Effective Implementation of Knowledge Management Strategies and the Key Roles of Knowledge Ambassadors in Strategy Integration: A Longitudinal Participative Case Study of Cross-Divisional Strategy Integration

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ABSTRACT

The purpose of this study is to examine how knowledge management strategies can be implemented effectively across divisions and what role change agents in the shape of so called ‘knowledge ambassadors’ can play in actively supporting knowledge sharing and effective integration of knowledge management strategies. Through a three year longitudinal participative case study the implementation of a knowledge management strategy is examined within the Danish Road Directorate and its seven geographically dispersed divisions. The results of the study reveal different steps and key activities in effective implementation of a knowledge management strategy and how knowledge ambassadors play a vital role in effective integration of knowledge management tools, continuous support of knowledge sharing practices and in developing a knowledge culture within the organisation. The contributions of this paper lie in the participative and longitudinal examination of effective knowledge management strategy implementation across geographically dispersed divisions and the introduction of knowledge ambassadors as a key success factor in knowledge management strategy integration.

Keywords: Change Agents, Knowledge Management, Knowledge Management Strategy, Knowledge Sharing, Participative Case Study

INTRODUCTION

Many organisations have established some sort of knowledge management strategy in an attempt to structure and support knowledge sharing across the internal and external organisation. Yet, in practice many companies fail in ensuring a continuous focus on knowledge sharing, the full integration of knowledge management strategies and on continuously developing a knowledge culture. Oftentimes the ‘news value’ of the knowledge management strategy and the
knowledge management initiatives wear off, when operations and daily assignments take over the employees’ focus. The challenges of overcoming the obstacles to effective strategy integration and execution have been discussed theoretically and empirically by various authors (Giles, 1991; Pellegrinelli & Bowman, 1994; Al-Ghamdi, 1998; Hrebiniak, 2005, 2006; Kaplan & Norton, 2006; Wheelen & Hunger, 2006; Brenes, Mena & Molina, 2008; Crittenden & Crittenden, 2008; Cater & Pucko, 2010). According to Hrebiniak (2005) all these obstacles relate to one of four groups: the change management context, the organisational culture context, the organisational power structure context and the leadership context. As it is not the objective of this article to summarise all the obstacles and potential success factors of effective strategy implementation, I will focus on the change management context and examine one tool in supporting efficient integration of knowledge management strategy, namely KM change agents or referred to as ‘knowledge ambassadors’ in this article.

Change agents have been suggested as one of the key tools in ensuring more efficient implementation of changes and in ensuring integration of strategies by a number of authors (Ginsberg & Abrahamson, 1991; Burgelman, 1991; Armenakisi & Fredenberger, 1995; Pitt, McAulay & Sims, 2002; Birkenshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2010). Yet the majority of the research performed on change agents focus on leaders as change agents (Yukl, 2002; Lines, 2007; Westover, 2010) and external change agents such as consultants (Armenakisi & Fredenberger, 1995; Greenwood, Hinings & Suddaby, 2002) and not on employees, the internal change agents (Birkenshaw, Hamel & Mol, 2008; Shanker & Sayeed, 2012). Furthermore change agents have not been studied within the knowledge management literature or in terms of knowledge management strategy implementation. In this paper, I introduce the concept of ‘knowledge ambassadors’, who serve as change agents in implementing changes through knowledge management strategies integration and in sustaining the organisation’s continuous change and development towards effective knowledge sharing in a knowledge company. In the following I will present the framework for this examination through a presentation of the key aspects of knowledge and knowledge management, knowledge management strategies and implementation through the application of change agents/’knowledge ambassadors’.

Knowledge and Knowledge Management

The nature of knowledge has been described as ‘justified true belief’ (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and as ‘a fluid of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information’ (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Moreover, Bolinger and Smith (2001) describe knowledge as ‘the understanding, awareness, or familiarity acquired through study, investigation, observation, or experience over the course of time’; that is, knowledge is an individual’s interpretation of information based on personal experiences, skills and competencies. For example, in the case of the Danish Road Directorate, ‘knowledge’ comprises the familiarity and professional capability in collaborating on planning, designing and carrying out these plans for projects related to the development and maintenance of roads and bridges etc.

Managing knowledge well can develop new opportunities, creating value for customers, obtaining competitive advantages or improving performance (Lloria, 2008). According Dayan and Evans (2006) the activities of KM include knowledge capture, documentation, retrieval and reuse, creation, transfer and sharing of its knowledge assets integrated in its operational and business processes. Earl (2001) suggests that knowledge management can be viewed from seven dimensions with their focuses as follows: (1) system: technology; (2) cartographic: maps; (3) engineering: processes; (4) commercial: income; (5) organisational: networks; (6) spatial: space; and (7) strategic: mindset. Alavi and Leidner (1999, 2001) concluded in their
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