

Inter-organizational Knowledge Management Within an NGO Community: A Pilot Study of a Unique Knowledge Sharing Structure

Abstract: Knowledge management principles have traditionally been derived from for-profit organizations but are increasingly being utilized to support the success of non-profits organizations (NPOs). This pilot study examines the knowledge needs of a group of Alberta-based NPOs linked by a hub organization whose purpose is to facilitate knowledge sharing within this community.

Résumé : Les principes de gestion des connaissances sont habituellement issus des organisations à but lucratif, mais sont de plus en plus utilisés pour accroître le succès des organisations à but non lucratif (OBNL). Cette étude pilote examine les besoins en savoir d'OBNL albertaines regroupées sous une même organisation mère dont le but est la diffusion du savoir dans la collectivité.

1. INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has been increasingly recognized as a vital asset for organizations both in its tacit and explicit forms (Nonaka 1994). Knowledge Management (KM) is a process of selection, organization, storage, and dissemination of knowledge through an organizational body for different activities such as problem solving, learning, planning, and decision making. (Gupta et al., 2000; Davenport et al. 1997; Benbya et al. 2004). Although research has been done in KM for the domain of non-profit organizations (NPOs), [e.g., Gregory and Rathi, 2008; Huck et al. 2009; Holm et al. 2009; Lemieux and Dalkir, 2006] the majority of KM research has focused on profit sector organizations. A relatively a new and emerging trend for KM is the use and adoption of KM principles beyond their commercial roots. This forms an essential phase of its maturation process and requires reevaluating and revisiting aspects of KM to create a more robust, widely applicable set of practices for KM in different domains of use including NPOs. This paper presents a case study that examines how knowledge is managed in a NPO which brings together a coalition of voluntary sector organizations. In this short paper, we will provide an overview of KM in NPOs and Inter-organizational KM, followed by an insight into the case study.

2. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

KM principles have begun to be adapted in the nonprofit sector. While certain elements remain the same, such as the need for management support for the deployment and use of KM systems and the importance of users of KM systems that are similar to For-Profit Organizations (FPOs), but there are other elements within the NPO domain that distinguishes it from the FPO domain. In particular, the NPO domain is characterized by a heterogeneous mix of organizational structures, highly knowledge-intensive organizations, and high turnover rates due to large numbers of volunteers (Lettieri et al. 2004, p.17) as well as a general lack of funds for essential activities (Matzkin, 2008). Individual motivation, a crucial factor in implementing a successful KM system, is also likely to be different with non-profit employees tending to be more driven by the satisfaction of their work (Stauss 2007, p69).

Renshaw & Krishnaswamy (2009, p.462) describe KM in NPOs as being in its infancy, and conclude that the unique structure of NPOs calls for “multi-partisan approach with government, businesses and the non-profit sector all contributing to develop appropriate KM strategies.” Another interesting aspect of both the FPO and NPO domain is that competitiveness occurs in both domains, but takes on a substantially different character in each. In NPOs, competition is for funding and skilled staff and is thus driving the adoption of commercial practices such as KM (Hume & Hume 2007, p.130). However, because NPOs are not focused on generating profit by outperforming competitors, there is less of a proprietary concern for the knowledge the NPOs generate and instead a greater emphasis is on collaboration, sharing, and dissemination, with knowledge ideally flowing inexorably outwards into broader contexts and for the benefit of the society as a whole.

3. INTER-ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Thorelli (1986) argues for the importance of building enterprise networks as alternatives to market and hierarchy derived competitive advantage. An organization's network of external relationships can be an important resource for competitive advantage (Carlsson 2003, 195). Thus, collaborations among networked organizations would allow them to pool resources toward a greater good such as market advantage for FPOs, or funding opportunities and media coverage for NPOs.

