DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/2975-8033/cad7a3

THE JOURNEY OF KNOWLEDGE. HOW THE KNOWLEDGE IS MANAGED IN A MULTI SCALE ORGANIZATION: EXAMPLE OF A SOCIO-PROFESSIONAL INTEGRATION PROJECT IN A FRENCH ASSOCIATION

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Abstract

This paper examines the relationships between the different actors (social and vocational integration counsellors, trainers, educational engineers and project managers) at different levels of the organisation through the prism of knowledge needs. Via a socio-professional integration project, this paper analyses this impact of knowledge in a complex multiscale organization of a French association. This paper will tell the story of knowledge management in this project. We will focus on the role of each actor and the relationship between them. How does the knowledge pass between different scales of the organisation and different cities? Have they experienced some loss of knowledge with the change in geographical and organisational scale? How do they manage the knowledge and data they already have and how do they manage the new knowledge they create in this project? What method? What tool? And who? We propose to follow the path of knowledge in this project.

Keyword: Knowledge management; Multi scale organization; Relationship between actors; Impact of territories in project implantation.

JORNADA DO CONHECIMENTO. COMO O CONHECIMENTO É GERIDO NUMA ORGANIZAÇÃO MULTIESCALAR: EXEMPLO DE UM PROJETO DE INSERÇÃO SOCIOPROFISSIONAL NUMA ASSOCIAÇÃO FRANCESA

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Resumo

Este artigo analisa como o conhecimento circula e é gerido no interior de uma organização complexa e multiescalar, tomando como exemplo um projeto de inserção socioprofissional desenvolvido por uma associação francesa. O estudo examina as interações entre diferentes atores – conselheiros de integração social e profissional, formadores, engenheiros pedagógicos e gestores de projeto – sob a ótica de suas necessidades de conhecimento. A pesquisa acompanha o percurso do conhecimento entre diferentes níveis organizacionais e territórios, questionando se há perda de conhecimento durante essas transições. Também aborda como o conhecimento existente é preservado, como novos saberes são produzidos e quais métodos, ferramentas e papéis estão envolvidos nesse processo. Ao seguir a "jornada do conhecimento" no âmbito do projeto, o artigo evidencia os mecanismos, desafios e estratégias que sustentam a gestão do conhecimento em organizações multiescalares.

Palavras-chave: Gestão do conhecimento, Organização multiescalar, Relações entre atores, Impacto territorial de implementação de projetos.

Introduction

In contemporary non-profit organisations, particularly those focused on socio-professional integration, effective knowledge management is crucial for sustaining impact and ensuring strategic coherence. As these organisations grow increasingly complex—both in structure and geographical scope—the challenge of managing knowledge flows also intensifies (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). This paper examines a case study involving a French non-profit operating a multiscale project across several cities. The aim is to understand how knowledge circulates among actors at different levels of the organisation and how tools, methods, and human roles contribute to this process.

The study concerns a social-professional integration project within a French association that began in 2016 and is due to end in December 2025. This project, named Double A (anonymised), is a perfect blend of social work and training. Indeed, Double A offers 210 hours of training and 10 months of socio-professional support. Double A also provides social integration or re-socialisation through volunteers who organise cultural outings (museums, city visits, etc.).

This paper is based on field and participatory research and will explore how knowledge from the field is relevant and must be utilised by senior management, as well as the relationship with knowledge—its production, use, and storage by each participant involved in the project. We will follow the journey of knowledge.

This study is grounded in fieldwork and participatory research methodologies. From June 2023 to the present, I have had the opportunity to attend meetings and observe the activities of various stakeholders through direct integration within the teams and by being physically present in their offices. The data derived from the participatory research were collected through systematic observations during meetings, as well as through formal and informal discussions with participants, including semi-structured interviews.

Furthermore, I was actively involved in the implementation and deployment of a collaborative tool designed to facilitate the transfer of data. This article primarily draws upon data collected during the deployment phase of this tool. My close collaboration with the teams afforded me the opportunity to obtain valuable insights, perspectives, and experiences from each stakeholder, thereby enabling a comprehensive tracing of the data flow.

