

Chapter 32

Inter–Organizational Knowledge Sharing System in the Health Sector: Physicians’ Perspective

Kamla Ali Al-Busaidi

Sultan Qaboos University, Oman

ABSTRACT

This study aimed to investigate the physicians’ attitude toward inter-organizational knowledge sharing system (IOKSS) deployment in the health sector in Oman. IOKSS in the health sector can be very crucial and results in several operational, strategic, social and economic benefits for healthcare providers and physicians. Previous research on inter-organizational systems (IOS) has focused on organizational adoption, particularly on vertically-linked organizations. Identifying major issues that are critical to physicians, the end users and key stakeholders, is crucial for IOKSS deployment. Based on data collected from physicians in Oman, results indicated that peers, the sector and knowledge workers, are critical factors to physicians’ attitudes toward IOKSS. The study also indicated that physicians’ attitudes were positively associated with their intention to share implicit, explicit, exploratory and exploitive knowledge. These results are valuable for organizational designing, planning and decision-making regarding their adoption of IOKSS in the health sector.

INTRODUCTION

This study aimed to investigate the key success factors to knowledge workers’ attitudes toward the development of a “public good” inter-organisational knowledge sharing system (IOKSS) among horizontally-linked (i.e., on the same business level) organisations in a specific sector in a specific country: health in Oman. An IOKSS is a type of interorganisational system (IOS) first identified by Cash and Konsynski (1985), who defined it as an automated and shared information system designed to link business pro-

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cesses of multiple organisations (Cash and Konsynski, 1985; Robey et al., 2008). Numerous operational, strategic, and social benefits can result from deploying IOS for participating organisations (Barrett & Konsynski, 1982; Robey et al., 2008), the government, and society at large.

In this study, an IOKSS is a type of knowledge management system (KMS) defined as a system that enables the seamless dissemination of individual and organisational knowledge, either via repositories or networking, between two or more organisations.

For the health sector, an IOKSS can be developed to enable physicians in several organizations to share knowledge such as medical cases, treatments and medical reports. Physicians can share knowledge through a health IOKSS either by codifying knowledge into the system or by communicating knowledge with their peers via the system (e.g., by using video-conferencing). More specifically, a “public good” IOKSS is open to all organisations regardless of their contribution to the system’s development (Choudhury, 2007).

Taking an advantage of new technologies for knowledge management is crucial for developing countries as several international organisations have indicated. For instance, knowledge networks are needed to address specific needs or to resolve particular problems, as well as to create a systemic capacity to share knowledge and information within a domain (Dawes et al., 2009). Inter-organisational information integration is also a key enabler for digital government (Pardo & Tayi, 2007). Moreover, partnerships among public and private organisations in specific sectors—especially service- or knowledge-based sectors—are vital for any country’s social and economic development and social welfare in sectors such as health and education. Inter-organisational information integration enables knowledge workers to exchange up-to-date professional knowledge and to learn, both of which reduce knowledge gaps among professionals. From another angle, IOKSS initiatives can contribute to the government’s developmental decision-making and planning.

One way for developing countries to bridge knowledge gaps with developed countries is to improve their public and private organisations’ ability to create and share knowledge by investing in KMS, including IOKSS. However, costs of and risks in establishing inter-organisational networks and collaborations can prove discouraging (Williams, 2005). As barriers, these costs and risks are linked to individual, organisational, technological, social, and political factors related to different stakeholders, including organisations with horizontal linkage. Even within a specific organisation, knowledge-sharing is a challenging process, for many people are unwilling to share their best practices. Crossing these and other organisational boundaries by using IOKSS can further complicate the knowledge-sharing process. Studies by Bock et al. (2005), Kankanhalli et al. (2005), Wasko and Faraj (2005), Al-Alawi et al. (2007), and Chen et al. (2012) have investigated the enablers (or motivators) of general knowledge-sharing behaviour in organisational contexts and generally underscored that these obstacles must be overcome in order to develop efficient, sustained inter-organisational networks, including IOKSS.

Prior IOS have mainly focused on organisational adoption (Bala & Venkatesh, 2007; Robey et al., 2008) yet given inadequate attention to the context of these IOS (Makipaa, 2006). Most other previous empirical studies have investigated IOS deployment in vertically-linked organisations (Grover, 1993; Rai et al., 2006; Ranganathan et al., 2011; Reich & Benbasat, 1990). Furthermore, few theoretical studies, such as those of Pardo et al. (2006), Dawes et al. (2009), and Yang and Maxwell (2011), have addressed IOS adoption by horizontally linked organisations. At the same time, very few studies have assessed IOKSS adoption by knowledge workers who are also end-users and thus key stakeholders in any knowledge management initiative. As such, assessing knowledge workers’ attitudes prior to the actual deployment of IOS will enable organisations to make better decisions and ensure end-user commitment throughout the developmental process.

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