

Issues on Knowledge Management in Organisations Today

Jesilin Manjula^a and Siti Maziha Mustapha^b

^aAdministrative Division

Kuala Lumpur Infrastructure University College (KLIUC)
e-mail: jesilin@kliuc.edu.my / jclynmanjula@yahoo.com
Tel. No. : 603-89266993 ext 818 • fax no: 603-87341021

^bSchool of Linguistic Infrastructure and Liberal Studies

Kuala Lumpur Infrastructure Universiti College
e-mail: siti_maziha@hotmail.com.my
Tel. No : 603-87383388 ext 746

ABSTRACT

The purpose of this paper is to discuss the issues on knowledge management that effect organizations embarking on a Knowledge Management journey (KM). KM is defined as the "conceptualization of an organization as an integrated knowledge system and the management of the organization for effective use of that "knowledge". "Knowledge" here refers to the "human cognitive and innovative processes and artifacts that support them. In an information society today, daily additional information and raw data are made available for employees. Organization converts knowledge and other resources into goods and services. The human mind stores data, generates information and forms fantastic ideas. Information once translated and transformed can mean revenue. Knowledge sharing can bring synergistic effect on organizations. Managers today realize that their own organization possess untapped resources -the human capital. A business entity has a tremendous capacity to create the right environment including cultural and structural inputs. The know-how and sharing of best practices can. determine organization survival. The right infrastructure and required support, the reward system to remove knowledge barriers, the tracking down of knowledge contributors and effective teams plus the recognizing of intellectual assets would determine the success of the KM journey.

Keywords

Knowledge management, knowledge sharing

1.0 INTRODUCTION

Knowledge Management (KM) is one management issue that is much talked about but it may be one of the most misunderstood theme in organizations today. Knowledge Management practices are seen as a crucial element of the 'global business process' within organizations and a major source of competitive advantage. There is a great need for informed debate to overcome the hype around Knowledge Management and to develop understanding based on objective research. It is all about structuring knowledge as one

of the resources in organizations today and therefore has to be dealt with the same intensity as with other resources such as human resource and financial resources.

2.0 DEFINING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM)

Knowledge Management practice can be broadly defined as 'the acquisition, sharing and use of knowledge within organizations, including learning processes and management information systems'. The convergence of information and communication technologies, and the advent of new tools such as Intranets and groupware systems emphasize the importance of targeting knowledge rather than information or data.

2.1 What is knowledge?

Knowledge can be defined as actionable information in the right context that facilitates intelligent decision-making (Frankie Ow, 2004).

2.2 What is management?

Management is part of another hierarchy that includes supervision, management and leadership. Supervision deals with individual tasks and teams. It works at the operational level of an organization or sub-unit. Management deals with groups and priorities at the tactical level. Leadership deals with purpose and change at the strategic level (www. Sandyrowley.com)

2.3 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM)

2.3.1 Definition of KM

KM can be seen as the process where organizations create, capture and reuse knowledge to achieve organizational objectives. KM is defined as :

“ self management of professional competencies to achieve sustainable superior performance by leveraging on current and specialized Knowledge”.

(FrankieOw, 2004).

“ the systematic, explicit and deliberate building and renewal, and application of knowledge to maximize an enterprise’s knowledge-related effectiveness and returns from its knowledge assets”

(Wiig, 1997)

“ the collection of competencies and processes that help capture, process, diffuse and absorb critical corporate knowledge in an effective, efficient and timely manner ”

(Carayanni’s and Laporte, 2002)

The product of KM is the rise of occupations based on the creation and the use of knowledge. Survival and success in today’s society depends on our ability to respond to changes with new mechanisms. It means not to merely accessing technology but developing capacity to manage knowledge (www.totalkm.com)

KM is the process that organization create, capture and reuse knowledge to achieve organizational objectives. According to Maryam Alvi (1997), the focus is not so much on definitions, tools or discovery of truth, but more on KM’s contribution to organization’s effective action and performance.

Knowledge is captured either in report or entered into a computer system or simply remembered or captured in reports. It is this tacit knowledge that needs to be captured in the explicit form. One recent Ernst and Young’s survey of executives of 431 US and Euro firms found that 87% of respondents named knowledge critical to competitiveness and 47% reported they were poor at transferring knowledge within their organization. According to Peter Novins of Ernst and Young, “organizing information from disparate sources into a context that reflects, influences and informs the processes of business and decisions” is central in KM.

