

Knowledge Sharing in Organizations: Issues of Society and Culture, Problems and Challenges

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Abstract-- The survival of almost all businesses is dependent upon the creation and utilization of new knowledge and it is therefore inevitable that knowledge needs to be shared. Knowledge sharing can be described as a series of processes that are adopted in order to help improve the overall performance of a community – whether corporate, small enterprise or local-based structures. The essence of knowledge sharing is to improve shared dialogue and communication between people within that community in order to encourage a more holistic approach which will consequently increase productivity. However, the sharing of information constitutes a major challenge in the field of knowledge management. One of the issues would be the existence of members of the community who do not share a common interest in sharing with others. This paper discussed some of the issues, problems and challenges pertaining to knowledge sharing in organizations. In doing so, this paper began the discussion with the background of the study in the introduction which briefly describe the nature of knowledge sharing and distribution in organizations. This was followed by discussions on benefits and the importance of knowledge sharing to justify the need to highlight the discussion on the issues within the organization communities, problems and challenges in knowledge sharing in the following section before concluding.

Index Term— Knowledge sharing, knowledge distribution, knowledge management, ICT in organizations

I. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge needs to be distributed and shared throughout the organization before it can be exploited at the organizational level (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Organizational structures, for instance, are based on control and traditional culture; the interaction between technologies, techniques, and people is minimized, thus it reducing the knowledge distribution

opportunities (Bhatt, 2001). According to Bhatt, supervision and a predetermined channel of knowledge distribution will minimize the interaction and consequently reduce the transferred knowledge validity question.

The extent to which a firm succeeds in distributing knowledge depends on the organizational culture and the amount of explicit knowledge available in the firm. Argyris and Schon (1978) states that the distribution of knowledge would be difficult for an organization relying on traditional control and authority relationships, is because of the limitation of the opportunities for the formation of social units and groups that come together under mental supervision. Traditional command and control based organizational structures do not offer the benefit of reducing ‘noise’, but the distribution and sharing knowledge will be quite inflexible laterally and across the team (Bhatt, 2000). Bhatt also believes that predetermined channels of knowledge distribution, such from top to bottom, might create conflict with others since knowledge does not come under intense scrutiny. On the other hand, if knowledge distribution channels are informal, based on cooperation and trust, the process will be fast and honest and a higher level of scrutiny can be arranged (Broadbent and Lofgren, 1993).

The interactions between organizational technologies, techniques and people can have a direct bearing on knowledge distribution. The applications of e-mail, intranet, bulletin boards and newsgroups can support the distribution of knowledge throughout the organization and allows members to debate, discuss and interpret information through multiple perspectives. In the end, the cycle of KM is neither completed nor successful if efforts are not made to ensure the use of stored and shared knowledge (Bouthillier and Shearer, 2002).

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II. BENEFITS OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING

The survival of almost all businesses is dependent upon the creation and utilization of new knowledge and it is therefore inevitable that knowledge needs to be shared. To create a knowledge sharing culture you need to encourage people to work together more effectively, to collaborate and to share in order to make organizational knowledge more productive (Gurteen, 1999).

According to Gurteen, the sharing of knowledge is crucial in business because

- the new knowledge leads to sustainable competitive advantage in the form of competitive intelligence
- the tacit knowledge resides in the minds of personnel and this knowledge will be lost when they leave the organization
- the extent of the knowledge is so wide and substantial that it can result in organizations, large and small, “not knowing what they know.” There is no standard expertise knowledge among organizations.
- Rapid changes in ICT affect business and societal changes. For example in some businesses, as much of 50% of what was current five years ago may be obsolete today.

According to Pasquariella (2003), knowledge sharing:

- a. fosters innovation by encouraging the free flow of ideas; encourages staff innovation and creativity
- b. streamlines response time
- c. streamlines productivity and operations and reduces costs by eliminating redundant or unnecessary processes and procedures
- d. provides a feedback loop to re-work and re-use knowledge for the benefit of the organization
- e. accelerates advancement of mission
- f. improves performance.

