

EXPLORING KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN AN ACADEMIC ENVIRONMENT

M Natarajan*, Rishi Kumar Kalra**

*Scientist "F", NISCAIR, New Delhi

**Library Officer (Retd), AMPRI (CSIR), Bhopal, India

ABSTRACT

Knowledge management is a process, which converts the internal and external information of the organization into actionable knowledge. This paper provides an understanding of knowledge management and knowledge sharing (KS); the need for KS has been discussed in an academic environment, with the framework of KS. The role played by technology for KS has been discussed with the tools supported for transferring the knowledge. The different aspects of human attitude towards sharing have been expressed with the role of library professionals, in order to support the research activity of the students in the academic environment. Some of the advantages are mentioned with the need for sharing of knowledge to enhance the role by the administrators in universities and by the professionals.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge is regarded as a factor of production together with land, labour, and capital. It is also recognized as the most important resource in the organization. Higher learning institutions serve as a reservoir of knowledge and provide knowledge resources to students and faculty. Information practices and learning strategies known as knowledge management are gaining acceptance in the field of education (Petrides and Nodine, 2003). These institutions manage, blend, and share knowledge among the faculty staff themselves. Thus, knowledge sharing is inevitably challenging and an important concept in higher learning institutions. This is evident by the fact that several higher learning institutions, particularly in the developed world have been receiving grants to implement knowledge management practices.

Knowledge sharing (KS) can be considered an important process in organizations, because it is fundamental to generating new ideas and developing new business opportunities through socialization and the learning process of knowledge workers. To increase the ability to manage KS within and across the organization is thus one of the major challenges facing contemporary organizations. The organizational value of employee knowledge increases when it is shared. Only when employees are willing to share knowledge with colleagues can organizations begin to manage knowledge resources effectively. Researchers have noted that firms can successfully promote a KS culture not only by directly incorporating knowledge in their business strategy, but also by changing employee attitudes and behaviors to promote willing and consistent KS. The purpose of this article is to examine factors that contribute to KS practices among teaching staff in higher education institutions.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM)

Knowledge management (KM) may be defined as the set of processes that create and share knowledge across an organization to optimize the use of judgment in the attainment of mission and goals. There are two types of KM. They are:

Explicit knowledge: It is the visible knowledge available in the form of letters, reports, memos, literatures, etc. Explicit knowledge can be embedded in objects, rules, systems, methods etc.

Tacit knowledge: It is highly invisible and confined in the mind of a person. It is hard to formalize and therefore, difficult to communicate to others. A master craftsman after years of experience develops a wealth of expertise 'at his fingertips'. But he is often unable to articulate the scientific or technical principle behind what he knows. Transformation of knowledge from tacit to explicit form increases its usability and visibility. Capturing the expert's tacit knowledge that resides within him in the form of Know-how and insights is a very difficult and challenging task.

Tiwana (2002) classifies KM in three different processes: knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and knowledge utilization. Knowledge acquisition is the process of development and creation of insights, skills, and relationships. Knowledge sharing is the act of disseminating and making available knowledge that is already known, and knowledge utilization is where learning is integrated into the organization.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING (KS)

KS can be defined as:

A social interaction culture, involving the exchange of employee knowledge, experiences, and skills through the whole department or organization.

The provision or receipt of task information, know-how and feedback regarding a product or procedure' and has been tied to a variety of managerial desirable outcomes including productivity, task completion time, organizational learning and innovativeness.

A set of behaviors about knowledge exchange which involve the actors, knowledge content, organizational context, appropriate media, and societal environment.

The action in which employees diffuse relevant information to others across the organization (Bartol and Srivastava, 2002).

NEED FOR KS

The goal of KS can either to create new knowledge by differently combining existing knowledge or to become better at exploiting existing knowledge. KS is defined as the process intended at exploiting existing knowledge, and hence defined as being about identifying existing and accessible knowledge, in order to transfer and apply this knowledge to solve specific tasks better,

faster and cheaper than they would otherwise have been solved. Hendriks suggested a conceptualized model which consists of two main activities for effective KS: transmission and absorption. The knowledge owner externalizes his knowledge through the skills of codification, elaboration, and presentation. Knowledge is subsequently transmitted to the recipient (reconstructor) by the appropriate media or channels, and then the reconstructor internalizes this knowledge through the capabilities of reading, learning, interpreting, and absorbing.

