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Chapter 10

Knowledge Management in U.S. Federal Government Organizations: Can It Work?

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Knowledge management (KM) is an active and growing field. One of the key factors of KM is its dependence on a culture that will support KM activities. Some of the activities that are extremely culture dependent are the sharing and acceptance of knowledge between individuals and organizations. The question to be answered is whether U.S. federal government (hereafter referred to as "government") organizations, which are notorious for the lack of this type of culture (although not all), can accomplish KM at all or just need a different approach that has not been defined previously? In this research, we will propose to use government initiatives to entice the organization into creating the culture needed for KM. We will also propose a way to effect changes in the culture by implementing a social initiative that has proven successful in other organizations. The combination of these two activities is expected to create a culture that is viable for KM to flourish even in the infamous government organization.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) is the process whereby knowledge (both explicit and implicit), which is contained in an organization, is distributed to other

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people, in or outside of the organization in a controlled format. It is not just a document management system with a high-tech search engine, as many current vendors would like to portray it (Van der Spek and de Hoog, 1998). A goal of the KM process is to remove the dependency on individual people for knowledge, which will segregate the knowledge and the people. The accomplishment of this goal will enable any person to retrieve and use any of the knowledge that exists in the organization. The benefits derived from this process are numerous, for example creating more productive workers, alleviating the risk of lost workers, and realizing organizational value.

KM can be found to be taking a foothold in many organizations. Many information technology companies are promoting it as the cure for all kinds of organizational ills (Dataware TEchnologies, 1998; Swoyer, 1999; Van der Spek and Spijkervet, 1997). Even government organizations are taking active steps in the KM arena (Liebowitz, Rubenstein-Montano, McCaw, Buchwalter, Browning, Newman and Rebeck, 2000), for example the government's CIO council subcommittee on KM. Academia is doing scientific research in order to expose its capabilities and failings (Alavi, 1999; Weidner, 1999). Both of these efforts have found that culture plays a critical role in the entire KM process. Most KM frameworks and initiatives include some form of cultural input and/or strategy (Apostolou and Mentzas, 1998; Andersen, 1997; Holsapple and Joshi, 1997; Liebowitz et al., 2000; Marquardt, 1996; Seaman and Basili, 1994). The cultural factors, which are enumerated in these references, encompass the activities of sharing and accepting. The individuals with the knowledge are required to share it. Conversely, the people who require knowledge need to accept it. These activities appear to be simple social constructs that children are taught in pre-school and develop in elementary school. However, there are many obstacles, which stand in the way of such progress. Organizational structures, which are depicted as concretely defined boundaries and organizational culture, which can be defined as accepted customs, are some of the obstacles (Tierney, 1999). Many government organizations contain these obstacles for the other productive purposes. Therefore, research is required to identify whether existing KM methodologies can accomplish their goals in a government organization. Through the following research, which places a greater emphasis on specific areas of current KM methodologies and manipulating other government specific variables, we can accomplish KM in government organizations.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge management is dependent on more than just information technology (Marquardt, 1996). KM can be summarized to depend on process, culture,