Chapter II

Sources of Knowledge Acquisition by U.S. Managers: An Empirical Analysis

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ABSTRACT

Questionnaire surveys of 156 U.S. managers are used to study knowledge acquisition behaviors. The study specifically examined the relationship among perceived accessibility, perceived task complexity, and the information-gathering behavior of U.S. managers. One of the major conclusions resulting from this study is that the accessibility of an information source, and not the perceived complexity of the task at hand, influences the choice of source used. Other study results are discussed and implications are offered for practicing managers. In addition, a knowledge management framework based on perspectives of the various management disciplines is also presented.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) has become the latest strategy in increasing organisational competitiveness. It is the most innovative, creative, and important
management concept to come along in the last 25 years. It doesn’t imply downsizing, restructuring, or reorganising; but rather, KM reflects a point made by Lew Platt, former CEO of Hewlett-Packard (HP): “If HP knew what HP knows, we would be three times as profitable” (Coates 2001). Researchers are calling it the only solution for competitive advantage in the new century (Evans, 1997; Hedlund, 1994; Hibbard, 1997; Martinez, 1998; Trussler, 1998). According to Robert H. Buckman, CEO of Buckman Labs, the purpose of the KM and sharing system at his corporation is to “facilitate communication across all of the organisation’s boundaries, so that the entire company works together to help everyone to be the best they can be” (Buckman, 1998, p. 11).

Many forward-thinking companies are realizing the value in systematically capturing, analyzing, archiving, and distributing knowledge. From Motorola’s Six Sigma program to the integrated KM systems of today, firms have derived substantial value from effectively managing their knowledge assets. A recent survey by Ernst & Young’s Center for Business Innovation and Business Intelligence reports 94% of the respondents admit they could better use the knowledge in their companies through more effective management, 40% have KM systems up and running or in development, and 25% have plans to develop KM strategies in the next year (Hibbard, 1997, p. 2; Evans, 1997, p. 2). A survey by the Delphi Consulting Group in Boston reports even stronger results, with 70% of the companies it surveyed saying they plan to make their first investments in KM in the next one to three years (Hibbard & Carrillo, 1998). According to a recent study by Ipsos-Reid and Microsoft Canada Co., a majority of Canadian business leaders indicate that KM practices have created value by improving organisational effectiveness, delivering customer value, and improving product innovation and delivery (Anonymous, 2001). The study reveals that 65% of Canadian companies practicing KM believe it has given their organisation a competitive advantage.

The attractiveness of the term KM appears to have been prompted by three major forces, according to the Knowledge Management Resource Center (www.kmresource.com): increasing dominance of knowledge as a basis for organisational effectiveness; the failure of financial models to represent the dynamics of knowledge; and the failure of information technology by itself to achieve substantial benefits for organisations.

Knowledge can be characterized in many ways. Popular taxonomies distinguish between tacit and explicit knowledge, general and situated context-specific knowledge, and individual and collective knowledge (Spender, 1996). Knowledge sources may lie within or outside the firm. Internal knowledge may reside within peoples’ heads; embedded in behaviors, procedures, software; and equipment; recorded in various documents; or stored in databases and online repositories. Common sources of external knowledge include publications, universities, government agencies, consultants, and knowledge brokers, among others (Zack, 1999).

There are two prominent themes dominating the field of KM: knowledge creation and knowledge use. The latter provided the initial spur for the field and still dominates academic and practical discourse. Interest in knowledge creation,
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