Chapter 4.10

An Evaluation of Factors that Influence the Success of Knowledge Management Practices in US Federal Agencies

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ABSTRACT

This chapter investigates the status of knowledge management practices implemented across federal agencies of the U.S. government. It analyzes the extent to which this status is influenced by the size of the agency, whether or not the agency type is a Cabinet-level Department or Independent Agency, the longevity of KM Practices implemented in the agency, whether or not the agency has adopted a written KM policy or strategy, and whether the primary responsibility for KM Practices in the agency is directed by a CKO or KM unit versus other functional locations in the agency. The research also tests for possible KM practitioner bias, since the survey was directed to members of the Knowledge Management Working Group of the Federal CIO Council and KM practitioners in federal agencies.

INTRODUCTION

The implementation of knowledge management practices has been underway in both the public and private sectors for many years. For the federal government this transition was well underway prior to the devastating events of September 11th, 2001 (9/11). However those events increased the awareness of the value and importance of the

government's stewardship of its knowledge. In fact, the 9/11 terrorist attack on the World Trade Center in New York City is considered by many to have been a 'wake-up call' for federal agencies to make both policy and process changes in order to prevent future attacks.

Knowledge management programs concentrate on managing and distributing what the government knows within and between agencies for the purpose of taking collaborative action. The basic tenet of knowledge management is that the right knowledge needs to be made available to the right people at the right time for the purpose of taking concerted action.

The most important role of the federal government is unarguably to protect its citizens from harm, and specifically from terrorist threats. As a result of 9/11, President George W. Bush, upon a recommendation of the 9/11 Commission, (National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States, created in November 2002) began to rectify the gap in sharing knowledge and coordinating action by creating the Department of Homeland Security (DHS). Twenty-two different agencies with a total of 180,000 employees were reorganized into a single agency for the purpose of preventing terrorist attacks and protecting citizens and infrastructure from threats and hazards. The intentional sharing of knowledge on the part of federal agencies is the new paradigm, albeit one in transition. The major objective is to ensure that the government knows what it needs to know, when it needs to know it.

Deployment of knowledge management programs in U.S. federal agencies has been hampered by two distinct conditions:

1. Long-established hierarchical "command-and-control" management styles and bureaucratic organizational structures make it challenging for agencies to share knowledge through either intra-agency collaboration, and much less through cross-agency or inter-agency collaboration.

2. Agency Information Technology (IT) systems are a mixture of legacy systems cobbled together with newer systems and technologies, making interoperability a technically difficult impediment both within and between different agencies.

The management of the government's knowledge is also made difficult by the vast amount of data and information contained in its repositories. In addition, the government's knowledge is comprised of the working knowledge in the minds of approximately 1,800,000 federal employees (OPM Fedscope, 2004) To manage this bewildering resource of both explicit and tacit knowledge and harness its capabilities is enormously demanding. Much of the knowledge in government organizations, and certainly within a constituency base, is tacit in nature, that is, knowledge that cannot be easily articulated and thus exists in people's hands and minds, and only manifests itself through their actions. (Stenmark, 2001) (Koh, Ryan & Prybutok, 2005)

A further problem is that the management of knowledge can be executed in many forms, but it is most useful to agencies when these forms are developed to fit specific agency objectives. This immediate utility is what gives knowledge its value to each agency. However, these unique uses and designs are what make it difficult to share knowledge across agencies. Much research has been pursued in the area of knowledge management, in which knowledge management initiatives were internally focused, and principally aimed at collaboration and knowledge sharing among employees (Almashari, Zairi & Alathari, 2002), (Henderson & Venkatraman, 1993) (Lai & Chu, 2003), (Liebowitz, 2003-2004) & (Koh, Ryan & Prybutok, 2005)

Unfortunately, there has been mixed comprehensive research into the value proposition of applying knowledge management practices to achieve improvements in productivity either within a single federal agency, or through the

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