In my capacity as project manager responsible for the deployment of this tool, I was able to systematically collect data essential for the preparation of this article. I oversaw the implementation process until the tool's full adoption by the teams. Additionally, I utilised feedback gathered through collaborative work with a colleague from the association to conduct an internal evaluation of the tool's effectiveness. These findings contributed to the development of my reflections on knowledge management.

Firstly, in this case, the term "field" refers to territories or cities. Double A operates in five French regions (Île-de-France, Nouvelle-Aquitaine, Occitanie, Bretagne/Brittany, and Île de la Réunion). In each of these regions, Double A is active in one or two cities, which we refer to as fields.

Double A has a multiscale organisation, with some team members based in Paris (top management), others in the regions (regional managers), and some in the fields (socio-professional consultants, trainers, and educational engineers). How does this multiscale organisation manage knowledge and data? How can the knowledge already held and produced at each level be shared and communicated to all? How is knowledge managed across these different scales within the project? To answer these questions, we first need to understand the project and the reason for having such a large team dispersed throughout France. Then, we will focus on the role of each actor at each level. Why do they need to use knowledge about the field/territories to succeed in the project? Why must they produce new knowledge? For what purpose and for whom? How do the actors and their interactions influence the knowledge they possess and generate? And what tools do they use to produce and manage knowledge?

The project mobilised four primary types of actors:

- Social and vocational integration counsellors were responsible for collecting field data and identifying individual needs.
- Trainers adapted educational content in response to evolving learner profiles and local demands.
- Instructional designers transformed training requirements into structured programmes aligned with pedagogical standards.
- Project managers co-ordinated activities across cities, ensuring alignment with broader organisational goals.

1. From Centralised Conception to Contextual Adaptation: Governance and Knowledge Gaps in the Double A Project

The Double A project was initially conceived by the association's central management team, based in Paris, in response to a national call for proposals from the French Ministry. This team, primarily composed of educational engineers and project managers, operated at a strategic level. Their role was to design a proposal that aligned with national priorities and funding criteria—an objective they successfully achieved. However, while this central team possessed expertise in project design and institutional strategy, they lacked detailed knowledge of operational realities in the field, particularly the specific socio-economic and demographic contexts of each region.

This knowledge gap shaped the project's initial structure. Double A was designed as a top-down initiative, where decision-making authority and project architecture originated centrally, while field implementation was delegated to local actors—primarily social and vocational integration professionals. The central team set overarching objectives, defined deliverables, and structured the project around performance indicators necessary to secure funding. Their perspective, however, was primarily institutional and goal-oriented, with limited engagement in the day-to-day challenges of social integration work on the ground (Mintzberg, 1989).

Despite this centralised approach, Double A exhibited certain adaptive features. The project brought together senior managers from two distinct domains: professional training and social integration. Each group brought different operational priorities and visions of success. Their convergence within the Double An initiative created opportunities for internal synergy as well as potential friction. Notably, one manager within this group advocated for a modular structure, proposing that regions should be allowed to adjust components of the project to better align with local needs. This proposal was not only pragmatic but strategic—it sought to increase local buy-in by enabling regional managers to feel a sense of ownership over implementation decisions.

This controlled decentralisation marked a critical turning point in the evolution of the project's governance. Although Paris retained authority over the project's core framework, regional actors were granted leeway to tailor implementation. This flexibility reflects a growing recognition in organisational theory that localised knowledge and field-specific expertise are essential for the success of complex, multiregional initiatives (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Wenger, 1998). From a governance perspective, the Double A project thus represents a hybrid model: centrally conceived but partially decentralised in implementation.

The post-approval phase exposed the limitations of the initial top-down model. Once funding was secured, central management was tasked with operationalising Double A across a geographically diverse set of territories. It was during this phase that the disconnect between strategic planning and field reality became apparent. Paris-based managers lacked the local knowledge needed to engage key stakeholders, recruit participants, and adapt communication strategies. They quickly realised that technical expertise in instructional design and project management alone was insufficient to navigate the complexity of regional ecosystems.

