How to Disseminate Professional Knowledge in Healthcare: The Case of Skaraborg Hospital

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EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Undertaking to implement a knowledge management approach is inherently difficult and risky for organizations. This article describes and discusses an implementation of a knowledge management system that took place at Skaraborg Hospital, a group of hospitals in the South West of Sweden. The article describes how the implementation process was carried out. Based on the experiences from this case and some previous cases, the article suggests a number of best practices for implementing a knowledge management approach.

Keywords: knowledge management implementation; knowledge sharing; organizational learning; organizational memory

INTRODUCTION

Modern healthcare organizations need to maintain a high level of efficiency and innovation as well as to flexibly adapt to rapid change in their environments. Among the main driving forces in this change process are people and their knowledge. To address similar challenges in the business world knowledge management (KM) has established itself as good management practice because it helps modern organizations that strive to be efficient and competitive. Most large and middle size organizations either have some knowledge management activities in place or are planning some. While healthcare organizations to a large extent may be considered as followers when it comes to KM adoption, they are able to gain substantial benefit from consciously practicing KM.

On the other hand, adopting KM is far from simple. In the past, many KM initiatives and projects have not been successful and even the more successful ones have struggled to make a broader impact. Far too often it can be observed that KM approaches, methods, and tools are tried
out but the results are unimpressive or, at least, they do not meet the expectations. In some cases, the KM initiative fades after a brief period of curiosity and enthusiasm. One of the reasons for these problems is that the process of implementing the KM system is too ad hoc and unplanned. The organizations attempt to follow generic advice such as “start small and build-up gradually” without enough internal expertise, or they rely on external consultants whose attitude is “we tell us what you want and then we will build it for you” (Persson & Stirna, 2006).

As a contrast to these experiences, the objective of this article is to report on a case of successful KM system implementation in a healthcare organization and to generalize a set of guidelines for introducing KM approaches in organizations.

The research approach is conceptual and argumentative based on empirical findings within a KM implementation project in a Swedish hospital. The project, “Efficient Knowledge management and Learning in Knowledge Intensive Organizations” (EKLär) was supported by the Swedish Governmental Agency for Innovation Systems (VINNOVA) (Stirna, Persson, & Aggestam, 2006).

The remainder of the article is organized as follows. We provide a brief background to knowledge management and knowledge cycles in organizations. We then present the KM approach used in the EKLär project and then focus on the project itself and the situation at Skaraborg Hospital in which it took place. We describe the process of introducing the taking up of KM at Skaraborg Hospital. We also provide a set of recommendations related to the main success factors of the EKLär case. Some conclusions and future work are finally discussed.

BACKGROUND TO KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Organizations need to utilize their knowledge in the most efficient way because, in essence, it is part of their competitive advantage. In the case of a healthcare organization, knowledge is at the heart of its services and, hence, efficiency gains cannot be achieved without improving the knowledge flows in the organization. This is why managing experience, competence, knowledge about work processes, and best practices is so important. This knowledge is the most valuable part of the organizational memory.

The knowledge management (KM) process as described in Figure 1 covers the whole life-cycle of knowledge in an organization. The cycle is adopted from O’Dell, Grayson, and Essaides (1998) and shares similarities with the spiral of organizational knowledge creation as presented by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1998).

*Figure 1. The knowledge cycle in organizations*
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