The need for better KS within and between development agencies is glaringly obvious. Project documents getting lost, evaluation lessons being ignored, consultant reports getting buried, research being bypassed, field experience being wasted when staff move on, organizational learning being blocked by hierarchies or internal structures, agencies not knowing what each other are doing and local stakeholders being left out of the loop; these are familiar problems that most agencies are only too aware of.

KS FRAMEWORK

Lee and Suliman proposed a KS framework which is affected by five factors – the actors who participate in the activity, the characteristics of the shared knowledge, the organizational concerns, the channel which is used to communicate with others, and the environmental climate. Ruggles (1997) found that the important impediments for knowledge sharing include culture (54%), organizational structure (28%), information communication technology (22%), incentive system (19%), and staff turnover (8%), by investigating 431 US and European organizations. (Table 1).

Table 1
Summary of knowledge sharing factors

Dimension	Sub-dimension	Factors
Organizational level	Culture	Sharing culture/Cooperation and collaboration culture/ Knowledge-centered culture/Learning culture
	Structure	Incentive and reward/Work design/Management support/Norm/Political directives
	People	Arduous relationship/Shared understanding/ Similar knowledge frame/Social interaction
	Technology	IT infrastructure/IT know-how/IT support
Individual level		Motivation/Prior experience/Absorptive capacity / Source credibility
Knowledge level		Explicit and tacit knowledge / Causal ambiguity / Knowledge articulability / Knowledge embeddedness

Technology plays an important role in KM, and it facilitates the process of transmitting and exchanging information. It can be used to manage uncertainty and complexity, where information is more factual and a high degree of interaction is not required. Technology enables

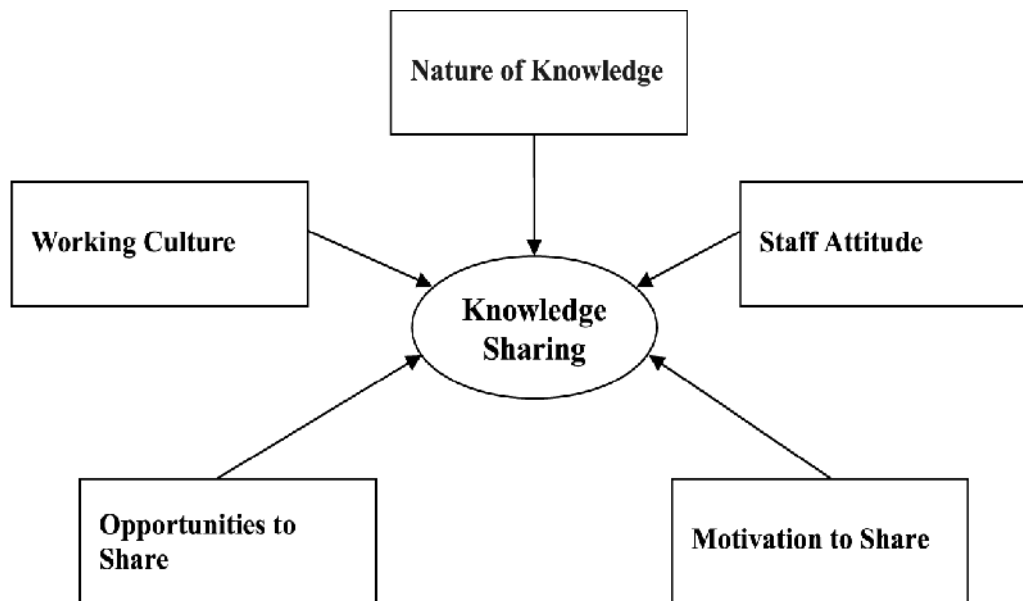
individuals to coordinate the logistics of face-to-face meetings. It can also be used to catalogue expertise of organizational members and as a result facilitating access to the right people and enhancing KS. Computer-mediated communication such as electronic mail or computer-conferences can help to maintain continuity and connection between conversations, especially for those in different locations (Marwik, 2001). Collaboration tools enable a company's professionals to work together and work virtually regardless of the geographical location. Web technology allows organizations to build Web and knowledge portals that can handle substantial amount of information and made it accessible to users anywhere anytime (Al-Hawamdeh, 2002).

