

A Pattern Language on Knowledge Transfer

How pattern languages boost knowledge sharing between generations

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge Transfer is a highly specialized field in organizations. It aims at capturing, retaining, preserving, and handing over experiential as well as other types of knowledge from individuals leaving their jobs to their successors. Experts in knowledge transfer act as facilitators who design and conduct knowledge transfer processes between knowledge sources, knowledge recipients, and managers. The authors of this paper are a group of knowledge transfer facilitators with decades of experience in the field. This paper demonstrates how they approach to capture and codify their experiential knowledge on the topic of knowledge transfer in what is called a 'pattern language'. A pattern language contains well-proven solutions for typical problems in a field of expertise. In this case, the pattern language is made up of prototypical recipes for dealing with problems in the field of knowledge transfer. The paper also discusses the concept of pattern languages and presents a general introduction to pattern language development, applicable in any field of expertise.

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*"Everyone has a right to express his inner experiences
only if he also knows how to find his language for it."*

(Friedrich Nietzsche (1844-1900), Posthumous
Fragments, 1874, translated from the German)

Introduction

Kate and George are two experienced knowledge transfer facilitators. One day, they complain to each other while sitting around a cup of coffee. The two of them are often tasked with knowledge transfer cases too late. Nevertheless, they are expected to harness and capture all of the knowledge of a person leaving the company. While chatting, they share their experience and well-established strategies to preserve under these circumstances as much important knowledge as possible for the organization. As a result, they find a language, i.e., a way of expressing their experience, in shape of a success pattern for dealing with the situation of limited time available.

What Kate and George have intuitively accomplished in our story was described by mathematician and architect Christopher Alexander in the 1970s in his concept of pattern languages. He published the world's first pattern language, "A Pattern Language: Towns, Buildings, Construction" (see Alexander et al. 1977) as a planning tool for human-centered architectural design.

Pattern languages go beyond traditional forms of documenting information. Developing a pattern language allows experts in a field to collaboratively discover their deep experiential knowledge and express it in a way that can be understood by others. This great potential of pattern languages has already been recognized in some domains:

- Software developers were among the first to take up the concept. The so-called Gang of Four (see Gamma/Helm/Johnson/Vlissides 1994) collected and categorized knowledge and experience of software developers in their pattern collection. They gave the patterns catchy names. The pattern language was translated into

many languages without changes and in the meantime became an indispensable part of trainings of software developers.

- Iba et al. developed many pattern languages, e.g., together with the Dementia Friendly Japan Initiative, a pattern language for individuals with dementia and their families (Iba et al. 2017). The group received several awards for their work, including the Grand Prix of Dementia Friendly Award 2015 (Iba Lab & DFJI 2014).
- Grundschober (see Grundschober 2019) took 13 pattern languages and extracted patterns with a focus on feedback-oriented learning and teaching by means of e-portfolios in higher education.
- In a pattern language for good cooperation in cities (InterQuality Architekten 2018), interested parties and experts from all over Germany laid the foundations of common good-oriented urban development.

However, today's reception of pattern languages is somewhat limited. The authors of this paper have developed a new pattern language on the topic of knowledge transfer. Goal was to capture, refine, and retain empirical knowledge out of hundreds of knowledge transfer processes. In the course of this development, the enormous potential of pattern languages once more became evident. This article explains the principle of pattern languages for capturing and disseminating well-established experiential knowledge. Due to entirely positive experience with the Pattern Language on Knowledge Transfer, we plead for a stronger reception of the concept of pattern languages in general in the field of knowledge management.

Patterns, Pattern Language, and Development Process

A pattern language is an organized collection of solutions to common, recurring problems in a domain of knowledge. Each design pattern contains a combination of a general recipe for solving a problem within its context. As in a natural language, the patterns are the vocabulary of the domain. The patterns of a pattern language are linked to each other via relationships. Because the patterns are inherently connected, those patterns that are suitable for solving a given use case can be combined to yield a high-quality overall solution.

A pattern language is an explicated result of a development process conducted by experts in a particular domain. The aim of the process is to preserve and document their expert knowledge thus making it available to others. The artifact to be created—the pattern language—consists of a collection of short text contributions that all follow a uniform structure (including at least the name of the pattern, its context, problem/task definition, and solution recipe). From a knowledge management perspective, it is perfectly possible to extend this basic text structure to multimedia patterns containing other media such as images and sound.