For example, the Île-de-France region primarily targets NEETs (Not in Education, Employment, or Training), typically youth aged 16 to 29 with specific integration challenges. In contrast, Occitanie

works with a population of newly arrived asylum seekers, whose needs differ markedly in terms of legal support, language training, and social accompaniment. These populations not only require different pedagogical approaches but also distinct social support mechanisms. Applying a uniform programme model across such divergent groups risked undermining the project's efficacy and alienating local actors.

At this stage, central management acknowledged that field-specific knowledge was essential. While capable of designing a generic programme structure, they required the insights of regional managers—individuals embedded in local networks with a deep understanding of community dynamics and institutional landscapes. These regional actors became indispensable for contextualising the project and translating its goals into locally relevant practices.

This recognition aligns with scholars such as Wacquant (2014), who emphasises the territorial dimension of social inequality. Local histories, institutional capacities, and public policy infrastructures significantly affect the outcomes of social integration programmes. Territories with robust welfare ecosystems and established social services can facilitate implementation, while those with weaker institutional frameworks face significant barriers.

Thus, to ensure Double A's success, top management had to pivot from a design-and-deliver approach to a more collaborative, knowledge-integrative strategy. This required not only the willingness to listen to field actors but also the development of mechanisms for gathering, validating, and integrating local knowledge into ongoing project operations. In doing so, the organisation began to move from hierarchical knowledge transmission towards a more distributed knowledge governance model—a shift increasingly recognised as essential in complex social interventions (Choo, 2006).

2. The Strategic Value of Field-Level Knowledge: A Multi-Actor Dynamic in Double A's Implementation

The implementation of the Double A project initially relied on the strategic vision developed by the central management team in Paris. However, as the project transitioned from design to delivery, it rapidly became apparent that centralised expertise alone was insufficient to address the complex, localised realities encountered on the ground. In response, top management turned to regional teams—particularly regional managers—to bridge the gap between central directives and local execution. Regional managers were presumed to possess the contextual awareness necessary to adapt the programme to territorial needs. Yet, this assumption proved to be only partially accurate.

Although regional managers did offer valuable insight into their respective contexts, their interventions were also shaped by their own professional objectives and institutional agendas. In many instances, regional adaptations of Double A were driven not solely by beneficiary needs, but also by internal ambitions—such as increasing regional visibility or demonstrating managerial efficacy. Consequently, these modifications often resulted in goal inflation, further complicating an already ambitious initiative.

The original framework of Double A included robust targets: training 900 individuals over three years, ensuring that 50% of participants were under the age of 29, and maintaining a 30% participation rate among women. The addition of supplementary regional objectives—such as showcasing innovation or aligning with regional strategic priorities—introduced additional layers of complexity and risked diluting the project's core mission.

As the divergence between top-down expectations and field-level realities widened, the project faced a growing risk of misalignment with the actual needs of its target populations. The absence of accurate, field-specific knowledge from both central and regional management created a critical disjuncture. In response, both levels began to seek insights from those most closely embedded

in the day-to-day dynamics of implementation: employment and social integration counsellors.

These counsellors emerged as key knowledge holders. Operating within the immediate realities of their territories, they possessed tacit and experiential knowledge essential for tailoring the project to local contexts. Their contributions revealed significant regional disparities that could not be addressed through a uniform national model. For instance:

- In **Réunion**, many prospective participants required not only vocational training but also access to stable housing, which was a prerequisite for any meaningful integration process.
- In Île-de-France, the impending Paris 2024 Olympic Games highlighted training opportunities in sectors such as security, hospitality, and sports.
- In **Occitanie** and **Nouvelle-Aquitaine**, where the target demographic included newly arrived asylum seekers, the emphasis shifted towards legal assistance, language acquisition, and basic civic orientation.
- In **Brittany**, a dense network of pre-existing associations already addressed integration needs, requiring careful strategic positioning to avoid duplication and resistance.

