

Chapter 30

Key Enablers for Knowledge Management for Australian Not-for-Profit Organizations: Building an Integrated Approach to Build, Maintain, and Sustain KM

Craig Hume
Griffith University, Australia

Margee Hume
University of Southern Queensland, Australia

ABSTRACT

Not-for-Profit (NFPs) organizations operate in an increasingly competitive marketplace for funding, staff and volunteers, and donations. Further, NFPs, both in Australia and internationally, are growing rapidly in number in response to increasing needs for humanitarian services and environmental sustainability that local and national governments and established international aid organizations cannot or struggle to provide effectively. Many NFPs are being driven to adopt more commercial practices in order to improve their donor appeal, government grant applications, staff/volunteer retention, and service delivery. Knowledge Management (KM) is one such “corporate” practice being explored to address the increasingly competitive environment. Although the concept of knowledge management may be basically understood in NFPs, researchers and NFP managers are yet to explore and fully understand the complex inter-relationships of organizational culture, ICT, internal marketing, employee engagement, and performance management as collective enablers on the capture, coordination, diffusion, and renewal of knowledge in a NFP environment. This chapter presents research into the relationship of KM with those enabling elements and presents an implementation model to assist NFPs to better understand how to plan and sustain KM activity from integrated organisational and knowledge worker perspectives. The model emphasises an enduring integrated approach to KM to drive and sustain the knowledge capture and renewal continuum. The model provides an important contribution on “how to” do KM.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge Management (KM) is an organisational activity that retains a certain mystique. What constitutes knowledge in the organisational context and how organisations can effectively and efficiently manage knowledge on an enterprise-wide basis is the subject of a growing body of research crossing many domains such as organisational behaviour, operations management, marketing and information management. What in pragmatic and replicable terms does successful “knowledge management” involve is a question that continues to have evolving answers based on the many different organisational and cultural contexts studied. The myriad of models and lists of activities that have been proposed under the banner of “knowledge management” are significant and continually evolving since Drucker (1969) first coined the term “knowledge worker” and posited that KM was crucial to future organisational competitiveness. With the complexity building around KM, came confusion, some publicised successes and a slow recognition that KM is a multi-dimensional, cross-disciplinary field that should be approached with some caution.

In the background of the academic evolution of KM, the not for profit (NFP) sector in Australia, indeed globally, are increasingly adopting more “advanced and mature” practices from the private sector in a movement to optimise their operations and performance in the face of increasing competition within the NFP sector and increasing demand for their services. The adoption of some of these “contemporary corporate practices” has met with mixed support and reaction from those who believe that these approaches were at odds with the sector’s mission, values and cultures (Helmig, Jegers, and Lapsley, 2004). Consequently, the adoption of KM in the NFP sector has been somewhat limited and informal (Lettieri, Borga, and Savoldelli, 2004; Cornfield, Paton & Little, 2013) despite being knowledge intensive organisations. One argument for this limited adoption is that the limited funding, limited resources and high accountability to members and the public NFPs face (Helmig et.al., 2004) makes it very difficult to gain the requisite financial investment, resourcing and expertise that are often required to pursue and develop these commercial practices (such as knowledge management) practices fully to be truly effective. Another argument is that despite being knowledge intensive enterprises, the knowledge is too unwieldy to manage and should not divert NFPs away from focusing on core service delivery and fulfilling their mission. Ideally, developing a generic KM strategy could reduce the costly approach to this practice for this sector however with the many different NFP enterprises that exist in Australia (Australian Productivity Commission, 2010 estimated over 600,000, the majority of them “small” organisations) with differing purposes and practices, the practicality of developing a generic “standard” KM strategy is an anomaly.

It is evident that the diversity of size, mission and operation within the NFP sector makes the context for knowledge management an extremely complex and difficult business undertaking. Riege (2005) and other authors have identified many barriers to KM that exist from a non-industry specific standpoint. What is unclear in the KM and NFP research to date is identification of specific KM enablers that are common, and/or scalable, to supporting and sustaining KM initiatives in the NFP sector (Reige, 2005; Stankosky, 2005; Conley, Curtis and Wei Zheng, 2009; Lin, Chinho, Ju-Chuan Wu, and Yen. 2011; Singh and Kant, 2007; Ho, 2009)

It is then suggested that to move forward in NFP-KM research and develop a foundation KM framework in this context, it is important to consider the many inherent differences of for-profit and NFPs and the differences within the NFP sector itself when developing a KM strategy in the NFP sector. It is proposed that the growing diversity, inherent characteristics of the NFP sector and within the organizations themselves necessitates a more customized approach to KM. Consideration must be given to opera-

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