In the process of pattern language development, the following phases can be distinguished (see Figure 1):

1. Preparation Phase
2. Research Phase
3. Production Phase
4. Pattern Linkage Phase
5. Usability Preparation Phase
6. Dissemination Phase

These phases reflect some of the building blocks often found in knowledge management methods, such as identifying, developing, preserving, distributing, and applying knowledge (see Probst et al., 2013).

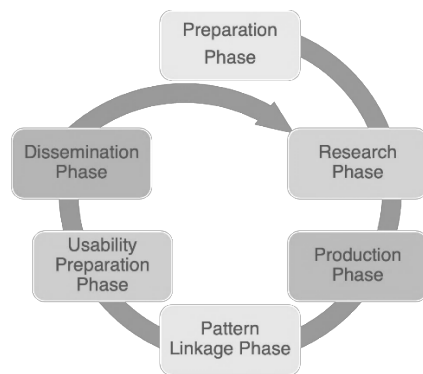


Fig. 1: Phases in the development of a pattern language

The preparation phase is about selecting the domain (or a section of it) and recruiting suitable individuals to participate.

Kate learns about the concept of pattern languages from John, a colleague in her knowledge management expert network. She asks George and the transfer facilitators in her organization whether they would like to participate in developing a pattern language for knowledge transfer so they could collect and share their common insights and learnings. After she introduces them to the concept and its benefits, George and two others agree to participate. John is willing to provide advice and to support the group of authors.

Development work for the pattern language begins with a research phase. Based on their experience, the authors write patterns and give them names aptly describing the situations or solutions covered in the patterns.

Kate invites everyone to a pattern mining workshop led by John. The participants tell each other about knowledge transfers they have conducted. They pay particular attention to approaches that have proven successful

repeatedly under given conditions. As they share their experience from different knowledge transfer situations, they find a number of evidence-based solutions to deal with similar initial situations. For the group, it is a new experience in working together that it is not necessary to argue until finding just the one right solution. They find that each perspective has its own validity and enriches their dialog. Neither opinions nor models from scientific theory are taken into account while gathering best practices. Merely the participants' experience is taken as a basis for adding recipes to the collection. They write the key points on cards. By clustering the cards, they find first patterns, and give them appropriate names. One of the patterns, not entirely unexpectedly, they name Dealing with the Situation of Limited Time.

The production phase contains the majority of mental workload in the development process. The authors come together in small groups to work on each pattern they find and to add visual elements. Each pattern is carefully edited and short summaries are added.

John offers to conduct the first pattern writing workshop together with the entire group of authors so that they can all understand and apply the concept of a pattern language. At the beginning of the workshop, they agree on the basic structure of a pattern comprising context, problem, forces, solution, obstacles, and references (see sample pattern further down). John suggests to start with a simple pattern. The discussion on the elements helps the group to find a common understanding about the context and the associated problem. Based on this common picture, the group now reflects which potential pitfalls from their experience can impede the proposed solution (conflicting priorities and obstacles). By the end of the workshop, the first pattern has emerged. The working group then continues in small teams until all pattern clusters have been processed. All of group complete the short summaries together and design an icon for each pattern.

In the pattern linkage phase, the set of individual patterns evolves to form a pattern language. Here, pattern relationships are established. Relationships reflect the inner structure of the pattern language and create clarity.

The group of authors visualizes the patterns using suitable software. They sift through the short summaries and add relationships between patterns. Visualizing relationships helps them to recognize the overall structure of the pattern language and also allows to add suitable substructures for improved clarity. For example (and remember they are dealing with the domain of knowledge transfer), they create a substructure that bundles variants of knowledge transfer methods.

Up to this point, the pattern language is understandable and applicable more or less only for its authors (and possible feedback providers). The usability preparation phase is about preparing the pattern language for use by different target groups. Appropriate characterizing keywords are selected for the patterns, which can later be used to find the right patterns with search algorithms and subject indices. If necessary, keywords with attributes are provided to further improve search results. In addition, coaches who advise and support users of the pattern language can be trained in this phase.

