TEMPORARY CLUSTERS –
A FUTURE RESEARCH AGENDA FOR CENTRAL AND EASTERN
EUROPE? INSIGHTS FROM RESEARCH ON CORPORATE
CONFERENCES IN TORONTO

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Abstract. As wider economic networks develop connected through relational ties, permanent spatial proximity is no longer a prerequisite for ongoing knowledge creation. Rather, temporary gatherings either based on physical proximity (i.e. trade fairs) or virtual proximity (i.e. Internet-based communities) can also support interactions between economic agents over great distances and play an important role for processes of inter-firm communication, learning and the corresponding creation and dissemination of knowledge. An increasingly important, albeit largely unexplored form of knowledge generation occurs during international and national corporate conferences. For understanding the role of corporate conferences as events that generate important economic knowledge flows we explore the scale of such face-to-face-encounters, the type of trans-local communities involved, the importance of these short-term meetings and the nature of the specific ecology of information and communication processes involved.

1. Introduction. In the knowledge-based economy, the competitiveness of firms depends on their ability to engage in and benefit from creating and circulating knowledge both with their regional environment and beyond. While economic geographers have for a long time been particularly interested in analyzing the role of spatial proximity in the creation and transfer of new knowledge, relying primarily on local factors in more recent studies has been found to bear the risk of over-embeddedness, affecting the competitiveness of individual firms and even entire clusters. In addition, as wider economic networks develop that are connected through relational ties (proximity), permanent spatial proximity is no longer a prerequisite for ongoing knowledge creation.

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In fact, practices of trans-local and global knowledge flows based on different forms of professional mobility have become widespread and must be considered as important determinants in gaining and maintaining competitiveness (Saxenian 2006; Bathelt and Glückler 2011; Henn 2012). Although many studies underline the importance of such translocal pipelines, their creation has thus far only been poorly understood. Recent work suggests, however, that temporary gatherings either based on physical proximity or virtual proximity (i.e. Internet-based communities) can support interactions between economic agents over great distances and play an important role for processes of inter-firm communication, learning and the corresponding creation and dissemination of knowledge over space (Amin and Cohendet 2004; Bathelt and Glückler 2011).

2. Trade-fairs and Corporate Conferences as Temporary Clusters. Recent research has highlighted the role of trade-fairs as one important type of temporary professional gatherings that allow for the generation and circulation of new knowledge (Bathelt and Spigel 2012; Bathelt and Schuldt 2008; Maskell et al. 2004). When applying a knowledge-based understanding of clusters, such events, even though only temporary in nature, resemble (permanent) regional clusters in manifold ways. First, trade fairs have both a vertical (customer-supplier-relationships) and a horizontal dimension (competing firms) which enable learning processes and the generation of new knowledge about markets and technologies. Second, the participants of trade fairs are exposed to different opportunities which enable them to establish new and to deepen existing relations to business partners on both an interregional and international level. The different information flows between the agents have been conceptualized as global buzz reflecting the external cluster dimension (Bathelt and Schuldt 2008).

Like trade-fairs, corporate conferences bring together professionals from different backgrounds for only a limited period of time. This raises the question of whether conferences represent another type of temporary clusters that enables processes of knowledge generation and circulation.

According to the International Congress and Convention Association (ICCA) (2012), conferences are defined as participatory meetings “designed for discussion, fact-finding, problem solving and consultation. As compared with a congress, a conference is normally smaller in scale and more select in character – features which tend to facilitate the exchange of information. The term ‘conference’ carries no special connotation as to frequency. Though not inherently limited in time, conferences are usually of limited duration with specific objectives”.

Rooting in the early 1930s (Bowers 1930), conference research so far has mainly been interested in the economic impacts of such events (e.g., Grado et al. 2008), in aspects of site-selection (e.g., Kim et al. 2004), the meeting participation process (e.g., van Dijk and Maier 2006), destination marketing (e.g., Davidson and Rogers 2006) and in advances in technology like telephone conferencing (e.g., West and Upchuch 2001). Little research, however, has been carried out on how conferences contribute to the creation and spatial dissemination of new knowledge.

3 Research Design and Methodology. To provide a better understanding of the role of corporate conferences in knowledge circulation processes, the nature of
the ecology of information and communication processes was studied on basis of a qualitative research design. The empirical analysis has focused on different corporate conferences in the Greater Toronto Area and been based on guided interviews with 57 firm representatives conducted at seven corporate conferences in the Greater Toronto Area in 2012.

4. Generation of Global Buzz and Pipelines. The results of the empirical analysis suggest that corporate conferences, similar to trade-fairs, are characterized by global buzz, i.e. unintended and intended flows of communication between the attendees of such an event. As was stated in different interviews, conferences provide the attendees with both trends and expertise, for example on newest technological developments or of existing applied solutions in new contexts. Important sources for such information are conversations with people whom are known and trusted and who have similar knowledge-bases and experiences and thus can be viewed as community of practice. Global buzz, however, is not only a mere product of chance but rather can be facilitated by different means. For example, depending on the seating, discussions and information exchange can be stimulated (e.g., when sitting on round tables). But also informal events like common dinners, cocktail parties, field trips and so on generate a certain atmosphere which allows for an easy flow of knowledge.

Aside from the generation of global buzz, corporate conferences also enable the creation of global pipelines. In particular, the temporary spatial proximity between the participants allows for a low-cost generation of new contacts to (potential) business partners. Whether a partner seems apt for future collaboration in many cases is evaluated during discussions, key notes, lectures and so on. However, there are also many unplanned opportunities for collaboration, arising for example on common dinners, luncheons, spontaneous talks during coffee breaks which allow for networking and socializing. The new contacts created on a business conference are not necessarily of direct relevance but rather may be important only in the future. In many cases, the participants of conferences are particularly interested in connecting to partners in regions not yet covered by their firms. In fact, some interview partners highlighted that close spatial proximity is essential for forming the initial contact and that a conference provides the attendees with manifold opportunities for doing so. Once established, the contacts can be easily activated over distance at later stages of collaboration.

5. Results and Implications for Future Research. The results of the study suggest that an increasingly important, albeit largely unexplored form of knowledge generation occurs during national/international corporate conferences. Aside from the members of a defined community, who are designated or self-selected, such events include experts such as well-known scientists or outstanding businessmen, who contribute to the collective sense-making amongst the participants. Through their comments and statements, they become important anchor or reference points for the evaluations of other participants. In addition, the attendees, due to their related knowledge bases and similar professional positions, are able to effectively exchange and circulate knowledge and to translate it into different corporate contexts in the aftermath of an event. Yet, we know only little about conferences as
temporary clusters which calls for more research in this field in general. In this context, it is suggested for different reasons that research on such events as well as on other types of temporary clusters should put a stronger focus on Central and Eastern Europe in particular: First, so far most studies in that field have clearly focused on Western Europe, North America and Asia while neglecting other regions of the world. Against this background, (comparative) empirical studies in Central and Eastern Europe could provide us with additional insights about processes of knowledge generation. Second, many Central and Eastern European countries have a long tradition in trade-fairs or are well-known locations for corporate conferences etc. and thus offer many opportunities for carrying out empirical studies. Third, aside from the sheer academic potential of such studies, both economic promotion councils and private event management companies will likely be interested in identifying and addressing room for improvements of such events.

REFERENCES