Chapter 10

Knowledge Management in U.S. Federal Government Organizations: Can It Work?

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Knowledge management (KM) is an active and growing field. One of the key factors of KM is its dependence on a culture that will support KM activities. Some of the activities that are extremely culture dependent are the sharing and acceptance of knowledge between individuals and organizations. The question to be answered is whether U.S. federal government (hereafter referred to as “government”) organizations, which are notorious for the lack of this type of culture (although not all), can accomplish KM at all or just need a different approach that has not been defined previously? In this research, we will propose to use government initiatives to entice the organization into creating the culture needed for KM. We will also propose a way to effect changes in the culture by implementing a social initiative that has proven successful in other organizations. The combination of these two activities is expected to create a culture that is viable for KM to flourish even in the infamous government organization.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) is the process whereby knowledge (both explicit and implicit), which is contained in an organization, is distributed to other
people, in or outside of the organization in a controlled format. It is not just a
document management system with a high-tech search engine, as many current
vendors would like to portray it (Van der Spek and de Hoog, 1998). A goal of the
KM process is to remove the dependency on individual people for knowledge,
which will segregate the knowledge and the people. The accomplishment of this
goal will enable any person to retrieve and use any of the knowledge that exists in
the organization. The benefits derived from this process are numerous, for ex-
ample creating more productive workers, alleviating the risk of lost workers, and
realizing organizational value.

KM can be found to be taking a foothold in many organizations. Many infor-
mation technology companies are promoting it as the cure for all kinds of organi-
zational ills (Dataware TEchnologies, 1998; Swoyer, 1999; Van der Spek and
Spijkervet, 1997). Even government organizations are taking active steps in the
KM arena (Liebowitz, Rubenstein-Montano, McCaw, Buchwalter, Browning,
Newman and Rebeck, 2000), for example the government’s CIO council sub-
committee on KM. Academia is doing scientific research in order to expose its
capabilities and failings (Alavi, 1999; Weidner, 1999). Both of these efforts have
found that culture plays a critical role in the entire KM process. Most KM fram-
eworks and initiatives include some form of cultural input and/or strategy (Apostolou
and Mentzas, 1998; Andersen, 1997; Holsapple and Joshi, 1997; Liebowitz et
al., 2000; Marquardt, 1996; Seaman and Basili, 1994). The cultural factors, which
are enumerated in these references, encompass the activities of sharing and ac-
cepting. The individuals with the knowledge are required to share it. Conversely,
the people who require knowledge need to accept it. These activities appear to be
simple social constructs that children are taught in pre-school and develop in el-
ementary school. However, there are many obstacles, which stand in the way of
such progress. Organizational structures, which are depicted as concretely de-
finied boundaries and organizational culture, which can be defined as accepted
customs, are some of the obstacles (Tienney, 1999). Many government organiza-
tions contain these obstacles for the other productive purposes. Therefore, re-
search is required to identify whether existing KM methodologies can accomplish
their goals in a government organization. Through the following research, which
places a greater emphasis on specific areas of current KM methodologies and
manipulating other government specific variables, we can accomplish KM in gov-
ernment organizations.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge management is dependent on more than just information technol-
ogy (Marquardt, 1996). KM can be summarized to depend on process, culture,