Ron Weissman of Verity, Inc mentions that KM is in danger of not handling the ‘people part of things’ as senior managers are trying to manage intellectual assets the same way they manage physical assets. But the fact remains that intellectual assets have to be managed and that human capital is an important investment in business.

Knowledge Management (KM) is one of the major themes for organization’s future activities. Knowledge Management practices are seen as a crucial element of the ‘global business process’ within organizations and a major source of competitive advantage. There is a great need for informed debate to overcome the hype around Knowledge Management and to develop understanding based on objective research.

2.3.2 The Advent of K-Economy

IBM commercially introduced home computer in 1981. The information technology (IT) revolution escalated with Internet technology being established around late 1980’s. In 1990, the US adopted k-economy. Tun Dr. Mahathir announced on 1st November 1995 that Malaysia has embarked on a program to establish the Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) as a part of Malaysia's vision to become a fully developed nation and knowledge-rich society by the year 2020 (Vision 2020).

Global Knowledge Conferences I (GK '97) took place in Toronto, Canada, 22-25 June 1997. The global knowledge revolution was announced. During the Global Knowledge Conference II on 8th March 2000, Tun Dr. Mahathir announced that Malaysia would begin its journey into a K-economy. RM5 million was allocated to create a Keconomy master plan. On 27 March 2000 the Ministry of Finance signed a Memorandum of Understanding (MoU) for the development of Malaysia’s Knowledge-economy (K-economy) Master Plan between the Government of Malaysia and the Institute of Strategic and International Studies (ISIS).

On 9th September 2002 Tun Dr. Mahathir launched Malaysia’s K-Economy Master Plan. The K-Economy Master Plan details a strategic framework outlining the changes to the fundamentals of the economy. The Master Plan sets clear vision and missions together with seven major strategic thrusts comprises of 136 recommendations. According to the vision, Malaysia, in Tun Dr. Mahathir’s words:

...must be to build a strong, resilient, vibrant and competitive economy – growing by an annual average rate of growth of 7 per cent to the year 2020 – driven most strongly by a dramatic increase in the application of knowledge to production and the development of new knowledge-intensive industries.

(<http://www.treasury.gov.my/english/veritybaru/index.htm>)

According to the Masterplan, the central mission is to ensure that we make a paradigm shift from P-economy to the K-economy and “in making this shift, Malaysia cannot afford to dismantle or neglect its presently dominant Pbased industries by infusing more wealth generating knowledge into them even as “concerted measures are taken to vigorously upgrade and expand the K-based sector”.

According to Dr Victor Wee, from the Economic Planning Unit, the transformation into a k-based society requires concerted effort, single mindedness and utter commitment from all sectors. It should not only be confined to the government or people in IT industries, but it must pervade throughout the economy

as it offers an unparalleled opportunity to bring prosperity to the Malaysians more rapidly than any country in history (InfoSoc Malaysia Conference, 2001).

3.0 THE EIGHT-KEY FOCUS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

3.1 K-Identification: Structured Knowledge Identification

K-Identification focuses on individual or group Knowledge Need Analysis. It requires an individual or group to first identify the matter at hand/ a problem to be solved. They need to look at their existing knowledge—“What knowledge do they already have relating to this matter?” After that, individual or group must look at the required knowledge and ask the question – “What knowledge do we need to solve the problem?” Then, to determine the knowledge gap they ask “What knowledge don’t they have?” and lastly, they need to look at the knowledge source: “Where can they find the missing knowledge?”

3.2 K-Acquisition: Intense Knowledge Acquisition

An individual or group can acquire or import knowledge from various knowledge sources internally and externally to minimize and eventually close the Knowledge Gap. The required knowledge can be acquired through colleagues, professionals in the field, suppliers, customers like parents and students, internet, and also from the products like journals, CD-ROMs, magazines, manuscripts, prospectus, newsletters, press releases, books learning histories and many more sources.

