

Chapter 8.12

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 technology function within it. As such, neither data-sharing activities nor technological implementation should be viewed as the ultimate objective and final stage of a KM strategy. Instead, KM practices necessitate strategies that build upon current practice, leading to more comprehensive and organization-wide changes in knowledge practices and actions.

How then can educational institutions translate isolated sharing activities into long-term learning? This chapter illustrates how KM strategies and practices enable higher-education institutions to distinguish between data, information, knowledge, and action and how this iterative cycle can help organizations assess their available resources—that is, their people and processes along with their technology. In turn, this chapter demonstrates how KM can help educational institutions place themselves on the path toward continuous learning and organizational reflexivity.

CONCEPTS AND THEORIES

An overview of KM practices in the business sector demonstrates an overwhelming focus on simplified solutions, specific applications, and singular information-transfer activities. Recent accounts suggest that KM has seen limited impacts in the private sector due to overemphasis on technological hardware and software (Hammer et al., 2004; Hovland, 2003; Huysman & de Wit, 2004). This may be due in part to the fact that it is often easier to persuade organizations to acquire new technology tools than to modify or redesign existing organizational processes (Coate, 1996).

However, these particular approaches to KM are less likely to embrace a systematic approach to how organizations function. By focusing too narrowly on isolated information-sharing activities, organizations are prematurely confined and prevented from engaging in a more integrative

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