Managing Knowledge: The Critical Role of Culture and Ownership as a Mediator of Systems

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ABSTRACT

For organisations, an environment of continuous change positions knowledge as the source of key competitive advantage and simultaneously mediates change to more fluid structures. More flexible structures challenge the traditions of knowledge flowing through hierarchical and formal chains of command. The emerging more fluid and knowledge based organisational structures present new challenges for developing, retaining and disseminating organisational knowledge. An area of highly contested debate involves the harmony and integration of Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) and changing organisational cultures. The paper explores KMS and cultural interface through an analysis of three mature organisational cases, identifying the key barriers that appear to prevent the effective use of KMS. The study constructs a framework for exploring cultural integration issues. The study confirms the primacy of culture in shaping integration and the imperative of resourcing learning and development programmes. The findings indicate that the critical issues organisations should explore are the legitimacy of authoring, the transparency of filtering and attribution, and the awareness of cultural dissonance. For practitioners the study provides a framework for exploring employee participation relationships, while academically the study confirms how existing cultural relations will shape KMS relations and how the exploration of existing cultural exchange practices should be equally weighted with practices to build employee capability. Generating ownership may be the key to success.

Keywords: Knowledge Flows, Knowledge Management, Knowledge Systems Management, Knowledge Transfer, Learning and Development, Organisational Culture

INTRODUCTION

Organisations operating in the 21st Century are exposed to an environment of continuous change, a challenge that requires a movement away from more predictable structures of the past, with hierarchies and formal chains of command (World Bank, 2011). The emerging fluid and network like structures and the centrality of knowledge as a primary source of competitive advantage present new challenges for ensuring the development, retention and dissemination
of organisational knowledge (Bhatti, Zaheer, & Rehman, 2011). An area of considerable current debate involves the harmony and balance between Knowledge Management Systems (KMS) and organisational culture (Maier, 2005).

Thomas, Watts Sussman and Henderson (2001) argued that it is the human and social aspects of KMS that are the critical determinates of successful integration and this theme emerges from more recent studies exploring success factors for KMS (Dennis & Vessey, 2005; Jennex & Olfman, 2006; Heisig, 2009; Durcikova & Fadel, 2010; Durcikova, Fadel, Butler & Galletta, 2010). However, Alavi, Kaywood and Leidner (2011) insist that in contrast to its importance, there has been limited empirical investigation of how culture is instrumental in operationalising a KMS. This paper builds upon this theme with a 2007 study that drew data from three Western Australian organisations that had recognised the implications of discontinuous change by installing knowledge systems to capture, store and distribute their organisations’ explicit knowledge. Their actions mirror the broader social movement towards managerial cultures that include capturing the tacit knowledge and disseminating the knowledge as a core function of organisational management.

Successful implementation of a KMS depends upon maximising the utilisation of the system by all potential users within an organisation and the existing organisational culture has an instrumental impact on such implementations (Donate, 2010, Jennex & Olfman, 2005). KMS need an organisational culture that facilitates such inclusivity and involvement. We define culture according to Schein (1997) in that it is the pattern of shared basic assumptions that has been learned, shapes established practice, and is transmitted to new members. Previous research indicates that the adoption of KMS is often fraught with dilemmas and achieves limited patterns of participation (Rubenstein & Geisler, 2003). In fact Young, Kuo and Myers (2012) suggest that the critical cultural question for a KMS is: to share or not to share. This study sought to understand why users might choose not to participate in using KMS.

To share or not to share appeared to be the first critical step in understanding why a KMS might not be used, and simultaneously would provide a taxonomy of: critical barriers that would inform organisations planning KMS implementation, maximising use, investment return, and the subsequent development of an organisational culture that could improve sustainability, and competitive edge.

This paper, presents case studies of organisations with established and mature KMS. Employees from various positions within the organisations were interviewed and encouraged to consider a framework of potential barriers to knowledge management that had been identified during an earlier pilot study. The paper presents the methodology, the findings, and a summary of those findings. The study provides guidance to managers implementing KMS and adds to the current stock of knowledge about how organisational cultures mediate the effective use of KMS and knowledge flows.

**KNOWLEDGE AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS**

Knowledge exists within all organisations, sometimes unknowingly within the minds of employees, but always flowing through their interactions each hour of the day. Knowledge Management (KM) seeks to capture that knowledge for the organisation’s future benefit, disseminate the knowledge and use it to create further knowledge. The history of knowledge management is complex and can be traced to the interface of several disciplinary knowledge streams (Prusak, 2001). Alexander, Schallert and Hare (1991, p.317) defined knowledge as “…refers to an individual’s personal stock of information, skills, experiences, beliefs and memories’. Karl Sveiby (2004) acknowledged as a founder of KM, ponders the term Knowledge Management, stating he does not believe knowledge can be managed. Wilson (2002, p.13-14) quotes Drucker and Kotzer, who also question whether it is possible to manage
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