


Knowledge Management Practice and Organizational Performance in the Context of International Schools

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ABSTRACT

This exploratory study delves into three private international schools' knowledge management (KM) practices amidst the Covid-19 pandemic. Utilizing Gold et al.'s KM framework, the research examines the applicability of this model in the unique industrial context of international schools and explores the potential influence of KM on organizational performance within this context. The findings highlight that teachers proficient in articulating KM processes and infrastructure perceive their schools as more successful in the international education landscape. As schools transition back to in-person learning, leaders and stakeholders are urged to evaluate their KM practices and consider targeted initiatives to cultivate specific competencies, fostering a sustainable competitive advantage and enhancing both financial and non-financial firm performance. This study's originality lies in examining KM practices in international schools during the pandemic, stimulating conversations among school leaders and stakeholders to optimize knowledge management in the post-pandemic era.

KEYWORDS

International Education, Knowledge Management, Organizational Performance

INTRODUCTION

The knowledge-based view of the firm posits knowledge as the most crucial strategic resource possessed by an organization (Bontis, 2002; Roos, 1998; Sveiby, 2001). Recognizing knowledge as a vital asset for sustaining competitive advantage has sparked increased interest in and extensive research of knowledge management (KM). KM encompasses the processes and practices that allow firms to manage their intellectual assets, thereby leveraging knowledge-based competitive advantages (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Heisig, 2009). Researchers (i.e., Gold et al., 2001; Zaim et al., 2007; Zack et al., 2009) have explored preconditions for effective KM, establishing significant connections to organizational capabilities and performance. There is a wide consensus that effective KM leads to positive performance, extending to both market positioning and financial metrics.

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Although KM in higher education has been explored extensively (Hoq & Akter, 2012; Ramachandran et al., 2013; Mahdi et al., 2019; Shosham & Perry, 2009), KM practices in secondary education have garnered much less attention (Cheng, 2014; Thambi & O'Toole, 2012).

Private international schools make up an industry that has grown tremendously in the last twenty years. Since 2000, the number of international schools has increased from 2,584 to 11,616, and total tuition fees have grown 1002% (ISC Research, 2021). While continued growth is expected in the coming years, especially in China and Southeast Asia, no research to date has been conducted on KM practices in international schools. In their study of knowledge management in secondary schools, Thambi and O'Toole (2012) concluded that several aspects of KM could be found incidentally in the schools they examined. It would therefore be useful to explore KM in international schools to expand knowledge in the field.

This paper aims to start this conversation by exploring KM practices in international schools during the COVID-19 pandemic and their influence on organizational performance. We strive to do the following in this study: (a) explore knowledge management processes and infrastructure within the international school context, (b) explore conceptual implications of KM within these schools, and (c) provide recommendations to the leaders of international schools for reflection upon their knowledge management performance. As knowledge-intensive organizations, how international schools manage knowledge could have repercussions for firm success in financial and non-financial measures.

This study is organized into six parts. The following section will present a review of the literature to outline knowledge management and identify KM practices currently employed across the industry. A conceptual framework for this study will be introduced next, followed by the methodology adopted. Data collected from the interviews will be presented through the lens of the study's objectives in the findings and analysis section, followed by implications. We conclude the paper with future research recommendations.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Defining Knowledge and KM

Knowledge has diverse definitions, encompassing a fluid mixture of experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). It can also be seen as justified personal beliefs empowering action (Alavi & Leidner, 1999). According to Drucker (2001), information is data endowed with relevance and purpose, serving as a foundation for knowledge construction (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Individuals in organizations use information to create knowledge, from which the organization extracts value.

Polanyi (1958; 1966) distinguished knowledge into explicit and tacit forms. Scholars emphasize the importance of tacit knowledge, embedded in individual experience and influenced by personal beliefs. Farnese et al. (2019) metaphorically represented explicit knowledge as the visible tip of an iceberg, while tacit knowledge remains submerged. They propose that the socialization, externalization, combination, internalization (SECI) model captures the conversion of tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge, driving the organization's knowledge-creation process (Farnese et al., 2019, p. 71).

Wiig (1997) identified three KM approaches: managing explicit knowledge through technical means like technology-based networks; focusing on intellectual capital comprising human, structural, and relational assets; and comprehensive KM encompassing all knowledge-related aspects affecting a firm's success. In today's business landscape, systematic knowledge management is crucial to achieve a competitive advantage. Knowledge assets unique to the firm, per the knowledge-based view, contribute to sustainable competitive advantage and market relevance (Grant, 1996; Earl, 2001). Efficiently managing knowledge resources secures the firm's viability and financial success.

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