TOOLS FOR KNOWLEDGE SHARING

KM tools only work when individuals see direct benefits in linking their personal knowledge management systems (KMS) with organizational KMS. If development workers believe that the chores of contributing to an organizational KM program benefit only their bosses, and not themselves or the communities with which they work, they may decide the best way to take advantage of the value of their individual knowledge is to use it for personal or local advantage. This results in serious knowledge deficits for the wider organization. KM tools go beyond electronic or paper-based data repositories. They include communities of practice as through which people create personally meaningful knowledge networks. Development organizations need to encourage development workers to take advantage of communities of practice by enabling, encouraging and rewarding them to join professional and special interest groups. Major KM tools are:

- Email and synchronous interaction tools
- Collaboration tools for community-building and networking; shared documents; conversations
- Document or knowledge repositories
- Tools for knowledge capture, distillation and presentation
- E-learning tools and applications
- Staff and expertise directories
- Calendars (personal, group and corporate); personal portals

E-mail is basically used for communication within and outside library for users, publishers (contacts for acquisition, reminders, invoice, exhibits, etc) and for library services like answering reference queries. Collaborative tools are library networks and human networks with local, regional, national and international level. Knowledge repositories store different types of explicit information which can be accessed and shared among the users locally and from outside also. Portals act as a very useful tool for anyone who is interested to know about the availability of the resources, collection details, OPAC, FAQs, contact with library professionals, subject specific responses, etc. KS has different aspects / attitudes like the diagram below:



Independently, librarians have developed and applied many KM principles in the provision of academic library services. Reference, cataloging, and other library services are designed to encourage the use of scholarly information and thus increase the amount of academic knowledge used in higher education. Questions in a reference interview and the points of access in a catalog both are intended to reinforce the ways that scholars work to create new academic knowledge. However, libraries have done little to use organizational information to create knowledge that can be used to improve the functionality of library and higher education processes. In many ways, KM incorporates principles that academic librarians have developed and used with scholarly information for many years. It then applies these principles and others to organizational information in ways that create new knowledge to improve organizational effectiveness (Marshall, 1997).

Organizations can create knowledge repositories composed of explicit knowledge that has been documented and organized for access. Often these are called data warehouses or data malls. Academic libraries focus on delivering scholarly information and support services in print, electronic and sometimes recorded, media exclusively (Townley, 2001). Librarians specified the following activities and strategies as factors that can encourage knowledge sharing among librarians.

- Sharing research projects.
- Training programs.
- Online newsletters.
- Teaching methods.
- Knowledge-sharing policies and strategies.
- Leadership and dedication of time.
- Group discussions.
- More communication channels.
- Formal procedures including publication of manuals for staff.

- Group discussion.
- Documenting experiences.

ADVANTAGES OF KS

Some of the benefits of KS are as follows:

- KS makes the captured expertise available to all people serving in an organization uniformly.
- As KM is to capture knowledge and make it accessible to all service and support agents, it no longer stays with those who hold or discover it; becomes an organization asset available to all who need it.
- KS enhances contacts with other people either local, regional, national or at international and develops a knowledge networks.
- KS reduces the costs of repeated mistakes or re-inventing the wheel.
- KS enhances functional effectiveness.

CONCLUSION

In the twenty-first century new educational professionalism is needed to deal with lifelong learning, knowledge development and knowledge sharing. It is often considered as being a distinct process somewhat distant to the ongoing daily activities in organizations, and the main goal of KS has been dominated by the closing of performance gaps. It can be seen that nature of knowledge, working culture, staff attitude, motivation to share and opportunities to share play important role in enhancing KS among teaching staff in universities. The presence of culture among the contributors shows that KS factors do not depend on technology alone. Sharing of knowledge could also be enhanced if the university administrators play a positive role by encouraging their teaching staff to share knowledge by organizing open discussions, forums, seminars or colloquiums. It has been emphasized that knowledge sharing is – or should be – part of ongoing organizational activities, and therefore it is fruitful to consider the process as one of bridging situations of interdependencies.

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