The Transformers: Mexican Immigrants and the Development of Tacit Knowledge

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Abstract

In recent years, knowledge flows associated with international migration and their relationship to economic transformation have garnered increasing attention. Academic and policy discussions on this issue have focused primarily on migrants considered highly-skilled, and have considered the contribution their tacit skill makes to the knowledge base of an economy. However, these conversations have viewed migrants with lower levels of formal education—those they categorize as less-skilled or unskilled—as atopic, and have relegated them to debates about whether they have had a negative impact on low-wage labor markets.

This paper examines the knowledge contribution Mexico immigrant workers make in the construction industry, a sector in which they are heavily represented. Challenging the assumption that skill is primarily derived from formal schooling and classroom education, we focus on immigrants whose access to formal education institutions is limited but who nonetheless have been able to acquire significant tacit knowledge through informal or on-the-job learning processes in both sending and receiving communities. Through a multi-year study in which we have interviewed over 200 Mexican immigrant construction workers in Philadelphia and Raleigh-Durham, we show that a significant proportion—close to 60 percent in our sample—migrate with deep and sophisticated construction knowledge. Many of those who arrive with this experience were employed as master craftsmen in building trades in their respective sending communities. Moreover, we find that Mexican immigrant workers continue to develop these skills while at their U.S. jobsites, exploring and innovating new construction techniques and carving out new pathways for upskilling immigrant co-workers and new labor market entrants.

We find that as migrants moved their tacit knowledge from one labor market context to another, they changed the form and composition of that knowledge. Their engagement with labor market structures, workplace practices, and construction materials informed the ways they translated tacit knowledge brought from Mexico, or other construction sites in the US. To explain this variance, we draw on Polanyi’s original articulation of the cognitive processes involved in the development of tacit knowledge. We focus on the relational aspect of tacit “knowing” that Polanyi describes: a relationship between an explicit aspect of knowledge, which he calls “distal” because it is external to the actor, and an implicit aspect that is impossible to fully articulate or know, termed “proximal” because of its internalization by the actor. Drawing on Polanyi’s argument that tacit knowledge consists in the relationship between these two knowledge terms, we argue that migration can sever and reconfigure the cognitive connection forged between the distal and proximal terms in tacit knowing. We show that as the migrants in our sample moved to new contexts, they encountered different tools, practices, techniques, routines and institutions. As a result, we argue, migrants were confronted with new forms of explicit – “distal” – knowledge, and to make sense of and engage with these new types of knowledge, they drew on their “proximal” intuitive knowledge. As they forged new connection between unfamiliar distal knowledge terms and long-held proximal knowledge terms, they ultimately transformed both. They created wholly new forms of tacit knowledge that were more than simple hybrids of Mexican and US construction practices. The knowledge they created was expressed through new construction techniques, new workplace practices, and new strategies for navigating the labor market.