With the help of John, the authors identify possible target groups for their pattern language. They also look for tags that support pattern search. For each pattern, they add appropriate keywords. Some keywords require attributes to make search more accurate. For example, for the keyword 'knowledge source' it is important to know whether there is one or more. Since some patterns address situations with a single individual as knowledge source and other patterns focus on situations with a group serving as knowledge source, corresponding attributes (single vs. group) are defined for the patterns. Performing a search will thus yield patterns according to the attributes specified as a solution for the use case in question.

An appealing presentation of the pattern language with notes on its goals and possible use cases round off the development process in the dissemination phase. This opens the door for distributing the evidence-based knowledge compiled in the pattern language. Also, dissemination promotes further development and continuous improvement of the pattern language. For the latter, future working groups start over with a new research phase.

The group of authors reaches out to a web designer who gives the presentation of the pattern language an appealing look and feel for selected user groups. Kate and her team guide interested users through the process

of getting started in using the pattern language. As a result, they continually receive suggestions for improvements and for further developments in their pattern language.

Wide use of the pattern language increases the experience of users in the domain. Sooner or later, they will suggest adding more patterns, e.g., because new contexts require new ways of solving problems. In the best case, users will join in to develop new patterns together with the original authors. Thus, the development cycle starts anew.

Phases in the development process do not necessarily have to be followed strictly sequentially. Depending on circumstances, individual activities, e.g., pattern mining, pattern writing, are prioritized or repeated several times in an iterative manner.

The Pattern Language of Knowledge Transfer

The authors of this article followed more or less strictly the development process as described above. The artifact pattern language, i.e., the collection of patterns on knowledge transfer, was documented in *inside*, a software in the field of knowledge management. Besides features of collaborative pattern development, *inside* also offers visualization and linkage functions. It is therefore useful for developing and implementing pattern languages. In the following, the basic structure of the pattern language as well as a detailed example of a pattern is outlined.

Pattern Language Structure

The pattern language of knowledge transfer is divided into the two basic pillars of *Organizational Knowledge Flow* and *Knowledge Flow Between Individuals*. In both pillars, patterns are sorted into four categories (see Figure 2). Patterns are assigned to pillars and categories according to their primary use, either to the pillar on organizational knowledge flow, or to the pillar on knowledge flow between individuals. The latter contains patterns oriented along phases and techniques of knowledge transfer processes.

A color scheme is used in order to better grasp the structure of the pattern language from an application perspective and to be able to correctly locate individual patterns. The pillar *Organizational Knowledge Flow* is colored in shades of blue and the pillar *Knowledge Flow Between Individuals* in orange. Brightness levels of the colors indicate subordinate categories (see icons in Figure 2). Pattern names are underlined so that they are immediately recognizable in the text.

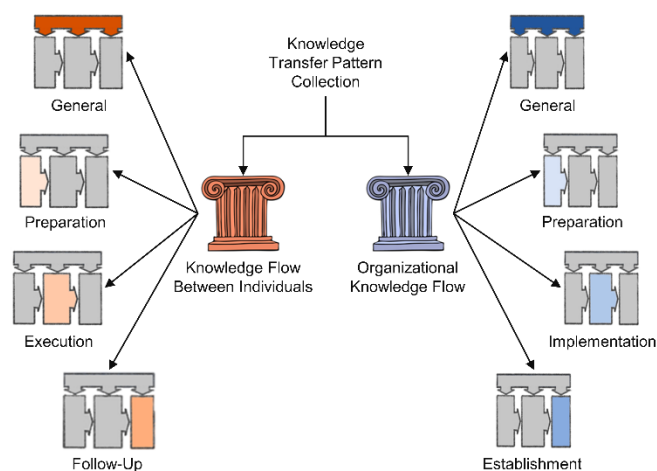


Fig. 2: Structure of the Pattern Language of Knowledge Transfer

The collection of patterns currently contains approx. 70 patterns that have undergone final review. A number of additional patterns are under development. The authors assume that with these patterns the empirical knowledge on knowledge transfer is sufficiently well

documented to be handed over to a next generation of knowledge transfer practitioners for use and further development.

