Chapter 76
Knowledge Management Practices and the Focus on the Individual

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reviews the current knowledge management (KM) practices to examine the attention (or lack thereof) paid to the individual in managing knowledge in organisations. It identifies and reviews four key practices of KM - i.e., information technology, organisational culture and structure, communities of practice, and human resource practices - to examine how knowledge is interpreted, processed and managed, and the role individuals play in such interpretations, processing and management. The review shows that existing KM practices may be improved through an increased focus on the role of individuals (an individual-centric approach) in designing and implementing KM in organisations.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) is seen as a catalyst for organisations to compete in the global market place (Mráček & Mucha, 2011; Palte et al., 2011). Since the 1990s, several industrialised countries, such as Germany, Japan, Switzerland, the United Kingdom and the United States, have developed into 'knowledge societies' where knowledge in its various forms is treated as the prime source of economic power (Campbell et al., 2012; Drucker, 1993). To manage knowledge effectively, organisations seek to adjust their core business strategies (Erickson & Rothberg, 2011; Murray, Millet & Syed, 2011). However, the costs of KM interventions exceed their benefits, and knowledge remains under-utilised in many organisations (EIU, 2007; Sveiby, 2007). We argue in this paper that a possible reason for the under-utilisation of available knowledge is the limited attention paid to the individual in processes and practices of KM.

Research in KM has acknowledged that individuals drive knowledge processes (e.g. Jennex, 2008; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; von Krogh

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-4666-9562-7.ch076

et al., 2000). Individuals are the true source of knowledge, and the creators of new knowledge, which is a crucial component of KM (Polanyi, 1998; Rechberg & Syed, in press). Literature on cognitive psychology has highlighted the role of human cognition as a necessary requirement to transmit and absorb knowledge (e.g., Albino et al., 2004). Nonetheless, there remains limited attention to the role of individuals in the discourse on KM (e.g. Nonaka & Peltokorpi, 2006; Rechberg & Syed, 2012; Swan et al., 1999), indicating an appropriation of individuals in KM, which may be one of the possible reasons for the lack of effectiveness of current KM practices. Moreover, KM decisions are, generally, made by senior managers in organisations, and empirical KM research mostly draws on the opinions of KM decision makers (Beijerse, 2000; Carrión et al., 2004; Fahey & Prusak, 1998; Riantoputra, 2010; Roomi & Mojibi, 2011). We argue that unless individuals are integrated into designing and implementing KM practices, it is unlikely that they will fully understand and participate in KM, thus limiting its effectiveness in organisations.

To map the role of individuals in KM, four key practices are identified in the KM literature: information technology (IT), organisational culture and structure (OCS), communities of practice (CoP), and human resource (HR) practices. Based on the literature review, a schema is developed to explain that an under-attention to the role of individuals may affect the potential and efficacy of current KM practices. The paper argues that unless the individual fully understands and supports KM practices, organisations cannot expect that knowledge will be effectively shared, created, or utilised in the workplace. The paper develops an individual- centric approach, where individuals are active participants in designing and implementing KM practices, which may in turn enhance KM effectiveness. In the next section, we define the key concepts used in this study, i.e., knowledge, individuals, KM, and knowledge processes.

CONCEPTS AND DEFINITIONS

Knowledge

There is no universal definition of knowledge. Zack (1999) suggests that knowledge can be defined by the purpose it serves; however, Fahey and Prusak (1998) warn that developing a working definition for knowledge is problematic because of the multiple purposes for which the term is deployed. Knowledge is often interpreted as an asset. For example, 80% of organisations participating in the KPMG (2003: 8) survey on KM "recognise knowledge as a strategic asset". Knowledge is an asset insofar that it is used by someone else than the original creator, and its ownership usually resides with the organisation (Rechberg & Syed, 2013; Tseng & Fan, 2011).

Polanyi's (1998) theory on knowledge informs us that individuals are a key source of knowledge. Knowledge is a process or action of knowing an experience or associating with an experience through individual participation (Rechberg & Syed, in press). It may be tacit in nature and may be turned into explicit form through formal processing (Polanyi, 1998). Explicit knowledge can take the form of data and information, whereas tacit knowledge is embedded in individuals (Tywoniak, 2007). Knowledge, if made explicit, can be shared, transferred, and exchanged, which may lead to knowledge creation. Tacit forms of knowledge such as embrained (cognitive), embodied (physical), and embedded (unconscious) knowledge are of great value, but often difficult to share with others (Collins, 1993).

Knowledge Management

KM denotes a range of strategies and practices used in organisations to identify, create, share, retain, distribute, and enable adoption of insights and experiences, embodied in individuals and embedded in organisational processes or practices (Nonaka