Chapter XVII

Using Social Networking Analysis to Facilitate Knowledge Sharing Amongst Senior Managers in Multinational Organisations

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ABSTRACT

Prior to the establishment of the knowledge management (KM) strategy, the British Council defined knowledge as ‘objects’. Knowledge sharing was about sharing documents and information on the intranet or via global databases. Since December 2002, Dervin’s sense-making methodology has been applied to manage ‘knowledge’. Knowledge is seen not as a product that can be transferred from one colleague to another, but as a communication practice. This means that shared knowledge has to be interpreted and made sense of by its recipients through genuine dialogue. During this phase of KM implementation, the focus shifted to linking up colleagues and providing space for dialogue through building global communities of practice and virtual teams. This chapter presents an example of how we have used the theory of social networking analysis as a diagnostic tool to promote knowledge sharing amongst our newly formed thirty-person global leadership team. The three steps we have taken to carry out the exercise and its limitations are also discussed. Towards the end of the chapter, the author presents an alternative application of social networking analysis in a multinational consulting firm.

BACKGROUND

The purpose of the British Council is to build mutually beneficial relationships between people in the UK and other countries, and to increase appreciation of the UK’s creative ideas and achievements. Much focus has been on sharing knowledge and experience with customers. To
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take the organisation to another level, the British Council promotes knowledge sharing among its 7,000 employees, who are located in 109 different countries. The ultimate aim is to empower staff to get the knowledge they need to serve their customers to the highest standard possible.

The knowledge management (KM) program was officially launched in December 2002 with the appointment of the new director of knowledge management. Following a comprehensive six-month knowledge audit exercise, the global knowledge management strategy was approved by the senior management team in December 2003. The knowledge management vision is to enable the British Council to develop and deliver world class products and services to its customers by effectively sharing and utilising collective knowledge. This will be achieved by finding the best ways to connect its employees with each other and by providing them with easy access to relevant documents and resources.

Over the last two years, we have launched a number of projects to increase awareness of knowledge management, and to get the buy-in of senior management for the program to invest in the tools and approaches needed to improve global knowledge sharing. Specific KM projects which are beginning to embed into the organisation include:

a. Knowledge audit conducted using Dervin’s sense-making methodology (Dervin, 1992)
b. Development of knowledge management strategies for business units
c. Building communities of practices using seven-phase methodology (Cheuk, 2004)
d. Enhancement of the intranet, collaboration tools and global databases
e. Applying social networking analysis to support collaborative working (Anklam, 2003; Cross & Parker, 2004)
f. Applying narrative techniques to conduct project debriefs

In 2005, knowledge management was widely recognised as an enabler to deliver the British Council’s overall business strategy. Over 100 knowledge champions worldwide have attended training on knowledge management and over 70 global communities of practice have been developed.

BUSINESS CONTEXT

During 2004-2005, the overseas operations of the British Council were significantly re-structured. Thirteen regions have been introduced to replace the existing 109 country operations which were each managed as individual entities. Each new region is made up of a number of existing country operations.

Thirteen regional directors were appointed. They have to work closely with the seventeen senior management team members based in the UK to set strategic direction for the organisation. This thirty-person team is referred to as Global Leadership Team (GLT).

The restructuring provides an excellent opportunity to promote knowledge sharing beyond country operations, as well as to promote knowledge sharing between overseas operations and the UK headquarters. However, it also presents a challenge. Any organisational re-structure leads to the creation of new teams, which can be to the detriment of any existing knowledge sharing culture. This presents a challenge to the knowledge management team.

What is the Nature of Knowledge?

A review into the knowledge management literature largely defines knowledge using Nonaka and Takeuchi’s (1991) definition of ‘tacit’ knowledge (i.e., knowledge in a person’s head which has a personal quality and is hard to formalise and communicate) and ‘explicit’ knowledge (i.e.,