

Being a manager, becoming a professional? A case study and interview-based exploration of the use of management knowledge across communities of practice in health-care organisations

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Plain English summary

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Given the demands facing NHS managers, it is important to know that they can access leading-edge management knowledge to improve health-care delivery and that this knowledge can be effectively translated into different health-care settings. Currently, we have only a limited understanding of how managers access and use management knowledge and how this is affected by the organisations they work for and the professional communities they relate to.

This research sets out to fill these gaps in our understanding by exploring how managers in the NHS use knowledge and learning from various sources to apply to develop and improve management practice. In doing so, it recognises that NHS management is made up of various different groups, including clinical, functional and general managers, and that these groups may rely on different sources for guidance on how best to manage. The study also recognises that what managers perceive to be valuable management knowledge varies and is affected by their background, role and organisational practices.

We interviewed 68 managers across three different types of trust in the NHS and observed their participation in different knowledge networks. Our research led us to differentiate between three broad groups of managers who represented very different experiences of management practice. We examined their various backgrounds and how this affected how they acquired and applied management knowledge. We also explored the networks they relied on in their daily practice. Our findings led us to make a number of recommendations regarding management development and organisational support.

The main findings of the research stressed the highly diverse sources of knowledge, learning, experience and networks drawn upon by distinct management groups (clinical, general and functional), the particular challenges facing general managers in establishing a distinct professional identity based around a coherent managerial knowledge base, the strong tendency for managers' knowledge to be more 'home grown' (localised) and experiential (as opposed to abstract and codified) and the tendency for this to be reinforced through the difficulties facing general managers in being actively engaged in wider networks of professionals for knowledge sharing, learning and support.

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