In terms of special content, some cross-sectional topics appear throughout the pattern language. One example is *quality*. It is a relevant topic from both an organizational and an individual perspective and is therefore found, e.g., at the following spots in the pattern language structure:

- Organizational Pillar | General | [Organizational Quality Assurance in Knowledge Transfer](#)
- Organizational Pillar | Preparation | [Introduction of an ISO-Compliant Knowledge Transfer Process](#)
- Individual Pillar | General | [Quality Assurance in Knowledge Transfer](#)
- Individual Pillar | Follow-up | [Evaluation of Transfer Success](#)

Other typical cross-sectional issues include communication, creating acceptance, and empowering stakeholders.

In addition to such cross-sectional topics, subgroups of patterns can be identified that address specific issues and solution paths in greater depth. In particular, the pattern cluster *Transfer Process Variants* should be mentioned here, located in the *Execution* section of *Knowledge Flow Between Individuals*. This cluster alone contains about 15 patterns describing different variants of knowledge transfer and their respective application contexts. Examples of patterns in this cluster are:

- [Accompanied Knowledge Transfer](#)
- [Self-Directed Knowledge Transfer](#)
- [Knowledge Transfer as a Sprint](#)
- [Knowledge Transfer Between Managers](#)

The *Execution* section contains the most patterns. About 50 % of all patterns are located here. Numerous subtopics address experiential knowledge in individual patterns, such as

- [Development of an Event Curve](#)
- [Naive Inquiry Recommended](#)
- [Shifting Between Openness and Structure](#)
- [Knowledge Requirements Analysis](#)

Linkages in the Pattern Language

Patterns are interconnected. This is an essential characteristic of pattern languages in general. Linkages between patterns are set via hyperlinks. Visualization features of the software *inside* are used to represent these logical connections (see Figure 3). Table 1 shows the types of relations used in the *Pattern Language of Knowledge Transfer*.

These relation types have proven useful for the *Pattern Language of Knowledge Transfer*. Some were defined in the early stages of development, some emerged along the way while the pattern language evolved. Pattern languages for other domains may require other types of relations or other definitions of the relations.

In order to arrange the patterns into logical sequences within the structuring pillars and categories of the pattern language, processual structures are integrated at several points. Groups of patterns that can usually be applied in succession are combined into corresponding pattern chains. The most obvious chains of this kind are the categories of *Preparation*, *Execution* and *Follow-Up* in the individual pillar and *Preparation*, *Implementation* and *Establishment* in the organizational pillar. Somewhat more subtle and not immediately recognizable when looking at the structure are procedural sequences that are assembled by means of the relationship 'Leads to'. A wonderful example is the pattern [Selection of a Suitable Knowledge Transfer Process](#). It can be found in the individual column on the level of preparation. This pattern is linked

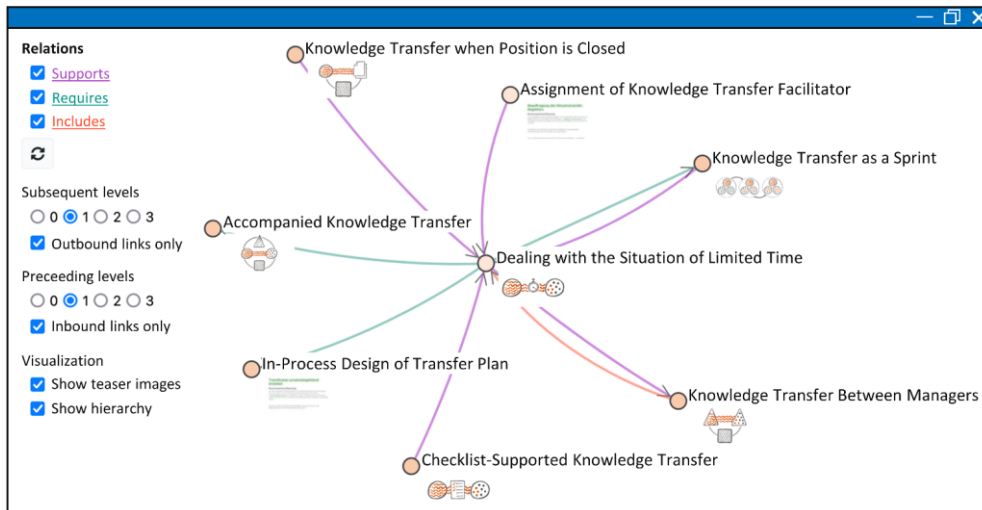


Fig. 3: Relationship graph of pattern *Dealing with the Situation of Limited Time*

to several subsequent patterns using 'Leads to', such as *Accompanied Knowledge Transfer* or *Self-Directed Knowledge Transfer*.