These adaptations were not peripheral—they were essential to the project's viability. Without tailoring Double A to reflect the socio-demographic, cultural, and institutional specificities of each region, the project would likely have failed. The intervention of employment and integration counsellors not only grounded the project in practical realities but also demonstrated a core principle of social policy implementation: strategic planning must be informed by field-level expertise.

Moreover, these counsellors played a critical role in stakeholder engagement and local communications. Gaining traction in each region necessitated building relationships with key actors—community organisations, potential beneficiaries, local employers, and public institutions. Counsellors, as knowledge brokers, facilitated access to these networks through their pre-existing relationships with structures such as **France Travail**, local non-profits, and small – to medium-sized enterprises.

However, this expanded role placed considerable strain on these professionals. In addition to fulfilling their core responsibilities—providing individualised support for employment and social integration—they were required to align their work with both national strategic goals and regional ambitions. The burden of managing upwards while delivering on-the-ground services underscored the complexity of operating within a multiscale governance system.

Nonetheless, their contributions were vital. It was their granular knowledge, contextual awareness, and local embeddedness that enabled the Double A project to adapt meaningfully to diverse regional realities.

This case highlights the strategic importance of distributed knowledge in multilevel organisational structures. The success of Double A did not depend solely on central planning or regional coordination, but on the integration of insights across all levels of the organisational hierarchy. The concept of **"knowledge symmetry"**—ensuring that decision-making is informed by relevant training from the right stakeholders at the appropriate level—emerges as a critical factor in successful programme implementation.

As the project matured, the knowledge dynamic evolved from a unidirectional model—where in training flowed vertically from top to bottom—into a more interactive and iterative process. Feedback loops, negotiated adjustments, and collaborative learning replaced rigid command structures. This evolution marked the transition towards a more resilient and context-sensitive governance model, characterised by participatory knowledge integration and a growing recognition of field-level expertise as a strategic asset.

Inter-Actor Relationships as a Determinant of Knowledge Management Effectiveness

The effectiveness of knowledge management within complex organisations is intrinsically linked to the quality of interactions between actors and their evolving relationships with both global and localised knowledge over time (Author, year).

DOI: https://doi.org/10.21747/2975-8033/cad7a3

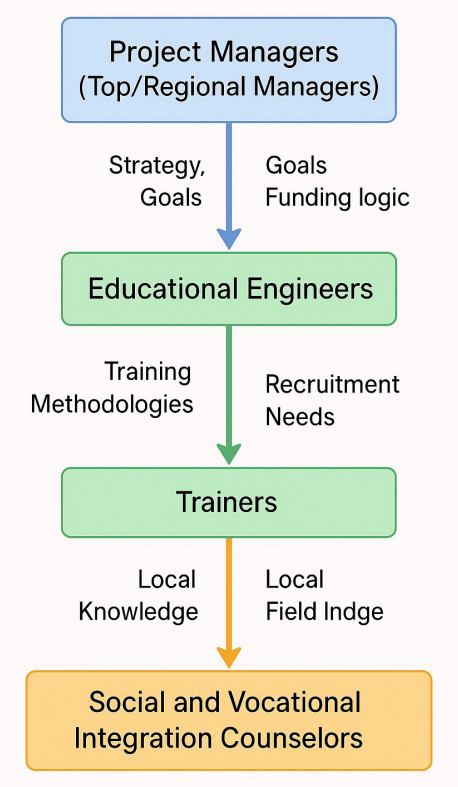

Figure 1. Author´s elaboration

This section examines how such interactions are structured and how they influence the production, transfer, and integration of knowledge within the framework of a multiscale organisational setting.

For analytical purposes, four principal categories of actors involved in the Double A project are considered:

- Social and vocational integration counsellors (also referred to as employment and social integration counsellors)
- Trainers
- Educational engineers
- Project managers (encompassing both senior and regional managerial roles).

Project managers serve as the primary custodians of strategic and global knowledge. Their responsibilities include the design of project frameworks, the formulation of objectives, and the establishment of institutional alignment and compliance with funding requirements. Their expertise lies in drafting funding proposals, articulating strategic visions, and constructing project architectures. However, their access to detailed, localised knowledge—particularly regarding the socio-economic, cultural, and operational realities specific to each region—is limited. This knowledge gap poses a significant barrier to the effective contextualisation of interventions.