3.3 K-Application: Obsession in Knowledge Application

To put into practice the knowledge acquired. LeCOP – the transfer of learning to the workplace by contributing and playing with ideas. Ideas can be turned into good practices (individual practices), good practices into best practices (group practices), best practices into industry practices (when other people in the industry use it), in real time application.

3.4 K-Sharing: Speed in Knowledge Sharing

Best practices come from sharing good practices across the organization. K-sharing promotes constant innovation. It must be cultivated, nurtured and promoted. K-sharing leads to local knowledge, global application; local problems, global solutions; local mistake, global learning. It allows collaboration of ideas and sharing of good practices so everyone in the organization can achieve the same competency level. The Speed in K-Sharing will lead to superior performance that can strengthen the economy. The

important elements of K-sharing are trust and respect; due credit and recognition must be given to the individual concerned by the community.

3.5 K-Development : Focused in Knowledge Development

It is a long term and overall enhancement of competencies. It involves conceptual abilities—by having positive mental focus, being open-minded, thinking outside the box; having behavioral abilities which stresses on communication and language mastery, and technical abilities which focus on the performance by having specializations and core competencies. The language and the communicative mastery coupled with technical abilities enable collaboration that leads to competency and innovation. The organization will be able to achieve sustainable superior performance.

3.6 K-Creation: Passion for Knowledge Creation

Creation of knowledge can be done in four ways:

1. tacit to tacit – by identifying somebody who has a high tacit knowledge and challenging him with your ideas.
2. tacit to explicit – by documenting tacit knowledge like writing reports or project papers on it.
3. explicit to explicit - by amending existing knowledge in a document like improving a certain document by adding to the existing explicit knowledge so that a more advanced knowledge can be innovated.
4. explicit to tacit - by using the explicit knowledge to help decision making process or problem solving in the organization.

Knowledge created is content specific and valuable as an input to decision makers in the organization. Knowledge that has been contextualized within the mission and the problem-solving situation of the organization gains value (Jamaliah, 2003).

3.7 K-Preservation: Culture of Knowledge Preservation

Knowledge preservation refers to the speed of knowledge capturing and frequently in use. The enabler is technology where individuals can use technological advances like shared folder, K-base and K-portal to store current, or specialized knowledge in virtual drives, or in hard copy. This will enable instant retrieval when required. Knowledge needs to be constantly captured, use, updated and re-use. Efficient storage systems result in less time spent in retrieving information and less frustration due to reduced duplication of data (Jamaliah, 2003).

3.8 K-Measurement : Periodic Knowledge Measurement

Knowledge is measured to assess the level or amount of gap that is closed. Progress Measurement Indicators can be used to measure total number of K-sets produced by an IKP and Impact Measurement Indicator can be used to measure the impact of a certain knowledge by counting the number of problems solved using that knowledge.

4.0 WHY KM IS IMPORTANT IN ORGANISATIONS TODAY?

Knowledge has become a commodity that has commercial value if packaged in the right form and made available in the timely manner. Organisations today have to be aware of this valuable resource and harvest it (exploit them) while it is still available from one's workplace (within the organization). If it is lacking, investing through acquisition of knowledge by either acquiring or purchasing information and interpreting it as knowledge would be one option. Examples include market research, subscription of relevant professional and specialized literature, conference, seminars, forums, datawarehouses, communication technologies, expert system, information retrieval engines, formation of social networks and knowledge brokers in the form of consultants.

The e-learning tool that KLIUC aspires to set up is the capturing of knowledge residing in the academic staff that include the chapter by chapter notes, test banks, tutorials/worksheets, quizzes, report by lecturer, project required by lecturers so that such knowledge can be shared by other lecturers to use, made available at their finger tips. Past year Exam questions to be made available so that lecturers can prepare the exam papers in the quickest time, no need to type from scratch, just modification or random selection from various papers. Samples of project requirements done by previous lecturer teaching the same subject which are worth redoing or as references to avoid duplication of efforts or as base for a more advance study can be made available.