Tab. 1: Relationships for linking patterns in the Pattern Language of Knowledge Transfer.

Relations Between Pattern A and Pattern B	Definition
Supports	A improves the quality of B or contributes to B
Belongs to	A is sub-pattern of superordinate pattern B
Requires	A has B as prerequisite
Leads to	A is cause or trigger of B
Is alternative to	A and B have the same context, free choice of A or B
Includes	A contains B

Graphic Language for the Pattern Language

As shown in Figure 3, most patterns already contain characteristic icons. The authors have developed basic symbols based on the most relevant roles in knowledge transfer (knowledge source, knowledge recipient, knowledge transfer facilitator, manager, and manager responsible for organizational knowledge transfer process), which are combined into icons for each pattern (see Table 2).

Example of a Pattern

To illustrate what a pattern in the pattern language on knowledge transfer looks like, the description of the pattern *Dealing with the Situation of Limited Time* with the sections context, problem, solution recipe and obstacles is presented below. The pattern is located in the individual column on the preparation level. This location of the pattern indicates that a lack of time is often already evident before the transfer process begins.

The pattern also contains hints on how to deal with time constraints occurring not only prior to but also during the transfer process. The decision to allocate the pattern to the preparation level as opposed to the execution level was made to promote better usability in search and retrieval. Alternatively, the pattern could have been divided into two separate patterns focusing on time management prior to and during the transfer process, respectively. This alternative design would have been possible. However, the authors decided that such an artificial separation would not offer any practical advantages in usability.

Tab. 2: Basic symbols for graphical visualizations in the pattern language of knowledge transfer.

Symbol	Explanation
	The symbol for <i>knowledge source</i> is a circle with waves. The waves indicate knowledge flow and thus show willingness to share knowledge with successors.
	The symbol for <i>knowledge recipient</i> is a circle with dots. Orange colored dots represent knowledge learned from the knowledge source. These parts will help the recipients to swiftly find their way in their new position.
	The symbol for <i>knowledge transfer facilitator</i> is a square holding a net. It shows that the transfer facilitator provides a safety net for all participants, guiding them safely through the entire transfer process.
	The symbol for <i>manager</i> is a triangle with vertical lines. The lines visualize organizational embedding and thus responsibility for successful knowledge transfer in the manager's area of responsibility.
	The symbol for <i>manager responsible for organizational knowledge transfer process</i> is a square with arrows. They symbolize individual transfer processes managed holistically in an organizational knowledge transfer process.

Example Pattern

Dealing with the Situation of Limited Time



Context

Before or during a knowledge transfer process, it turns out that time available will be short (particularly common in →*Knowledge Transfer Between Managers*) for retaining and transferring as much knowledge as necessary. Both knowledge source and knowledge recipient are supportive of the knowledge transfer process.

Problem

How is it possible, despite limited time resources, to transfer as much relevant knowledge as necessary, experiential knowledge in particular, and thus retain it for the organization?

Solution Recipe

A knowledge transfer accompanied by a knowledge transfer facilitator (→*Accompanied Knowledge Transfer*) is best suitable for

the situation. This type of knowledge transfer allows an efficient handover that can be pursued along with the day-to-day work of all those involved. This ensures that the time available for transfer is used in the best possible way.

In this setting, process clarity is key. It should be clear what happens when, how, and with what time effort. This can be realized either by appointing an experienced knowledge transfer facilitator (as described here) or by structuring the process efficiently in other ways such as clear visualization of process steps, guiding questions, etc.

In order to get a grip on time pressure in the context of a knowledge transfer process, the entire process is well planned like a project before it starts. Preliminary discussions clarify how much time the entire transfer process is expected to take.

A transfer plan (→In-Process Design of Transfer Plan) is used throughout the entire knowledge transfer process. It contains all transfer-relevant activities and is a living document. This means that open points are added or marked as completed throughout the entire process.

