

Chapter 8

Lessons from the Private Sector: A Framework to be Adopted in the Public Sector

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ABSTRACT

The primary aim of this chapter is to operationalize a Knowledge Assessment Framework (KAF) using two exploratory case studies. The development of a KAF is important for the public sector for three reasons. Firstly, the use of knowledge assessment allows firms to pinpoint knowledge gaps. Secondly, it allows firms to manage knowledge more effectively. Thirdly, it gives public sector organizations a diagnostic tool with which to gauge their knowledge base. The effective management of knowledge can be considered a competency that enables a greater level of service to be extracted from other resources within the organization.

INTRODUCTION

This research was carried out between 2009 and 2011 in two medical device companies in the private sector in Ireland. It is hoped that insights and lessons from this study can be used in the application of the proposed framework in the public sector. The debate persists as to the manageability and measurability of a concept such as knowledge – whether all forms of knowledge (tacit/implicit/explicit) can be managed and of the compatibility

of the terms knowledge, measurement and management. Studies seem to focus on general conceptual principles of Knowledge Management (KM) and KM initiatives (Spender and Scherer, 2007; Hahn and Subramani, 2000). They offer few insights in the area of knowledge assessment as a means to try to assess knowledge gaps or to explain KM phenomena. A narrow focus on performing outputs deprives inquiry of self-reflection and critical scrutiny (Zining and Sheffield, 2006). Moreover, KM literature has focused on internal sources of knowledge generation and has not sufficiently taken into account the measurement of this stock internally or externally as a way of

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learning an organization's knowledge intensity. The literature, therefore, lacks a holistic view of the concept of organizational knowledge indicators and the management of them. As McAdam and McCreedy (1999) state, "given the change and emergent nature of the field over the past two to three years, it is now an appropriate time to try to have a more in-depth enquiry into KM discourse to attempt to clarify how KM can be more beneficially researched and applied to organizations" (p. 92). The motivation for this research rests on exploring more effective ways of assessing and managing knowledge at organizational level. This will be achieved by using KM to derive a conceptual framework and operationalize it using two exploratory case studies in the private sector. These lessons can be applied to the public sector because the goals for KM are similar. Common challenges and concerns that affect public sectors worldwide are identified as: driving efficiencies across all public services; improving accountability; making informed decisions; enhancing partnerships with stakeholders; capturing the knowledge of an aging workforce; and improving overall performance (Arora, 2011). The key objectives of the chapter are as follows: To explore various knowledge indicators at organizational level; present a knowledge assessment framework with accompanying research probes; and discuss avenues for future research.

BACKGROUND

The Need for an Assessment Framework

As highlighted by the OECD (2006a) and Lev and Daum (2003), there is no control, census or assessment framework to give an understanding or to gauge knowledge at organizational level. The OECD has developed macro-level indicators; however, these on their own are not sufficient enough to explain complex knowledge activities

at firm-level. In addition, a consistent picture of knowledge only can be achieved by combining several indicators (Kurtossy, 2004; Sirilli, 1992; Grupp, 1990). The OECD has recognized the importance of knowledge assessment and that organizations are now more strongly dependent on the production, distribution and use of knowledge than ever before. It also is recognized that in order to facilitate any kind of knowledge assessment, distinctions have to be made between different types of knowledge (know what, know who, know why, know how) that are important to the knowledge-based organization (OECD, 2006a, 1996a). KM is useful in this regard. In 2004, the OECD's study on the significance of KM suggested that KM practices are being used more frequently, but it also recognizes the association between such practices and innovation and productivity, even if the link is not that well understood (Brinkley, 2006). There is consensus within the literature that accepts that knowledge can be assessed indirectly, using impact indicators that the OECD (2006a, 2002b, 1996a) has suggested (Kurtossy, 2004). The indicators presented by the OECD are, however, aimed at the macro-level of evaluation and based upon higher-level knowledge performance. The importance of knowledge in the modern economy has been established (Forfás, 2011a). The OECD (2006; 1996a) has suggested, along with writers in other disciplines (Lev and Daum, 2003; Wagner and Sternberg, 1991), that there is no company knowledge record, census, or assessment instrument that can gauge knowledge at the organizational level. In the absence of such a tool, the OECD has presented certain indicators for knowledge. These indicators do not necessarily enable an organization to provide or account for an organizational knowledge base; however, they do create a starting point with which to build upon. Indeed as early as the mid-1990s (OECD, 1996a), it was established that there were several key reasons why knowledge indicators, no matter how carefully constructed, could not approximate the traditional quantifiable economic indicators.

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