

Managing Knowledge and the Problem of Commitment

Donald Hislop

Sheffield University Management School,
University of Sheffield,
9 Mappin Street,
Sheffield, S1 4DT.
00 44 (0)114 222 3438
d.hislop@sheffield.ac.uk

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Abstract

Recent times have witnessed a growing awareness that for an organization to successfully manage its knowledge base requires it to possess the commitment and loyalty of its workers (Storey & Quintas 2001). This has resulted from an acknowledgement that; much organizational knowledge is highly tacit and personal in nature (Baumard 1999); behavioural 'problems' (such as a reluctance to share knowledge – Storey & Barnett 2000) represents one of the main challenges in many knowledge management initiatives; and a growing recognition that there has been too much of an IS/IT emphasis in many knowledge management initiatives (Ruggles 1998).

One of the main findings from a number of recent surveys on organizational commitment was how limited levels of commitment appeared to be (Gallie et al 1998, Scase 2001). Further, increasing levels of commitment may not be a simple or straightforward task, as the literature on high commitment HRM practices shows how difficult it is to achieve (Storey & Quintas 2001). Finally, Scarbrough (1999), in one of the few papers to link knowledge sharing and the management of knowledge workers with the issue of organizational commitment suggests that the difficulties of motivating knowledge workers to share their knowledge may be related to fundamental conflicts in the employment relationship.

These low levels of commitment therefore represents a potentially significant barrier for organizations attempting to involve their staff in knowledge management initiatives. This paper addresses this issue by examining the contemporary literature

on organizational commitment, and linking it to the literature on the management of knowledge workers, and knowledge management more generally. This represents an important issue to examine, as while commitment has been identified as a key issue in the management of knowledge, there has been little by way of detailed analysis of the issue in much of the knowledge management literature.

The paper also considers how contemporary changes to the character of work organizations and the nature of employment may be affecting organizational commitment. This suggests that the problem for any knowledge management initiative of low levels of commitment may be compounded by the fact that changes in work and employment – with the use of downsizing and delayering, the growth of flexible forms of employment and virtual forms of organization – may be reducing employment security, and having an adverse effect on levels of organizational commitment. For example, research into the effects of downsizing shows that survivors appear to exhibit substantially lower levels of trust, loyalty and commitment towards their organization (McGovern et al 1998, Sahdev et al 1999, Worrall et al 2000). Organizational commitment therefore appears to be somewhat fragile and brittle. While it is a difficult, uncertain and time consuming process to build commitment, once achieved it can very easily be shattered and lost.

Thus, paradoxically, just when it is being argued that knowledge represents the main source of competitive advantage for organizations, it appears that the evolution in organizational forms and structures may be making the management of knowledge more difficult to achieve.

In conclusion, the paper will contribute to the literature on knowledge management through making use of the extensive literature on organizational commitment to achieve an improved understanding of the difficulties and problems involved in motivating workers to share their knowledge.

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