All parties involved (knowledge source, knowledge recipient, manager, knowledge transfer facilitator, etc.) schedule expected time slots in their calendars and assign the meetings the highest priority. An escalation procedure is mapped out together with the manager in the event of meetings being postponed or cancelled repeatedly.

Those responsible for the knowledge transfer process ensure that the process is divided into suitable time segments and meetings (a maximum of 90 minutes is suggested with respect to attention span for knowledge sharing and learning). The sequence of meetings takes into account the individual capacities and boundaries of participants. Since time is limited, it is important that the meetings take place as planned.

As soon as scheduling problems arise, the manager is involved according to the predefined escalation procedure. Several solution scenarios are jointly developed by prioritizing knowledge areas or knowledge transfer steps. The optimal scenario and transfer variant under the given circumstances is then implemented. One possible solution scenario could be a →Knowledge Transfer as a Sprint.

Obstacles

- The knowledge provider and/or recipient cancels scheduled meetings without offering alternative dates. The knowledge transfer facilitator asks the manager for support.
- The meetings are either too often or too rare resulting in poor transfer quality. The knowledge transfer facilitator tries to find a better scheduling arrangement involving all participants.
- Again and again, some topics cannot be discussed with sufficient depth in the time scheduled for the meetings. The knowledge transfer facilitator revises the project schedule together with all participants and discusses the priorities of the topics.

Connected patterns

- Accompanied Knowledge Transfer (requires)
- Knowledge Transfer as a Sprint (requires)
- Knowledge Transfer Between Managers (supports)
- In-Process Design of Transfer Plan (requires)

Conclusions on the Method and Lessons Learned

When developing a pattern language, the way the group collaborates is a critical success factor. An open dialogue bringing together different experiences provides a much richer description than a culture of discussion focused on convincing others through

arguments. When there are different experiences, i.e., when solutions and beliefs seem contradictory, this is often an indicator for different contexts. In such situations, it is appropriate to formulate different patterns. Hence, if the context is different, write a new pattern!

Creating a pattern language in the way described in this paper leads to experiential and tacit knowledge being captured and made explicit. The patterns are codified artefacts, and they are the result of knowledge retained while developing the pattern language. Thus, remembering comes while working on the patterns and is encouraged by sticking to the predefined sections of a pattern template (e.g., context, problem, solution recipe, obstacles).

Even if the temptation is great to let oneself get carried away when writing—when it comes to solution recipes, obstacles, etc., the group should pay careful attention that they stick to their own, personal self-made experiences. Unconfirmed deductions from theory or assumptions not verified in practice should not be part of any patterns. This discipline ensures that the resulting pattern language contains only solutions that have proven successful in reality.

Equally relevant for practical use of the pattern language is that the solution recipes contain clear, operationalized instructions for action. These solution recipes bypass and take into account the described obstacles and pain points.

Experience expressed as a pattern language should follow a meso-level documentation, i.e., should have a medium degree of abstraction. On the one hand, patterns go beyond a single specific application example, in the sense that the solutions described were successfully confirmed again and again in practice. On the other hand, however, abstraction should not be overdone to a degree that patterns contain merely theoretical explanations that lose reference to the context.

Pattern languages are designed to be utilized. One prerequisite for this is that they are formulated in a comprehensible way. It is therefore helpful if the group of authors obtains feedback from outside experts in order to fine-tune the text of the patterns in a review process.

Finally, a group that wants to develop a pattern language must be aware that this undertaking is a marathon, not a sprint. Group exchanges, pattern design, drawing connecting links, keyword selection, and attribute assignment take time. And once a set of patterns is written, it often turns out in review that intensive revisions are still needed for consistency and comprehensibility. But if a group deliberately embarks on this long journey, it will be rewarded with a body of codified experience that is most probably unparalleled in the chosen domain.

Note on Original Publication

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Tools

- *inside*, software for strategic knowledge management in companies and organizations, www.inside-workspace.de
- *Conceptboard*, online whiteboard for digital collaboration, <https://conceptboard.com/de/>
- *MindManager*, mind mapping tool, <https://www.mindmanager.com/de/>

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