Inter-organizational knowledge sharing hinges on the ability of organizations' members to interpret patterns of communication and knowledge use in order to allow all groups involved to become acquainted with views from outside their experiences and to integrate these novel practices into their own knowledge patterns. Although there are major benefits to collaboration and tapping into external networks to bolster and develop new information resources, there can also be barriers to these kinds of collaborative efforts. Some of the benefits to inter-organizational collaborative work include minimization of duplication of effort, enhancement of overall capabilities, tapping into best expertise, easy access to support, generation of novel solutions, validation of ideas and plans, and potential of reputation enhancement. Potential barriers include lack of common values (culture clashes), issue of knowledge leakage, time and resource costs, facilitators' roles not being adequately legitimized, lack of critical mass and shared IT tools, and a 'knowledge is power' attitude. (Skyrme 2005, p.168).

While the literature concerned with collaboration and networked enterprise generally refers to large organizations, these ideas could be adapted to increase the efficiency of smaller organizations who are typically (already) utilizing the strength of local knowledge networks which operates on a largely informal basis in their regular activities (Milner 2000, p.68). Thus, in this paper we present the collaborative practices and lessons learned of a unique knowledge based organization which functions as a central knowledge hub for a large number of international development agencies of many sizes. This organization embodies many of the issues surrounding the application of KM principles to the non-profit sector and provides a rich opportunity to explore the similarities and differences inherent in NPOs and FPOs.

4. THE STUDY

This paper presents a case study that examines how knowledge is managed in a NPO (name of the organization not disclosed for privacy reason) which is a coalition of voluntary sector organizations. There are approximately eighty member organizations in the coalition and the organization is located in the province of Alberta.

The member NPOs work both locally and globally on sustainable human development projects. The case study organization was chosen for its ability to help us to understand the knowledge organization, sharing, and dissemination within the network of NPO members. The chosen organization has a unique position in the network of NPOs because the organization is at the center of the network of organizations and acts as an information broker; providing education and information to their member organizations as well as acting as a conduit for information between their member groups and the community. In addition, the NPO's organizational structure presents a novel opportunity to explore the role of KM within an extensive collaborative environment.

A knowledge audit was done in March 2010 to explore the existing informational structures, knowledge silos (Dalkir, 2005), and knowledge organization, sharing and dissemination norms active within this information-centric organization. The knowledge audit is a process of identifying KM flows, sinks, sources, and constrictions in an organization (Liebowitz et al, 2000). This process helps in identifying problems such as the use of out of date information, knowledge ghettos where workers engage in significant 'reinventing of the wheel', and an inability to locate experts within the organization (Liebowitz et al., 2000, p.3). These types of gaps are identified with the purpose of directing a prioritization of KM goals and projects (Dalkir, 2005).

Data for this knowledge audit was collected in two ways: firstly by interviewing the NPO's office staff and several of their board members; and secondly by conducting a quantitative survey with the member organizations of the coalition. The interviews were conducted with two full time office staff members and with two board members of the NPO. The interviews were conducted face to face as well as over phone depending upon the members' availability. The NPO itself conducted an extensive quantitative survey using online tools with its member organizations in early 2010 and researchers were given access to the anonymized survey responses.

The findings from the interview data gave insight into the current organizational structure of the NPO and its relationship with other organization in the network; the mandate of the NPO to share and disseminate knowledge, and the change in role of the NPO in knowledge dissemination; the current state of KM in the organization; the knowledge flows within the NPO and in the network organization; barriers and benefits of knowledge sharing with the network of organization; etc.

The NPO hosts different types of activities for the employees of the member organizations which include providing opportunities for networking, giving training, promoting advocacy in the international development community, and providing platforms to participate in public engagement. The findings from survey responses gave insight into how effective and useful these activities have been to the members. Finally, based on the findings from the two data sets, some recommendations were made for the NPO including both technology based solution (e.g., database, blog, etc.) as well non-technological solution (e.g., whiteboard, etc.).

To conclude, this case study has provided a useful lens through which we have been able to examine and evaluate KM principles from both a non-profit and knowledge network perspective. The application of KM principles to the non-profit sector is relatively new, but NPOs have much to gain in the examination of their practices in a knowledge resource heavy

field. In addition FPOs also stand to benefit from close examination of new and innovative KM practices to be developed out of the unique non-profit environment. This paper provides a unique look at an organization at the centre of a large knowledge network and what role KM principles play in the functions of this group.

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