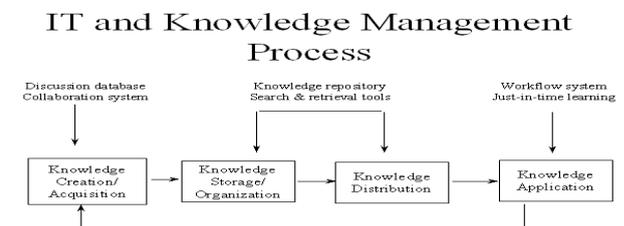
On the administrative side, KLIUC aspires to archive and update all "checklist" prepared to ensure success of events carried out and effective processes so as to not leave any "stone unturned". Some of the areas covered are as follows:

- all academic, bursary & administration routine operational processes
- student and subject registrations, venue layouts, planning & processes, policies
- Convocation preparation
- Open Days preparation
- Preparation for the Higher Education Ministry visits
- Preparation for the Lembaga Akreditasi Negara visits

- Preparation for the Jabatan Audit Negara visits/audits
- Preparation for the ISO 9001:2000 Surveillance and Reassessment visits
- launching of new undergraduate and postgraduate programmes
- detailed checklist for students to obtain financial aids
- detailed steps to apply for staff education loan
- examination administration processes
- procedures for purchasing library books and fixed assets
- procedures for forming clubs and societies for students
- fundraising events processes
- organising international seminars and national level seminars for the university

The above areas in KLIUC emphasizes the following key focuses which are K-identification, K-application, K-sharing, K-development and K-preservation. KLIUC is currently sourcing for the relevant softwares to capture these knowledge in the most efficient manner which allows quick capturing and retrieval and modification that also enables an effective K Management journey for KLIUC. All tacit and explicit form of knowledge is currently residing in KLIUC and the challenge it faces is the effective structure needed to preserve the knowledge. In KLIUC, it requires both culture and IT tool.

5.0 KEY ROLES PLAYED IN ORGANISATIONS



*Figure 1: IT and Knowledge Management Process
Source: Maryam Alvi 1997*

5.1 Information Technology (The Role of Technology)

KM is also seen as a computer technology or group of technologies. It is an important enabler of KM. Information Technology (IT) make the knowledge of groups and individuals readily available inter-departments within the organization and inter-organizations. When advances in IT networks occurs, it has to ensure specific locales (locally formed knowledge) are not cut-off or lost in the process. IT tools' strength is organizing and transferring tacit knowledge to the explicit form.

The tools and techniques in for capturing and distributing information include intranets, videoconferencing tools, document management systems, information retrieval engines, databases,

groupware, workflow systems, push technologies and agents, helpdesk applications, data warehousing, information communication technologies, expert systems etc. The supplier or maker of software or computer technology reposition themselves as KM vendor in the present day.

K-sharing occurs via office e-mails, between doctors in telemedicine, videoconferencing in the boardroom etc. Thinking at all stages before an end product is offered to the market is mandatory. One has to look at the business, not just information systems and all business processes. One also has to look at the entire knowledge management process – creation, capture, classification and sharing (Wally Brock). A wider of systems such as hiring, training, rewards, support activities to make knowledge available to all is mandatory.

Make information and knowledge available to folks in the field who will in turn provide feedback and insights from their experience. The whole experience is a cycle. Give access to customer records, reports, (if it is not so sensitive to outsiders), artificial intelligence, project reports, sales-calls, notes, searchable keywords and controlled vocabulary as search aids, reference groups etc. Knowledge yellow pages and listing of contacts, powerpoint files, technical manuals also counts. Give staff access to one another without confining to the department alone. Known keywords on subject matter enables easy retrieval of classified, modified and indexed knowledge through information technology tools.

Set up listservs and chats where they can share tips and experience. Develop application files that help them to apply what has been learned in one situation to another situation. Encourage staff to use the local net as the base to collect information on customer preference and technical lore (knowledge passed down from generation to generation) in a database where everyone can find it and add to it.

5.2 Consultants (The Role of Knowledge Brokers)

With networks such as consultants, suppliers (vendor), professional trainers, the role of consultants become greater than producers of knowledge. Role of consultants is more of applying, modifying and interpreting such knowledge in the local context and allow the effective implementation of the 'blackboxed package'. When things do go right or do not go right, the consultants may identify the strengths or the areas needing improvement or point out the right way to go, run or position the business as done by McKinsey and Co for example.

