Chapter 19
Semiotic Analysis of the Conceptual Outlay of Knowledge Management:
Lessons from South African Case

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge Management (KM) development in the SADC region has been hampered by contextual challenges and lack of context-aware KM designs and interventions. In most of the cases, the frameworks and models utilized are adopted from the developed world with inherent characteristics of the developed world and when these are introduced on the African scene, they provide a contextual mismatch. This chapter presents the fundamental concepts of knowledge management especially as conceptualized in the African context and paves way for the design of a framework commensurate to the dynamic environment of the African continent. The chapter presents key concepts of knowledge management and probes whether the desired levels of knowledge management development have been reached to guarantee effective participation in the global knowledge value chains. This conceptual chapter emanates from extensive literature and document review on the different interventions and strategies for KM development in the SADC region. Using South Africa as a case, the chapter presents the ramifications that need to be followed with regards to KM design and implementation. The chapter provides "semiotic" analysis of the synergy between different KM interventions propagated by the governments and/or co-operating partners and actual realization of a knowledge economy.

INTRODUCTION

African countries are slowly putting in place interventions to drive the Knowledge Management (KM) agenda in their socio-economic setups. Most of these interventions are being promulgated in the public sector business value chains with a view to enhancing effectiveness (ultimate usage of human and intellectual resources and assets) and efficiency and with conviction that this will further have a *domino effect* to other national socio-economic value chains (Heck & Rogger, 2004). The understanding of what interventions to put in place starts from the understanding of the context in which those interventions are to be implemented. This chapter, therefore, intends to scan the general interventions put in place to encourage proliferation and development of KM especially in the Southern African Development Community (SADC) region, provide semiotic analysis of the factors driving the KM agenda, and providing future research directions centred on context-aware KM interventions. The major goal of this chapter is to ignite debate on how best to design and implement KM with context-relevant conceptualizations, and what impact this will have on sustainable KM development in Africa. It is posited that appropriate understanding of KM with reference to context is the beacon for successful KM interventions.

Most public sector establishments have slowly been following the businesslike approach to service delivery as envisaged in the private sector where efficiency, effectiveness and focal point of service delivery is on the citizen needs (Fowler & Pryke, 2003; Haricharan 2004; Smith, 2007). With regards to KM in the public sector, it cannot be denied that the following are some of the key benefits (Cong & Pandya, 2003): providing quality services commensurate to citizens' expectations, and maintaining a just, acceptable and secure soci-

ety. Wiig (2002) further contends that KM makes the public sector effective by facilitating informed decision-making; encouraging ordinary citizens to participate in decision-making (social and political inclusion); ushering in a knowledge competitive human resource base; and a stable, just, orderly and secure society, among other benefits. Successful mainstreaming of KM in the public sector business processes further culminates into well-organized, integrated and technically functional processes, e.g. e-Government implementation, workflow management systems, etc. When such a public service environment is created, knowledge will be able to move from one place to another with a view of fuelling innovation and competitiveness. Other authors have emphasized that KM can only yield results in an organizational setup if its implementation is aligned to the organizational goals and the overarching business strategy of the organization (Sunassee & Sewry, 2002).

With the transition by main African countries from resource-dependent to knowledge based economies, KM presents itself as a long-lasting predilection and strategic management tool that can guarantee success in the ever-changing global socio-economic value chains. The conceptualisation of KM is hinged on the fact that the success of an organization depends on its effectiveness and efficiency in managing both its tangible and intangible knowledge resources. It cannot be overemphasised that effective management of knowledge resources contributes to the success of the organisation. This understanding is based on the knowledge-based theory which contends that knowledge is the only resource that provides sustainable competitive advantage in an organisation setup (Roberts, 1998). This has been confirmed by a variety of researchers (Bembya, Passiante & Belbaly, 2004; Corbitt, Bradley, & Thanasankit, 2005) who have posited that knowledge and intellectual capital are organisational assets that add

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