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**Co-evolution of Knowledge and Organization in the Entrepreneurial Process:
A Case Study of Albirex Niigata Football Club**

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After the so-called “Lost Two Decades” and the Great East Japan Earthquake, reconstructing the Japanese economy is urgent. Revival of large Japanese companies is important for that goal. Moreover, to create new industries through start-up venture companies is important as well to revitalize the diminishing Japanese economy due to the low-birth rate and graying population. Yet, the rate of new start-up ventures and their survival rate are low in Japan. Therefore, policies to stimulate entrepreneurship and to help start-up companies grow into fully-grown organizations are most strongly required. To that end, better understanding of the entrepreneurial process is needed.

The purposes of this case study are: (1) to build a theoretical model of the entrepreneurial process by analyzing how Albirex Niigata Football Club, a professional soccer team in the top level of J League, has evolved from a network of individuals into a fully-grown organization and (2) to draw practical implications to help solve practical problems in the entrepreneurial process from the case analysis. To guide the research process and draw theoretical implications, we set the Major Research Question (MRQ): How has a network of individuals evolved into an organization?

Our literature review on entrepreneurship, organization theory, leadership, and knowledge management showed that there exist a lot of literature on the entrepreneurial process from such organizational viewpoints as network analysis, entrepreneurial team, and organizational growth. On the other hand, however, research on the entrepreneurial process from the knowledge perspectives is still rare and remains on the level of just proposing concepts. To fully understand and explain the entrepreneurial process, we need both empirical and theoretical studies as well as studies from both organizational and knowledge perspectives. As such, this study has high novelty and originality.

Our case analysis revealed that in the beginning phase of the entrepreneurial process, there was an informal network of individuals who have different experiential knowledge in their different occupational fields. As an idea of creating a professional football club in Niigata to bring World Cup games there became clearer and shared by those individuals, gatherings of an informal nameless group were frequently held to discuss the idea. Then, the “Preparation Office for the Setting-Up of a Professional Football Club” was officially formed as an entrepreneurial team by main members of the informal group. Finally, the team evolved into an organization by incorporating the Albirex Niigata Football Club, which grew further into an multinational organization as it set up its satellite teams in Singapore, Barcelona, and Phnom Penh. In the evolutionary process from a network to a group, from a group to a team, and from

a team to an organization, various kinds of knowledge were created, shared and utilized. First, there was a know-who network of individuals who had knowledge relevant to a vision of setting up a new professional football club, thereby bringing World Cup games to Niigata. The visionary knowledge was shared by individuals who spontaneously formed a group to discuss how to make the vision a reality. Then, the group became a team to officially set up the football club. The team created various kinds of knowledge such as articles of the newly incorporated Albirex Niigata Football Club and a concept of “full capacity strategy” and its tactics by utilizing team members’ experiential knowledge accumulated throughout their careers.

As for theoretical implications, we proposed a theoretical model entitled “Co-evolution of Knowledge and Organization in the Entrepreneurial Process.” This model explains the entrepreneurial process by looking at its two dimensions: i.e., knowledge and organization. In the knowledge dimension, knowledge evolves from “dispersed knowledge,” to “collected knowledge,” to “a small body of integrated knowledge,” and to “a large body of integrated knowledge.” In the organizational dimension, a start-up venture company evolves from a “network” of individuals, to a “group” of selected individuals, to a “team” of the selected individuals, and finally to a fully-grown “organization” of top-management and functional teams. These two sets of four phases are juxtaposed in parallel and interacts with each other: i.e., dispersed knowledge vs a network of individuals, collected knowledge vs a group of selected individuals, a small body of integrated knowledge vs a team of selected individuals, and a large body of integrated knowledge vs a fully-grown organization.

As for practical implications, to increase the number of start-up new venture companies and their survival rate in the first five years and to help them grow into organizations listed on the stock market, the following actions are needed. First, networking individuals relevant to any new business ideas through databases on professionals and experts, who have rich knowledge in many fields and could help each other. Second, opening real and/or virtual meeting and discussion places or *ba* to attract individuals who are interested in particular new business ideas, thereby creating groups to discuss those ideas. Such groups could emerge by setting up regular gathering events into which many individuals participate from different industries.

Finally, suggestions for future research are as follows. First, the proposed theoretical model should be tested by other cases, particularly cases in other businesses to refine or modify it. Second, this case can and should be examined from the viewpoints of social business and social innovation because Albirex Niigata started as a means for regional development and has grown into a regional sports club that also includes such sports as football, basketball, baseball, skiing & snowboarding, track & field athletics, and cheerleading.