

Chapter II

Knowledge Management Trends: Challenges and Opportunities for Educational Institutions

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Abstract

While the pressure of public accountability has placed increasing pressure on higher education institutions to provide information regarding critical outcomes, this chapter describes how knowledge management (KM) can be used by educational institutions to gain a more comprehensive, integrative, and reflexive understanding of the impact of information on their organizations. The practice of KM, initially derived from theory and practice in the business sector, has typically been used to address isolated data and information transfer, rather than actual systemwide change. However, higher education institutions should not simply appropriate KM strategies and practices as they have appeared in the business sector. Instead, higher education institutions should use KM to focus on long-term, organization-wide strategies.

Introduction

Knowledge management (KM) can be used by educational institutions to gain a more comprehensive, integrative, and reflexive understanding of the impact of information on their organizations. Specifically, the practice of KM, initially derived from theory and practice in the business sector as described in the previous chapter, provides a framework to illuminate and address organizational obstacles around issues of information use and access (Davenport, 1997; Friedman & Hoffman, 2001). Yet introducing the concept of KM into the educational arena from the business sector has been a slow and often underutilized process. This is partially due to the fact that KM is a multi-layered and systems-oriented process that requires organizations to rethink what they do and how they do it (Brown & Duguid, 2000; Senge, 1990). Additionally, educational institutions are traditionally hierarchical with silo-like functions, making cross-functional initiatives difficult to implement (Friedman & Hoffman, 2001; Petrides, McClelland, & Nodine, 2004).

However, educational institutions can perhaps learn from KM efforts in the business sector, in terms of the limitations and drawbacks associated with KM. In fact, there are several compelling reasons why educational institutions have not, and perhaps should not, simply re-appropriate KM, as popularized by the business sector, into their own organizations. For example, in the business sector, there has been an appeal to focus on information technology and systems as solutions to problems of knowledge transfer and knowledge sharing (Hovland, 2003; Huysman & de Wit, 2004). Coupled with a profit motive, KM as it exists in the business sector is often limited in its ability to create far-reaching organizational change (Hammer, Leonard, & Davenport 2004). Furthermore, recent trends in the field also fail to fully distinguish between data, information, and knowledge (Huysman & de Wit, 2002). Consequently, organizations merely address singular and isolated data and information transfer, rather than actual systemwide and organization-wide change.

These particular limitations are especially salient now as higher-education institutions face an increasing number of challenges that have forced them to rethink how they are accountable to external demands, as well as how to improve internal accountability. Rather than focus on micro-level information-sharing activities, implementing KM strategies and practices requires these educational institutions to examine the larger context of information sharing within the organization, specifically how their people, processes, and technol-

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