Essentially, one gains from the interactions with others while, for instance, developing a product idea, and such interaction helps shape and improves that idea. Even the dialogue with another person could further add unique insights and improve ideas and knowledge. Within the context of an organization, what is needed is active collaborative effort among the personnel for support and buy-in, helping it to achieve the objectives (Gurteen, 1999).

III. IMPORTANCE OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING

Knowledge sharing and knowledge management systems are most commonly associated with IT-related projects because of their use of joint storage such as shared drives, the ability to exchange information via networking systems operating across thousands of machines, and the resulting mass circulation of information. This includes initiatives such as access to databases, the worldwide web and company intranets.

In the year 2000 the company KPMG conducted research on the types of area that might be associated with or engage in

knowledge management-based projects across a broad section of industries. The findings were as follows: IT department outputs suggested 22% of their overall projects being knowledge based, 16% of all Marketing department activity was deemed to have a knowledge sharing remit, with Human Resources departments registering as 5% and Operational departments carrying out around 4% of projects that were knowledge sharing orientated Cabrera (2002). This same survey also revealed that 81% of the main organizations across Europe and the United States had either adopted these types of models or were considering/in talks about implementing knowledge sharing programmes (KPMG, 2000).

Human Resources departments can be seen to demonstrate knowledge sharing in a different way, a more internalized way in that they can act as mediators between staff and their unwillingness to participate in knowledge sharing activity in the workplace. A recent article entitled *Managing Human Resources toward achieving knowledge management* (Yahya and Goh, 2002) lists the relationship in organizations between Human Resources objectives and the direct impact they have on knowledge management systems in a variety of ways, for example through training programmes, decision making, performance appraisals and financial rewards or compensation. Five suggested areas of knowledge management can directly fall under the responsibility of Human Resources departments: knowledge acquisition, knowledge documentation, knowledge transfer, knowledge creation and knowledge application (Yahya and Goh, 2002). Fundamentally, Human Resources teams can improve our overall understanding of what contributes to either the willingness, or in a great many instances the lack of willingness, of employees to partake in knowledge sharing-based work practices. They are a crucial player as exponents of knowledge sharing. Human Resources have the ability within organizations to help build staff morale, trust and motivation in order to help persuade personnel into adopting shared working practices. Most recently new divisions have emerged within Human Resources departments that recruit specific staff to roll out programmes of motivational knowledge-sharing activities and advice. In the United States this can be illustrated by General Electric and Coca-Cola, who are considered two of the leading protagonists for implementing knowledge management systems. Both these organizations are committed to employing a Chief Knowledge Officer and a Chief Learning Officer respectively, to take forward these specific initiatives within the companies (Martensson, 2000). A further example of Human Resources proactively taking forward knowledge sharing implementation is demonstrated by another US company, Buckman Labs International Inc. The company's Vice President of Human Resources was recently quoted as remarking that “the company that finds the way to best unlock its collection of minds will be the winner in the marketplace” (Martensson, 2000). These theories can be recognized alongside the need for greater political strength and awareness across Malaysia, similarly supporting the argument for a more focused approach to the research by way of measuring any existing IT or HR systems in place across the political parties in question.

Human Resources departments and the methods adopted by Marketing campaigns that share knowledge through resources such as mailing lists, client knowledge and an overall understanding of the target markets are less obvious immediate examples of good practice in knowledge management, alongside the more demonstrable contribution that IT systems provide. Nonetheless, they are invaluable in understanding the contributory factors involved with knowledge-sharing activities. What is apparent here and from the findings of KPMG is that different divisions within a community, whether business or organizational, can collectively have an enormous impact on the overall fundamentals of knowledge sharing.

In 2007 researchers Chuck Law and Eric Ngai carried out comprehensive empirical research using a study of 134 firms to determine the benefits of knowledge-sharing activity across a broad cross-section of industries including manufacturing, wholesale and retail. The outcomes revealed categorically that knowledge sharing and the learning patterns and behaviours of workers are strongly linked to improving business processes and productivity. The results of the data strengthen all the hypothetical thinking around the enormous benefits of implementing knowledge sharing in some capacity within an organization. The article concludes that “Executives should encourage knowledge management and organizational learning activities within their firms, and give proper considerations to the strategies and implementation of programs supporting these activities in order to enhance firm performance” (Law and Ngai, 2003).