Educational engineers function as intermediaries who translate the strategic directives of project managers into concrete pedagogical models. Their expertise is grounded in the design and deployment of educational frameworks aligned with institutional objectives. Yet, in highly diverse and dynamic operational contexts such as those encountered in Double A, technical pedagogical knowledge alone is insufficient. The success of educational engineering increasingly depends on adaptability to local realities.

Trainers operate at the frontline of educational delivery. Their knowledge concerns the application of instructional strategies, learner engagement, and course facilitation. However, their ability to execute these functions effectively is contingent on the successful recruitment and retention of participants—a process dependent on access to local networks and an understanding of field-specific conditions, which is often mediated by other actors.

Social and vocational integration counsellors represent the principal holders of field-level, tacit knowledge. Their intimate understanding of local socio-economic environments, challenges facing beneficiaries, and community-specific dynamics makes their expertise critical to implementation. Nevertheless, these actors are often isolated from strategic decision-making processes and the expectations of funding bodies. Their work remains oriented towards addressing immediate, tangible needs at the local level rather than aligning with broader institutional objectives.

The distribution of knowledge within the Double A project reveals a structure of interdependent expertise, where each actor simultaneously produces and depends upon the knowledge of others. For example, project managers rely on field counsellors for insights necessary to adapt interventions to regional contexts, while counsellors depend on managerial actors to secure funding and institutional legitimacy.

It can thus be argued that the nature of relationships between actors constitutes a foundational condition for the success of knowledge management in multiscale organisations. In the case of Double A, these relationships are largely shaped by a hierarchical framework, where knowledge flows both vertically and horizontally. The effectiveness of these flows—and by extension, the overall success and sustainability of the project—depends on the degree of coherence, reciprocity, and adaptability within inter-actor relationships (Fig. 1).

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The Evolution of Power Relations and Knowledge Circulation Among Actors

The hierarchical structure previously described inherently generates asymmetries in authority and influence among the various actors. Within this architecture, trainers and social and vocational integration counsellors are expected to report on their activities and to produce knowledge and data for their immediate superiors—namely, educational engineers and regional managers.

However, recent developments indicate a gradual erosion of these intermediary managerial layers. Increasingly, trainers and social workers engage in direct communication with top-level managers based in Paris. This shift is largely attributable to the fact that regional managers often lack access to the highly specific, field-based in-training that top management requires for decision-making and reporting. As a result, senior managers now seek training directly from frontline actors, bypassing traditional reporting hierarchies.

This trend is indicative of a broader evolution in the nature of organisational knowledge: as knowledge becomes more granular, situational, and operationally embedded, the interactions between actors become more multifaceted and less linear. Top managers, particularly when fulfilling the reporting demands of funding agencies, depend heavily on data produced at the operational level—especially by social integration professionals. For instance, when funders request demographic insights about participants entering the Double A programme, it is the social workers who provide the most precise and current data.

This emergent dynamic raises fundamental questions about the role and relevance of regional managers within the organisational configuration of Double A. Although formally responsible for setting regional priorities and overseeing implementation, they appear increasingly peripheral in the knowledge flows that inform strategic decision-making and real-time adjustments. Nonetheless, the long-term value of regional managers should not be underestimated. Their broader organisational perspective and capacity for foresight remain vital for sustaining the project's strategic coherence and territorial adaptability.

The Production and Prospective Utilisation of Knowledge within Double A

A thorough examination of the interplay between global knowledge and the knowledge held by different categories of actors is essential for understanding the mechanisms of knowledge production and utilisation within the Double A project. In this context, global knowledge is conceptualised as the composite body formalised in training, practices, and resources generated to support the operationalisation, evaluation, and promotion of the project. This includes educational methodologies, digital and analytical tools (such as databases and monitoring platforms), as well as strategic and administrative documentation.