On the other hand, Bloomfield and Danielli (1995) argue that sometimes consultants are needed because these consultants create such a need among customers. They are able to create a demand for their product

when organizations seek to pursue greater heights or imitate others. When organizations become more network-oriented and move outwardly in the right circles, the more they become exposed to behaviours of other organizations. Ways of knowing associated with consultancy practices will cause the locally formed knowledge and experience be fine-tuned and expanded further through mediating activities of consultants and wider knowledge. The consultant' role is in reducing ambiguity in his customers' thoughts.

5.3 Internet (The Role of Information Communication Technology)

The internet offers almost unbounded opportunities for the diffusion of ideas and information. 1000,000 (1 million) pages are added to the world wide web everyday, with little or no regulation of content. This offers a platform to widen the dissemination of knowledge to the mass. Organisations are also able to interact and source for knowledge on competitors, suppliers, customers etc. Knowledge of what the organization's scope of business is, who are the key management and contact persons, what are their products and services, how to acquire their products/services are all revealed to the public in a more direct, vivid and cost effective way compared to traditional advertising. The internet may become a one-stop centre to source and spread knowledge for organizations and individuals today. Organization websites have become a must in the K-economy where marketing has become borderless and every organization, entrepreneurs and organizations managed to disseminate information to most parts of the world. Knowledge travels on the same wavelength and speed on the information superhighway.

5.4 Management (The Role of Facilitators)

The leaders of the organization who are empowered to steer the organization towards the organisation's objectives must have the commitment to signal to the rest of the organisation the significance and the beginning of the KM journey, the awareness of KM itself and share the understanding of strategy or business model while having the right organization structure and culture.

Proper division of labour that best ensures networking among specialists and interdepartments allow more access through inter-organizational interaction, development of organizational culture that is conducive for the KM journey. Areas of concern to ensure the success of this journey is the reward systems which should encourage the sharing of explicit and tacit knowledge among "specialists". This is to enable problem-solving, highlight best practices that generate new knowledge, successful ideas and innovation. Unlike the traditional practice of rewarding the specialist for giving limited information or privileged

knowledge upon request, especially during meetings and projects.

The impact of physical proximity of networking teams within and outside the organisations should not be overlooked as well. Embedded organization structures will influence the effectiveness of the journey either for better or for worse.

Central issues of motivation, trust and power (“not forgetting that knowledge means power”) between departments and individuals to be addressed before the journey begins. The management is to decide on the required technology to invest and culture to make KM journey a success, thus, allowing K-creation, K-sharing, K-dissemination and K-harvesting. For this to happen, interaction between departments and between organizations must take place. That would bring about the formation of social networks at workplace and in the industry.

5.5 Social Networks (Knowledge creation and transfers)

Inter-organizational alliances and joint-ventures e.g. the classic example would be the Anglo-Japanese joint-ventures. This touches on the necessary interaction within departments (for a start), inter-departments, inter-organizations, inter-industry (strategic alliances), between sectors and governments (to deliberate and find ways to overcome SARs and terrorism).

If knowledge can be brought together, people who use them can work faster and better. According to studies done by Thomas Stewart (1995), Andersen has set up its own Knowledge Xchange; Booz Allen & Hamilton has developed Knowledge Online (KOL); Ernst & Young has created a Center for Business Knowledge, KPMG Peat Marwick, a Knowledge Manager, Price Waterhouse has Knowledge View and many others have embarked on the KM journey to exploit the vast knowledge in their midst.

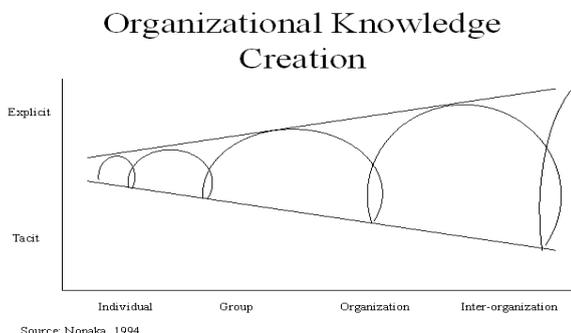


Figure 2: Organizational Knowledge Creation

For example, a consultant in Indonesia helping an oil company improve customer service can adapt to a similar work done in New York, Caracas or Houston. Upon logging on to KOL, one icon that appears on

screen is on Experts/Resumes/History; clicking on it and typing the name of a colleague or ‘customer service’ may allow access about 1500 documents, cross-filed by industry and topics such as reengineering, marketing, change management. Their counterpart in Jakarta can download oil-industry benchmarking studies, find journal articles, or go through a document written for a client in another industry that probably contains a very good checklist of things to look for when reengineering customer service.