It is necessary to consider and outline in greater detail the overall objectives of a framework for knowledge sharing across the political parties, other than it just being a good thing to do. Knowledge sharing by definition could potentially generate healthier competition amongst the parties and raise the quality and standard of political candidates. The high achievers and drivers could become better recognized, with greater emphasis and importance placed upon expertise and recognition of hard work and achievements. Collectively utilizing a knowledge-sharing approach in the political system in Malaysia could encourage levels of widespread communication – internal and external; value, support, understanding and awareness in addition to increased clarity of political issues. There are a number of disadvantages which will be discussed further, but as it exists the ‘Knowledge Sharing within Political Parties in Malaysia’ proposal requires further arguments for legitimizing the objectives that it purports to, which are essentially fairly radical.

The Institute for Democracy and Electoral Assistance (IDEA) launched their initiative *Effective Party Assistance* in January 2007 at their headquarters in Stockholm¹ to discuss problems with international weaknesses in the delivery of assistance to political parties worldwide. The focus was on building and developing partnerships across other partners and stakeholders

in order to help inform improvements for a collaborative system of political party assistance.

This initiative could be studied in more detail for the benefit of this research, in appreciating the rudimentaries of knowledge sharing between political parties globally and the current efforts that are being maintained to encourage this.

IV. ISSUES OF SOCIETY AND CULTURE. PROBLEMS, CHALLENGES OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN ORGANIZATIONS

The sharing of information constitutes a major challenge in the field of knowledge management, because some employees simply do not want to share their knowledge and ideas with anyone else. There is no greater influence in terms of the success or failure of an organization’s knowledge-sharing objectives than that of the overall attitude and approach of the working members of that community, which is the rationale behind why some knowledge management systems work effectively in one organization, only to prove futile in another. Knowledge sharing is not just about a useful system of communication tools and methods of exchanging dialogue; it is all about the people that use the systems. This results in a number of complex psychological and behavioural issues that need to be taken into consideration amongst the staff or working community before any effective measures can be implemented or utilised. Typically this may manifest itself in a number of different ways amongst people:

- People feel that their jobs might be threatened if they then share all that they know with a colleague, no longer making them the ones with all the knowledge and understanding. This can result in a defensive attitude when they are asked to contribute to knowledge-sharing activities.
- To add to the above point, there is a widespread mentality that says “the more you know, the more indispensable you are”.
- Some people hold to the notion that they should be able to barter information in exchange for other things – perhaps a promotion, financial reward, etc.
- There exists amongst many an overriding fear that someone else will take credit for their work and ideas, leading to a sense of paranoia and distrust.
- Similarly, any information that might be exchanged may be used by another person, and the person who had the original idea will be held accountable if anything goes wrong as a result of imparting that knowledge.
- There is a fear amongst some that by asking people to share their ideas and knowledge it will make them appear inadequate and incapable of doing their job properly.
- There is also the theory that knowledge sharing as a discipline is just an irritating waste of time and unproductive to individual work schedules (Chin, 2005).

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http://www.idea.int/parties/international_assistance/release_policy_paper.cfm

In principle, why should people relinquish what they have worked hard for only to hand over years of experience and hard work to someone else who merely has to listen to or mimic them. Knowledge sharing can be disempowering from this perspective. Additionally, people often have a degree of pride in being able to seek the answers to their questions from somewhere more learned and authoritative than from a colleague or the internet, to discover and work out for themselves what they want. Sometimes it is easy for people to think non-objectively about where their knowledge is being utilized, which is what creates the defensiveness. More often than not the knowledge they impart is being used in another context, for a purpose other than that which it was originally meant. Greater clarity within an organization is needed to ensure that many of the mythological and paranoid assumptions people may be feeling about sharing information are unfounded.

