



Organizational Readiness for Successful Knowledge Sharing: Challenges for Public Sector Managers

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing in public services has not yet received much attention in the research literature. This paper investigates knowledge sharing in one public service context and identifies factors that influence the readiness of an organization to share knowledge effectively. Using participant observation, document analysis, interviews (n=30) and a survey (n=132), data are presented to highlight antecedents to effective knowledge sharing in healthcare service delivery. Through factor analysis and regression modeling, we have isolated six factors that are significant predictors of effective knowledge sharing. Our research is broadly consistent with previous findings that an innovative culture, a capacity to learn from failure and good information quality are strong predictors of successful knowledge sharing. However, we also identify factors associated with change management, and a predisposition to confront performance indicators, that significantly influence the knowledge sharing process. While we argue that our six-factor model may be equally relevant to private sector firms, we suggest that the peculiar nature of the public sector environment poses unique challenges for healthcare managers who seek to develop a knowledge sharing capability.

Keywords: *knowledge sharing; public services; culture; information quality; change; learning; performance orientation*

INTRODUCTION

This paper contributes to our understanding of an increasingly important practical problem, namely the effectiveness of knowledge management in organizations. As with many other managerial innovations, knowledge management appears to have been adopted firstly by manufacturing firms, and is only now beginning to per-

meate the service sector, predominantly in professional services such as consulting (Hansen et al., 1999; Sarvary, 1999). Public services, traditionally slower to embrace innovative management practices, are only beginning to recognize the importance of knowledge management. There is, as yet, little published research of its implementation in this context (Bate & Robert, 2002).

This paper examines knowledge sharing in the context of public services partnerships between organizations mandated by government policy to jointly improve the delivery of healthcare services. In particular, the paper explores the central roles of knowledge sharing, learning and information provision in the improvement of service delivery. Our research question focused on the issue of making knowledge sharing more effective. In other words, are there broader organizational factors, beyond the dynamics of individual sharer-receiver interactions, that significantly influence knowledge sharing? To that end, the paper firstly reviews what can be learned about knowledge management from previous research, predominantly from the private sector. We then discuss the public sector context of healthcare in general and the concept of partnership working in particular. We outline possible external influences that may uniquely affect knowledge sharing therein. Results are then presented from our empirical study of UK health and social care partnerships, highlighting some significant antecedents to sharing knowledge. The findings support the small but growing body of evidence that motivational and reward factors are not the main influencers of knowledge sharing, (Szulanski, 1996; Bock & Kim, 2002; Stonehouse et al., 2002).

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Studies of knowledge management practices have been predominantly of two types to date: (a) surveys, often sponsored by consulting groups, with limited reporting of the underpinning methodologies, and (b) case studies in individual firms. These studies provide some insight into KM implementation and have influenced our research design. For example, in Ernst and Young's

survey of 431 private organizations (Ruggles, 1998), it was concluded that the main barriers to implementing knowledge management were all people related, i.e., a culture that inhibited knowledge sharing, a lack of top management leadership, and poor understanding of what KM involved. Similar studies by KPMG (1999) of 100 UK companies, and by the Conference Board (Hackett, 2000) of 200 companies broadly confirmed these findings.

However, these three surveys highlighted some differences. For example, lack of time and lack of perceived benefits were cited in the KPMG survey as the most significant barriers to knowledge sharing, while the Conference Board survey added that there was little observed integration between firms' activities in knowledge management and the promotion of organizational learning. Leidner (2000, p.100) underlined the same point: "Although a well-established tradition of organizational learning research could be considered an adumbration if not a forerunner of organizational KM, KM as a research discipline has drawn less from organizational learning than from strategy research."

Nonaka (1994) also recognized the link between knowledge sharing and organizational learning in his discussion of the interactions between tacit and explicit knowledge and their subsequent spiraling through different organizational levels. Although his work is largely related to knowledge creation, all four of his tacit-explicit transformation processes could apply equally to knowledge sharing. Nonaka's SECI model has become very influential in both research and practice; however less recognition has been given to the importance he placed upon information in this process:

Information is a necessary medium for initiating and formalizing

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