6.0 KM’S BIGGEST CHALLENGE IN ORGANIZATIONS TODAY

The collaboration, knowledge sharing, commitment and initiative often results in changes in organizational culture. The world’s most advance technology contributes nothing if people do not use it. When asked what they would do differently in KM, the common response from project leaders is to “pay more attention to the ‘people’ issues”. Issues like retention, recruitment, training may be sidetracked in the pursuit of KM.

Leaders know that one has to create conditions for new way of knowing and network relationships is one of them. This also means that there is a need to establish community of practice and create a social identity. As knowledge is a resource for persuasion, it is also the means of creating legitimacy and good faith, means of obscuring uncertainty and counteracting doubt.

Andersen and Booz Allen decided that they had to build intellectual capital and manage it more efficiently because their best customers, big global companies wanted deep expertise delivered instantly even to the most remote locations. Part of the challenge here comes from ensuring the consultants use the system, upload the necessary details, categorize and format documents and eliminate the obsolete and identify topics that become research projects. With a template to support the capturing of such knowledge in the most user friendly knowledge database along with the culture of teamwork and K-sharing, KM journey would prove fruitful for employees, employers and ultimately the customers. However some “housekeeping” needs to be done by assigned staff in this knowledge management journey. It also means making the best out of “network neighbourhood” sort of arrangements by creating better access to knowledge.

Rethinking business and technology strategies, organizational control, information sharing culture, knowledge representation, the organization structure, managerial command and control, economics returns would pose as challenges to be taken up in the KM journey. The efficacy of inputs and strategic deployment of inputs are not questioned when expected performance outcomes are achieved. Some of the input

for business performance are data, IT and best practices. The inputs need the influence of intervening and moderating variables such as attention, motivation, commitment, creativity and innovation according to Malhotra (2002).

7.0 CONCLUSION

The importance of common goals and business objectives is central. Along with it is the willingness to share knowledge and to move the organization forward. Teamwork is top priority here.

As one of the functions of management is organizing resources effectively and efficiently, the resource in the context of KM is knowledge. Process manuals, flowcharts, blueprints and procedures have been commonly employed by quality-oriented organizations as supposedly captured practical knowledge of the organizations.

Just like any solid development, the infrastructure has to come in and in the case of KM, the technical infrastructure, social infrastructure and the cultural infrastructure will provide the essentials to make the KM journey a productive one. As outlined by Stewart (2002) in 'The Case Against Knowledge Management,' Business 2.0, "building databases, measuring intellectual capital, establishing corporate libraries, building intranets, sharing best practices, installing groupware, leading training programmes, leading cultural change, fostering collaboration, creating virtual organizations" can work only if we know what knowledge we want to manage and towards what we hope to achieve.

On the other hand, KM may lead to simplifications, ignorance and critical understandings according to Alvesson (1998), as knowledge is not acquired as a first hand information for some. KM may be seen as if employed for deskilling and downsizing (lecturers versus online education facilitators?). There are downsides to KM in terms of costs and bottomline but the fact remains that benefits are to outweigh the costs for KM journey to begin.

The consequences of not embarking on the KM journey may be costly as it may result in repeating errors that are deemed 'negligent' or 'ignorance' by top management, heavy losses in terms of profit or loss of potential revenue, time and monetary waste, duplication of efforts in 'reinventing the wheel', loss of valuable and 'hard to replace' capabilities when key staff leave, missed opportunities when to convert brilliant ideas or solutions as achievements for organization, not able to seize opportunities are some of the setbacks when KM is not practised. There is also a danger of having existing knowledge become obsolete or risk of survival in the dynamic and turbulent environment the organization might be in today or in future. According to Peter Drucker (1994),

"In the Post-Capitalism, power comes from transmitting information to make it productive".

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