According to Chin (2005), time wasting is one of the major factors and barriers involved in people's reluctance to share knowledge. When daily work life is fraught with deadlines, project objectives and staff management, people are reluctant to have to find the time to explain to someone else how things are done or need to be monitored, rather like having a work-experience trainee in the office environment, who requires teaching and assisting.

None of these elements may appear to hold relevance to a knowledge-sharing framework to develop political parties, but indirectly these are some of the major issues that will need to be taken into consideration, particularly if the people who are working within these areas have experienced little technology and have become set in their ways.

In relation to making changes across Malaysian political parties, there will be considerable cultural issues amongst many 'commonly held beliefs', 'attitudes and values' (Skyrme, 2004) which may need to be addressed. As Malaysia is a developing country and predominantly Islamic, there will no doubt be a number of concerns when trying to implement an agreed system of knowledge sharing and unified knowledge management structure politically. The parties also have inadequate technology and strong internal competition. All of these will act as considerable barriers that need to be factored into the research and subsequent recommendations.

Skyrme (2004) makes suggestions as to how some of these barriers can be overcome or challenged and determined better. For the purposes of the proposed research, it may be advantageous to consider incorporating some of the following techniques into the overall research methodology:

- A culture audit – conducting questionnaires, interviews and team sessions with a cross-section of people working in the chosen environment. This can be helpful in determining the difference between the desired culture and what is actually done. In other words there may be a shared belief but this will sometimes become compromised in reaching a target

or goal. It is essential to establish from the outset which people should be the specific targets for change. It can be easy to group all individuals into one mind-set.

- Challenge 'improper' behaviour – if people are abusing the knowledge they are provided with this should be challenged, although not aggressively.
- Involvement – encourage everyone to believe that their knowledge, ideas and opinions are respected. This will then help people to feel more valued and in turn more empowered.
- Use of role models – encourage people who are well known, respected and listened to, to have greater authority and profile amongst others.
- Team-building / organization development sessions – factor in regular team meetings which are succinct and more about focused tasks and exchanging dialogue than wasting time.
- Rewards and recognition for appropriate behaviour – rewards and praise for team efforts rather than individual financial/career gain.
- Change people – move those who are willing to share knowledge around. Recruit consultant industrial psychologists and behavioural experts; reshuffle management to ensure there is quality of leadership and all the aims of the objectives are being met.

A project as ambitious as the proposal outlined suggests the need for a well thought out framework. It seems very clear from all of the complexities involved with knowledge sharing and how it can best be implemented for maximum effect that a good overall idea of what is feasible and justifiable is necessary in the first instance. This can develop out of the primary research that needs to be completed in order to establish the exact nature and challenges of existing communication systems within the political parties.

According to Lee (2001), when knowledge sharing is carried out between different organisations, in this instance different political parties', this type of work can become fraught with problems. This is due to the fact that different working cultures, structures and goals will vary, sometimes considerably, between working communities. Lee suggests that if this type of knowledge sharing is to take place there must exist "a clear, common vision and objectives which are pre-determined and agreed upon in advance".

V. CONCLUSION

The most effective way to create a knowledge-sharing culture is to start to practice it at your level. The higher up the organization, the more effective the staff will be in changing the culture, but even if they are low down the hierarchy they have some influence. Since it involves people, the

organization should create incentives and performance credit. Sharing is more than access, it is helping others make meaning and obtain understanding. Deeper sharing is possible if the domain is partitioned, the core concepts are negotiated, the environment is scanned and the feedback is shared within the community. There needs to be reflection around joint meaning and reciprocity to have quality sharing. All the processes should be well reported, especially the actionable outcomes. Knowledge-sharing technology should be applied for storytelling and disseminating document repositories to put in place institutional memory. Training and educating programmes should be implemented for effective application and utilization of the ICT system. The two together – people with the appropriate knowledge sharing mindset and the appropriate knowledge sharing technology to support them – will rapidly bring about a knowledge-sharing culture that helps the staff better meet their business objectives. Practising communities are already at work in many organizations and now is the best time to create the conditions and network infrastructure they require to boost bottom-line performance in knowledge sharing.

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