ago I don't have a network of contacts. But that would be the idea, to have colleagues in a number offices you can rely on. There's an emerging degree of integration but its still got quite a way to go but its getting better as we work on these global accounts and come in to contact with one-another" (A14). Again, there are numerous caveats to the argument made



about the existence and development of relational spaces. These are again explored in more detail in appendix 1.

## 7) Discussion and conclusions

The empirical research findings detailed here extend our understanding of the nature of globally stretched learning and suggest that when the geographies of the 'knowledge economy' (Department for Trade and Industry, 1998) are discussed there is a need to recognise both the cultural and institutional influences on knowledge and economic practice (e.g. Gertler, 2003; Morgan, 2004) yet also the potential for successful 'knowledge development and diffusion worldwide' by global firms when certain forms of knowledge leverage are practised (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Bartlett and Ghoshal, 1998). The paper begins to address this issue and acknowledges the **multiple geographies and practices of learning** that exist in global organizations (Allen, 2000). Two significant contributions have been made that help in this task.

First, the empirical material has been used to show that two different epistemologies of learning and practices of knowledge leverage exist and are used in global advertising PSFs. The global transfer of knowledge operates as a way of circulating knowledge in the reproducible form of best practice (Gertler, 2001; 2003; 2004; Whitley, 2005). As has been previously suggested, this suffers, however, from difficulties associated with the implementation of culturally and institutionally sticky best practices outside of their place of production. Consequently, in advertising PSFs the most successful knowledge transfer relates to management practices not advertising knowledges. Instead, the social production of new knowledge allows the development of new advertising ideas and knowledges through social practice (Amin and Cohendet, 2004; Wenger, 1998), helping overcome the difficulties created by spatially variegated and ambiguous advertising practices and markets as the aim is not to replicate approaches

elsewhere but to allow individuals to learn from others' ideas and experiences (Alvesson, 2004; Perry, 1990). Acknowledging these different approaches to knowledge leverage in global firms is suggested to be a fruitful way to build on the complementary and insightful work of economic geographers in relation to the spatiality of knowledge and learning.

The paper secondly shows that the 'network management strategies' used by global PSFs to exploit, configure and construct global practice-based and relational spaces of learning are central to the success of the global production of new knowledge through social practice. As a result, both the 'cognitive' (practice based) spaces and the 'social' (relational) spaces needed for learning were managed within the firms studied. The emergence of these spaces creates communities or constellations of learning that stretch beyond scale-defined boundaries, in particular highlighting how the development of trust, respect and mutual understanding is not a process that can be delimited to the local scale nor associated with relationships based exclusively on face-to-face interaction.

Recognition of these different epistemologies and the practices of learning and knowledge leverage associated with them might enable economic geographers to further develop their contributions to debates on organizational learning through intricate theorisations of the spatiality of learning and knowledge. This means recognising that there are multiple geographies and practices of learning that play out in diverging ways, bolstering the argument that there is a need to decouple tacit knowledge from the local scale but also highlighting the need to be sensitive to different knowledge management practices and their different spatial reaches. Therefore, as has been identified in this paper, a relational analysis that traces the networks of learning involved in organizational knowledge management strategies and their socio-spatial constitution would seem valuable in producing more refined and spatially sensitive analyses.

## Appendix 1

Whilst the majority of interviewees were clear that the practice-based spaces described allowed the sharing of insights and ideas between professionals working in the advertising industry, a minority were less sure about their value. Of the 29 advertising executives interviewed, six expressed some uncertainty about their ability to learn from overseas colleagues, five of these being creatives. Creatives were, in particular, concerned that it was hard to understand the use of a creative strategy in another country and, therefore, that the ability to learn from it could be limited. As one commented, “A fantastic example is when I was at [firm x] and we we’re trying to do some work for [client x] and I spoke to someone in Brazil and they described how they’d used aspiration in an advert. But when I got the actual advert they’d cast someone who looked like he was out of Hanson, you know the boy band, with long blond hair, wearing a T-shirt and messy suit. And I couldn’t understand what they meant by aspirational in this sense – I don’t really know if they even meant that in the end” (A14). This is, then, a potential limit to the global stretching of learning in advertising agencies and the attempts to exploit practice-based spaces were often subverted by those who had doubts about the value of stretched learning with recommendations of global consultation being ignored.

In relation to the configuration of practice-based spaces by firms, interviewees regularly commented on the almost total or complete absence of any co-ordination of activities at the global group level (i.e. the holding company level such as WPP). The only type of inter-agency interactions that did occur were at the most senior levels where ‘high level planning’ in relation to group strategy and client allocation was dealt with. It should also be noted in relation to the construction of practice based spaces that ‘manufactured’ spaces were seen as problematic by some advertising executives. Reflecting the points noted about the cultural and institutional embeddedness of best practices, of fifteen advertising executives interviewed who worked for agencies with such tools four were somewhat negative about their affects. They found the manufactured approaches too restrictive and limiting when working on a project. The counter to such an argument by those who liked these tools was that the most important thing about such manufactured spaces was how they build upon and complement the ‘natural’ spaces that already exist.

