Chapter XX

Theory vs. Practice:
Finding Out if We Do
What We Preach

Abstract

One area of omission in knowledge-intensive studies is within higher education and research organisations where there is the virtuous circle of teaching, research, and consulting professional work. Using a model adapted from Handzic (2001) and a survey modified from Arthur Andersen (1998) this chapter explores perceived importance (in theory) and perceived implementation (in practice) of knowledge management in two large university schools. The discrepancy between faculty members’ perceptions forced us to confront our own biases. Guidance was sought from ethnographic accounts that allow the researchers to state personal feelings in a confessional accompaniment to the formal findings.
The literature in management and organisation indicates a widespread recognition of the association of knowledge and organisational success. Despite early awareness of the construct (Drucker, 1967) and comprehensive overviews (Despres & Chauvel, 2000; Earl, 2001), there remains little overall advance in understanding the construct itself (Drucker, 1993; Stewart, 1997). Specific applications of knowledge to work have been explored by industry practitioners (e.g., Collison & Parcell, 2001 at BP; Mann et al., 1991 in power utilities), management commentators (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998) and researchers (e.g., Carneiro, 2000; Newell et al., 2003). This produces the distinction that knowledge is associated with skills (e.g., Macintosh & Stader, 1999) or making judgements and decisions in particular circumstances (Carr, 1999), so it is not surprising that differences exist among scholars as to what constitutes useful knowledge and the ways in which it is created. Some theorists show more interest in codified repositories and information processing as enablers of “explicit” objective and systematic knowledge (Budzik & Hammond, 1999; Carr, 1999; Den Hartog & Huzinga, 1997 in Huysman & de Wit, 2002; Klösgen, 1996). Others focus on the “tacit” knowledge that people derive from their experiences and from social interaction with others (Malhotra, 2000; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). The shift in emphasis from sharing knowledge to making productive use of knowledge is reflected in the shift from individual focus to that of communities (Wenger, McDermott, & Snyder, 2002).

As organisations become more knowledge based, their success will increasingly depend on knowledge workers becoming successful at contributing to effective decision making and creating innovation. It is, therefore, not surprising that there is a growing recognition amongst researchers and practitioners alike for the need to better understand what knowledge is, the value of knowledge, and how it should be managed. In some cases this is formalised as knowledge management (KM), and in other cases as the learning organisation (DiBella, Nevis, & Gould, 1996) or organisational memory (Weick, 1979). Both are recent responses to the need to better understand and manage knowledge for success or survival. The central task of those concerned with knowledge management is to determine best ways to cultivate, nurture, and exploit knowledge at individual and organisational levels. In other words, it needs to ensure to get the right knowledge to right people just in time (Snowden, 2002), and help people share and put knowledge into action in ways that strive to improve organisational performance (Dixon, 2000; O’Dell & Grayson, 1998).

A distinctive application of KM is applying knowledge to knowledge itself. Knowledge intensive firms focus on the commercialisation of knowledge (e.g., Gibbons, Limoges, Nowotny, Schwartzman, Scott, & Trow, 1999; Starbuck, 1992), innovation and creativity (e.g., Brown & Duguid, 2000; Gerlach & Lincoln, 2000), or...
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