Chapter XII

Acquiring and Sharing Knowledge Through Inter-Organizational Benchlearning

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ABSTRACT

This chapter introduces inter-organizational knowledge acquisition and sharing as a means to facilitate benchlearning within the field of human resource management. The chapter presents an interactive web-based portal and demonstrates how valuable knowledge can be released from organizational “silo centers” and be passed around to the benefit of both organizations and academia. In general, human resource departments struggle to demonstrate their validity to the business and their ability to accomplish business objectives. In addition, human resource departments generally lack the ability to speak of their accomplishments in a business language. The presented portal assists human resource professionals in making more efficient and qualitative decisions that are not based on good guesswork or mere instinct, but on facts and knowledge. The portal is novel in its approach of facilitating benchlearning across organizational boundaries and within the soft area of human resource management.

INTRODUCTION

In order to stay innovative and be competitive under rapid environmental changes, it is essential for organizations to continually develop strategic and organizational flexibility (Samper, 1997). Thus, critical knowledge acquisition is crucial for organizations’ continual development and sustainability. However, knowledge acquisition is essentially related to human action since
knowledge is created by individuals (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Yet, organizations can establish a context that supports creation and enlargement of knowledge (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), for example through the use of an information system. The value of such information system, however, can be even greater when applied to a collaborative setting, especially when such setting involves a combination of both professionals and academics.

This chapter suggests that software designed to collect, store, manage, deliver, present, and manipulate data can increase knowledge acquisition and sharing and thus facilitate the process of learning even across organizational boundaries. Academic researchers have increasingly focused on the notion that innovations are often found in the space between organizations (e.g., von Hippel, 1998; Powell et al., 1996). Mostly this research, however, does not address the ways in which information systems can support the joint acquisition of knowledge.

This chapter presents a technological platform (i.e., share2know) that facilitates inter-organizational knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing within the field of human resource management. Hereby, this chapter answers a request in this specific field, as little theory has dealt with knowledge acquisition and knowledge sharing within human resource management. As Ulrich et al. (1989) argues, progress within the field is little supported by empirical evidence. Furthermore, trends are pushing towards justifying the expenditures and the mere existence of human resource departments leading human resource professionals to become preoccupied with enhancing their knowledge on how to increase their efficiency and visibility within the organizations.

The platform presented is designed as a web-based bench-learning tool (Karlöf et al., 2001). Through inter-organizational knowledge acquisition and sharing, the portal provides organizations with easier access to human resource knowledge, quicker responses to problems, and increased learning curves. The tool facilitates that valuable knowledge is released from organizational “silo centers” and passed around not only to members of the community of human resource professionals (i.e., inter-organizational), but also around intra-organizational members (e.g., CEOs and directors of finance). Equally important, the portal facilitates knowledge acquisition to academia. Through the portal, academic researchers can retrieve data for scientific usage that makes the researchers end-users of the portal as well. In this way, the portal provides both inter-organizational and intra-organizational knowledge acquisition. Moreover, the portal facilitates knowledge generated on the basis of a longitudinal theoretically and empirically driven reflection from academic researchers. It is especially the close collaboration with academia and the fact that the information system is based on scientifically based knowledge combined with practical experience that is rather unique.

**BETTER AT KNOWING WHAT IS KNOWN**

Knowledge provides a substantial input to all business activities whether it is production, sales, logistics, or human resource management. The ability to acquire and share the specific knowledge that provides competitive advantages is a key factor in gaining success. However, knowledge acquisition and sharing is not simply a question of distributing informative reports and sharing ‘best practices’ (Marshall et al., 1997). The general view is that knowledge acquisition is closely related to experiences for example in the form of organizational learning (e.g., Fiol & Lyles, 1985; Huber, 1991), and as such knowledge acquisition is closely related to internalization. However, the ability to exploit external knowledge sources is a critical component related to organizations’ innovative capabilities since a broader knowledge base is preferred when the aim is to increase flex-

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169
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