This explained why, considering the point noted above, creatives were so negative about these tools.

In terms of the 'relational spaces' outlined, although existing in all of the advertising agencies studied there are a number of caveats about their construction and operation that should be taken into account. First, the emergence of relational networks within project teams was often insufficient to enable the most effective knowledge leverage. Interviewees argued that it was necessary to also move outside of project teams and develop relationships with counterparts in other teams doing the same task (i.e. account management, planning or creative work). As one account planner commented, "so you get the [client x] account teams and the [client y] account teams and within each team the sharing of knowledge is very strong. What is essential is that you also consult more widely, there's massive benefit to be got from talking to planners on other teams and learning from their experiences but in a slightly different context" (A2). The second caveat relates to variations in the extent to which advertising executives in different roles developed embedded relational networks. Account planners, manager and directors and other senior executives were, in general, able to describe in great detail geographically and numerically extensive relational networks. They would always contact overseas colleagues when a difficulty arose or new project was commenced. In contrast, creatives of all seniority were much less likely to engage in global consultation, something that is probably the result of the dominant belief in the creatives interviewed that they alone were responsible for producing new ideas and because of their scepticism about practice-based spaces. As one creative commented:

"The main way we interact with other people in the [firm x] network is when head honchos' have come here! It's important to try and make the network the hero not just one office but that can be quite difficult. The fact that we do a lot of our creative out of New York makes that harder, I just feel it's my work and I don't really know how much other people can help me" (A24).

It should also not be assumed that all account planners and managers developed relational spaces in an equally uniform way. The most senior advertising executives suggested they travelled to overseas offices between three and eight times a year and,

therefore, benefited from face-to-face encounters that strengthen relational spaces. However, less senior individuals generally travelled at most once or twice a year, the result of which was a reduced density of global relational networks and a reduction in the frequency and success with which junior advertising executives talked to and learned from their overseas colleagues.

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### Analytical approach

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Amin and Cohendet (2004)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Analysis of global relational spaces of learning and the role of involve business travel, virtual communication and the circulation of documents.</li><li>• Scale-defined analyses are replaced with relational, network focussed, examinations of learning as a social practice.</li><li>• Actor-Network theory favoured as an analytical lens that allows a topological understanding of networks in space.</li></ul>
Bartlett and Ghoshal (1998)	<p>TNCs operate one of four models of learning:</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• Multinational (knowledge produced and retained in each office);</li><li>• International (knowledge produced at HQ's and disseminated as global best practice);</li><li>• Global (knowledge produced at HQ's and all clients served from this office);</li><li>• Transnational (knowledge developed and diffused worldwide to allow collaborative innovation based on the sharing of ideas).</li></ul>
Bunnell and Coe (2001)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"><li>• TNC's manage R&amp;D and the knowledge upon which innovation is based at local and global scales.</li><li>• Frequent interactions and virtual communication allows tacit insight to flow across space.</li></ul>

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**Table 1.** Illustrations of globally stretched tacit knowledge management in TNC's.

Company	Holding company group	Global billings for 2002 (millions)	Global offices	Global employees	Key global clients
McCann-Erickson worldwide	Interpublic	\$26,630	170	21,280	Coca-Cola Mastercard Cereal Partners
BBDO worldwide	Omnicom	\$19,925	417	24,008	Mars Gillette Guinness
Young & Rubicam	WPP	\$18,678	283	11,387	Colgate-Palmolive LEGO
Publicis worldwide	Publicis	\$18,083	227	10,718	Allied Domecq Hewlett Packard Ericsson
Euro RSCG worldwide	Havas	\$12,614	233	11,708	Intel Danone Cadbury Trebor Basset
Ogilvy & Mather worldwide	WPP	\$10,688	480	15,034	Ford BP American Express
J Walter Thompson	WPP	\$10,465	314	9130	Vodafone Shell Diaego
TBWA	Omnicom	\$9,755	237	12,626	Addidas Sony News International
Leo Burnett worldwide	Publicis	\$9,459	84	9778	Heinz Proctor & Gamble Morgan Stanley
Grey worldwide*	WPP*	\$8,488	304	9058	GlaxoSmithKline Proctor & Gamble Nokia

**Table 2.** The 10 leading global agencies by turnover.

**Source:** Advertising Age (2003); Fieldwork.

\* Grey Worldwide was original part of the 'Grey Global group' but was acquired by WPP in 2005.