At the apex of the organisational structure, top managers maintain privileged access to knowledge regarding the expectations, evaluation frameworks, and procedural criteria of external funding bodies. Their primary competencies lie in constructing proposals that align with funding priorities, securing financial support, and positioning the project strategically within wider institutional landscapes. In this sense, top managers constitute the **structural and cognitive core** of the project—akin to the "skeleton" and "brain" of an organism—ensuring both stability and strategic direction.

Regional managers, meanwhile, assume an intermediary role. They are tasked with translating national objectives into operational strategies suited to the specificities of their regions. In a governance context characterised by decentralisation, they must reconcile the standardised demands of central planning with the socio-economic and cultural heterogeneity of local territories. Regional managers can thus be likened to the **"organs"** of the Double A system—responsible for adapting and regulating the flow of strategic imperatives to maintain coherence across diverse localities.

At the operational base, trainers, educational engineers, and social and vocational integration counsellors act as the primary producers and stewards

of field-level knowledge. Their proximity to beneficiaries enables them to generate detailed, contextualised insights into individual needs, capacities, and trajectories. Their roles encompass the development of pedagogical content, the design of practical support tools, and the ongoing recalibration of project activities in response to emergent conditions. Within the broader system, these actors perform the role of **"blood"**—circulating vital in training, enabling communication across levels, and sustaining the dynamic reproduction of the project's core functions.

Knowledge production within Double A is therefore not a static or top-down process but an inherently **dynamic and iterative** one, shaped by continuous adaptation to the diverse and evolving conditions of the field. Without the ongoing integration of newly produced knowledge—whether related to changing participant demographics, shifting policy landscapes, or emergent socio-economic trends—the project would risk obsolescence and diminished impact.

As such, the long-term sustainability and scalability of Double A depend critically on the organisation's capacity to **recognise, valorise, and integrate** knowledge generated at all levels. The principal challenge lies not merely in producing new knowledge, but in building robust institutional mechanisms capable of **capturing, disseminating, and operationalising** this knowledge across a complex, multiscale organisational environment.

Final Reflections

The knowledge management approach observed in the Double A project highlights the critical importance of long-term knowledge retention and demonstrates how stakeholder relationships can play a decisive role in both the successful implementation of a project and the overall effectiveness of its knowledge management processes. The initiative's success was largely dependent on the specific expertise of actors within their respective domains, and—crucially—on their deep understanding of the territorial contexts in which they operated. Absent such specialised, localised knowledge, the project would likely have failed.

This case underscores the increasing necessity of recognising and responding to the particularities of local territories in the design and execution of social initiatives. Territorial factors now exert a significant influence on project outcomes, and as a result, the production and application of knowledge must become more focused, context-sensitive, and specialised.

The data and knowledge generated by actors in their respective fields must be effectively mobilised by senior managers—not only to guide present decision-making but also to inform the development of future initiatives that are both relevant and sustainable. This process is particularly critical within the French associative and social work sectors, where project funding is often contingent on competitive calls for proposals and the evolving expectations of institutional partners (Cottin-Marx, Hamidi, & Trenta, 2023; Chevalier, 2022). In such an environment, the **preservation, refinement, and strategic use of knowledge and data** have become essential for organisational resilience and impact.

In the context of contemporary social crises, knowledge management is not merely a technical function but may constitute a fundamental component of collective responses to urgent societal challenges. A growing number of actors have already recognised the imperative of consolidating and scaling knowledge in order to address complex issues more effectively. One notable example is **Soliguide**—a digital platform that maps local resources and facilitates access to essential services by connecting individuals with nearby associations and public structures that provide support in areas such as food security, legal aid, and employment integration.

Ultimately, the experience of the Double A project suggests that successful knowledge management in multiscale, socially driven initiatives depends not only on technological or procedural innovation, but also on the cultivation of **inclusive, reciprocal, and adaptive knowledge ecosystems**—where learning is continuous, power is redistributed, and the value of field-level expertise is fully acknowledged and integrated into strategic decision-making.

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Artigo recebido no âmbito da chamada aberta que decorreu até 31 de março de 2025. Aprovado para publicação a 11 de julho de 2025.