Chapter 2

Knowledge Management as an Organizational Process: From a Theoretical Framework to Implementation Guidelines

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ABSTRACT

The management of knowledge is a multifaceted organizational process that involves three parts. They are (i) a strategy, (ii) the creation of an organizational environment or space for knowledge - known as the “enabling context” or “Ba” and (iii) an operational/action toolbox consisting of IT tools and managerial practices to effectively put the strategy into action. The main objective of this paper is to propose a conceptual integrative map for Knowledge Management that was built as the result of a longitudinal programme of research on knowledge management, conducted between the years of 2001 and 2009. As an outcome of this research, knowledge management concepts, motivation, practices, results and implementation processes will be highlighted. The qualitative research strategy used was the study of multiple cases with incorporated units of analysis and three criteria were observed for the judgment of the quality of the research project: validity of the construct, external validity and reliability. Multiple sources of evidence were used and data analysis consisted of three flows of activities: data reduction, data displays and conclusion drawing/verification. The results confirmed the presuppositions and the conclusions suggest that organizational knowledge cannot be managed; it is just promoted or stimulated through the creation of a favorable organizational context, namely “Ba”.

INTRODUCTION

The current debate about Knowledge Management is not only divulged in recent publications and research works of mainstream authors from the field of business administration, but also from the library and information science, such as Davenport & Cronin (2000). They suggest that:

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(...), though considerable academic and professional attention has been focused on this area in the past decade, the concept is not yet stable: the term appears to be used differently across domains with each claiming that its partial understanding represents a definitive articulation of the concept. (Davenport & Cronin, 2000)

Therefore, contemporary organizations face new terms such as “knowledge management”, “communities of practice”, “strategic intellectual capital management”, “competitive intelligence”, “organizational learning” and many others. These different perspectives reflect different conceptions of organizational knowledge and organizations themselves, besides a growing need of meticulous analysis about the upcoming opportunities for gaining competitive advantages through strategic use of information and knowledge. In this particular arena, knowledge management arises both as an opportunity and an oxymoron, depending on how it is conceived, analyzed, practiced and measured for its results concerning the organizations’ core-business and readiness to compete.

Alvarenga Neto (2002, 2005) and Marchand & Davenport (2004) suggest that most of what it is called “knowledge management” is actually information management. They also state that knowledge management is more than simply information management due to the fact that it includes and incorporates other aspects, themes, approaches and concerns such as the creation, use and sharing of information and knowledge in the organizational context, not to mention the creation of the so called “enabling context” or “enabling conditions”, among others. Hence, information management is just one of the components of knowledge management and a starting point for other related initiatives and approaches.

Debates like these, associated with the lack of a conceptual definition and all the controversy surrounding the term motivated a longitudinal re-search on organizational knowledge management conducted in between 2001 to 2009. The first set of studies involved 20 world cases related in the literature and served as basis for a theoretical framework entitled “Knowledge Management Integrative Conceptual Mapping Proposition”. This theoretical proposal was then put into proof in a qualitative study with three large organizations within the Brazilian organizational context. Both studies concerned how organizations understand, define, implement, practice, measure and evaluate knowledge management, what motives led them to those initiatives and what they expect to achieve with it. The basic presuppositions were two, respectively: (i) most of what it’s referred to or named “Knowledge Management” is actually “Information Management” and information management is just one of the components of knowledge management. Consequently, knowledge management is more than simply information management due to the fact that it includes and incorporates other aspects, themes, approaches and concerns such as the creation, use and sharing of information and knowledge in the organizational context, not to mention the creation of the so called “enabling context” or “enabling conditions”, among others; (ii) a conceptual model or map can be formulated based on three basic conceptions: (a) a strategic conception of information and knowledge, factors of competitiveness for organizations and nations; (b) the creation of an organizational space for knowledge or the enabling context – the favorable conditions that should be provided by organizations in order for them to use the best information and knowledge available; (c) the introduction of such strategy in the tactical and operational levels through the several managerial approaches and information technology tools, which are susceptible to communication and orchestration. The results of such study will be presented in this paper.