Example of learning facilitated by practice-based spaces	Exemplary quote from advertising executive
Problem solving and identifying the best way to develop successful advertising.	“One of the key things is understanding what the client actually needs and translating that into a requirement of what the agency needs to deliver...quite often there is this innate enthusiasm in agency’s to try and rush off and get things done to please the clients without really fully understanding what the client wants or needs, and the two things may be different. And certainly what I try and do is analyse the situation so that I can understand what the client is after ...and talking to colleagues gives you a different perspective, it gives you chance to test you’re speaking against other people to see if it makes sense and it gives you a chance to draw on their experience and to see how they see a problem, how they’re experience influences them” (A1).
The development of creative, innovative and radical approaches in adverts.	“...there’s creativity which is the result of unusual combinations of existing things and then there is creativity which is the creation of new things and actually most people would feel they do mostly the former, the latter is very very rare. So they might combine references from pop music to references to bread and you stir up ideas from different ‘vocabularies’ if you like... sometimes you’re at an earlier stage in the process and you just want to hear what others think about it. And sometimes it may be that they have had specific experience of something on an account, but whatever, talking to other people wherever they are in the World can inform that type of creative thinking” (A16).
The assessment of ideas before their implementation.	“It takes time to have good creative judgement, to spot a good ad or a good idea from a bad idea [and] unlike being, say for example an artist working in a singular way, advertising is very collaborative. Working with your colleagues makes you successful. That’s critical, we constantly debate things, bounce ideas off each other, test out ideas and views on one another” (A13).

**Table 3.** Examples of the benefits of practice-based spaces and the types of learning facilitated.  
**Source:** Fieldwork.

Agency	Corporate tool	Description	Key principles
Foot Cone & Belding	FCB's Blueprint and Tools	“The FCB Blueprint is our way of working around the world. Our way to organise as a team to uncover insights that lead to powerful ideas. Designed to smooth the way, not to bog it down, the FCB Blueprint gives structure to the process, so everyone agrees on where to go, and how to get there”.	A set of tools used to interrogate the challenges relating to any client's brand. Tools include 'Brand Insights Online', 'The Chess Team', 'Future Focus', 'Mind & Mood' and 'Relationship Monitor'. Each relate to a discrete issue associated with any advertising campaign. For example, 'the chess team' relates to strategy whilst 'future focus' consider where the brand should be located within the marketplace at the end of the campaign and in the future. Each tool is made up of procedures and analytical frameworks that, based on the investigations of the advertising executives involved, can be employed to understand the specific issues associated with a brand.
J Walter Thompson	Thompson Total Branding	“To achieve our goal of 'Total Branding' we cross continents, span mediums and traverse boundaries both physical and spiritual...Creating and nurturing brands in this environment is a frighteningly complex challenge. What is called for is a perfect blend of left-brain logic, process and rigor together with right-brain passion, chaos and creativity. This is why Thompson Total Branding was created, and why it is proved to be so successful”.	A protocol guiding the analysis of advertising challenges. Tools and methodologies allow advertising executives to deal with issues such as 'the decline in sales of a product in a mature market' using a pre-defined analytical approach. The tools and methodologies drawn on ask key questions about the brand and the product and use the answers to construct an initial understanding of the issues, beginning with answers to the questions: <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Where are we now?</li> <li>• Why are we there</li> <li>• Where could we be?</li> <li>• How can we get there?</li> <li>• Are we getting there?</li> </ul> This is then followed up with tools and methodologies that allow the initial challenges identified to be converted to ideas for a campaign.

**Table4.** Corporate descriptions of communications tools.

**Source:** Based on descriptions taken from [www.fcb.com/agency/goal\\_pf.html](http://www.fcb.com/agency/goal_pf.html) and [www.jwt.com/jwt/philosophy/ttb/2.2.2.html](http://www.jwt.com/jwt/philosophy/ttb/2.2.2.html) - both accessed 24<sup>th</sup> April 2004.

Benefits of being embedded in relational spaces	Exemplary quote from advertising executive
The development of mutual respect and appreciation for the different characteristics of advertising marketplaces throughout the World and, therefore, the different opinions, ideas and strategies individuals have.	“It can be a problem, its sounds very UK centric, but advertising is so much more developed in the UK than it is in other markets. So it’s not just that we approach it differently it’s just that UK consumers are much more media savvy and get stuff more easily. So you might produce an ad that you think would be great and then the Eastern European markets who are not at the same level would not understand it at all because they are not familiar with the idea and they approach things differently. When you know the people you understand that and recognise it so you don’t think’ they’re so dim’ or something like that” (A8).
A willingness to challenge the ideas of an overseas colleague and be critical of their work, without being fearful of damaging the relationship with them.	“Once a German manager said something and there was a bit of jockeying between us and disagreement about it but there was recognition that there’s often no right answer and that it wasn’t personal criticism but constructive help” (A6).

**Table 5.** Further benefits of relational spaces of learning.  
**Source:** Fieldwork.