

## ***"Knowledge Management and Public Organizations: How well does the coat fit? The case of Greece"***

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### **Introduction**

In today's global environment, change rather than stability is the order of the day. Rapid changes in technology, cultural values, social life, competition and citizen/customers' demands have increased the rate at which organisations need to alter their strategies and structures in order to survive and operate successfully. As the pace of change has increased, the importance of planning, monitoring, and controlling activity has decreased. Thus, nowadays business system tends to move organisations towards a world of work where everything is in flux and where continued learning is the only stable goal. Public as well as private organisations need to have the capacity to be adaptive (to learn the know-how of solving problems) and generate knowledge (to establish new methods of solving problems). In other words, bureaucratic organisations have to be transformed into learning organisations.

The role that managers (especially those ones on the middle level) play within every organisational environment has fundamentally reoriented. In order to encourage learning and knowledge creation, managers need to collect, analyse and synthesise information, facilitate adaptability and implement strategic decisions. However, it is still doubtful how far public organisation's managers can shift their actions and develop this three dimensional role. Thus, it is still questionable how far learning and knowledge creation has become an issue in public organisations.

This paper seeks to answer the above question contributing to cover the literature gap existing in the field of organisational learning in public sector. More specifically, its purpose is to investigate the role of the middle manager in organisations operating in the Greek public domain. Greece's complex, huge and non-competitive public sector makes the country a very good candidate for the purposes of this study. Greek public organisations are characterised by a long tradition of legal culture, which is associated with an enormous bureaucratic structure. In such an

organisational environment it is very difficult for middle managers to develop new roles and take new actions such as those of knowledge synthesisers and facilitators.

## **The emergence of organisational learning**

Organisational learning (OL) is a process through which managers can adapt, modify and change the organisational environment in order to help organisations survive to an increasingly competitive and continued transforming business system. A learning organisation is an organisation that is open to environmental changes, able to accept those changes, try to analyse them and then to transform them to new actions and strategies. These concepts, which have been analysed by several theorists (Batenson, 1973; Argyris and Schön, 1978; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), help us to understand that a learning organisation is a philosophy rather than a practice.

In OL theory three concepts have a key role. The first concept is associated with the idea that the whole organisation is much more important than the parts of it (Drafke and Kossen, 1998). Thus, when we deal with organisations we have to deal with 'live organisms' connected by many different as well as interrelated parts. The second concept is related to the human side of organisations as well as the fact that "people are not to be treated as disposable items but as parts of a team because the team helps define the individuals in it" (Drafke and Kossen, 1998, p.161). Finally, the third concept is the language, which although describes reality, it is not reality. As Senge et. al (1994) point out, even though there are different descriptions of the same thing or situation, none of them is absolute truth, meaning that none of them describes what and/or how the thing or situation is in reality.

In conclusion, the basic process in OL is the creation of knowledge and the way that this knowledge spreads within an organisation (Senge, et. al, 1994). OL, from this point of view, is closely linked with organisational sense-making process, which is basically interpretative routine used by decision makers to detect problems, define priorities, and develop an understanding of how to deal with performance discrepancies (Senge, et. al, 1994). A key role in this process is played by individual managers. According to Senge (1990), OL is the process through which managers seek to improve organisation member's desire and ability to understand and manage the organisation and its environment so that they can make decisions that

continuously raise organisational effectiveness. This argument, however, raises the first question in our analysis:

***Q1: Do managers in all hierarchical levels play a key role in OL process? Or more specifically, are Middle Managers important in the OL process?***

## **The 'New Middle Manager': the role of middle managers in knowledge creating organisations**

The vast majority of today's managers in large organisations are middle managers (MMs) (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996). "Their positions are located between the strategic apex and the operating core of the organisation" (p.3). Several theorists attempted to give a definition of middle management (Mintzberg, 1973; Kay, 1974; Kanter and Stein, 1979; Ishikawa, 1985; Breen, 1984; Brennan, 1991). For the purpose of this study we will adopt a broad definition given by Dopson (1993) referring to all those below the small group of top strategic managers and above first level supervision.

Traditionally, MMs could be described as the 'luxury hard-workers' who were mainly considered with routine management jobs. Their focus was completely internal: they translated programs into actions (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996). Nevertheless, the rapid changes in every business environment (local, national and international) and the need for organisations to alter their strategies and to adopt new management practices, suggests the redefinition of MMs' role within organisations. As Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) argue "middle managers are increasingly been called upon to focus on the 'what' of strategy, sharpening top management's vision by developing and promoting initiatives that respond to changing conditions" (p.6). In the literature there are two distinct views on MMs' changing position in the new business environment: the pessimistic and the optimistic one.

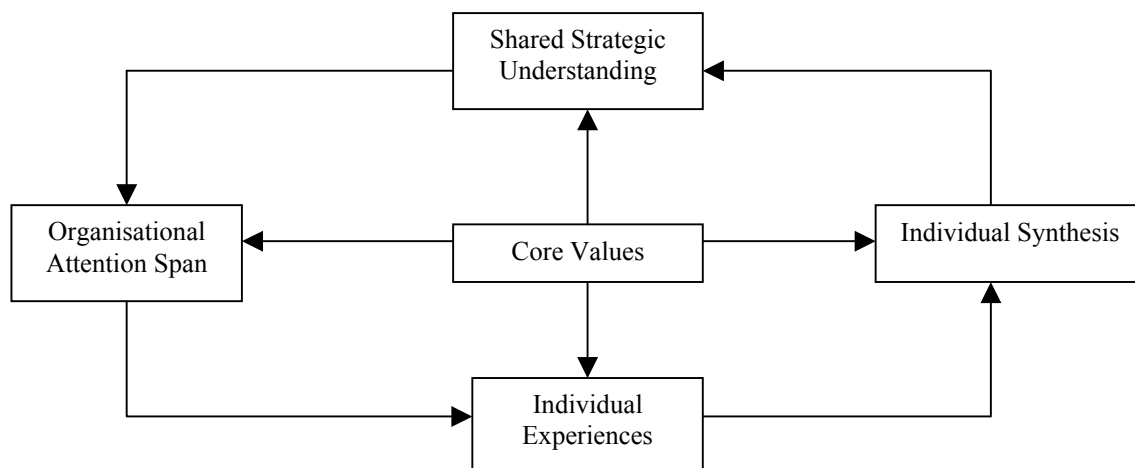
The *pessimistic view* can be summarised in the argument of Scarbrough and Burrell, (1996) that "middle managers are no longer the beneficiaries of organisational change, as they were under Fordism, rather they are its primary victims" (p.182). In other words, the impact of organisational change will be *first*, a demise of MMs due to information technology. *Second*, a reduction in their numbers due to increased competition, cost reduction efforts and changing attitudes to

authority and *third*, an impact on their personal development, career, status quo and autonomy. Nevertheless, it is not our intention to go further in the analysis of the pessimistic view, as far as the optimistic includes a clear relation of middle management to the learning organisation.

Therefore, according to the *optimistic view* organisational changes have a positive impact on MMs. It seems that MMs in the new organisational environment have greater responsibilities, more authority and more autonomy than before. In other words, it seems that the continuously transforming organisation needs the '*new middle manager*' as a key player. This argument is supported by many authors and academics. Dopson and Stewart, (1993) suggest that in the slimmer and flatter organisation there are new opportunities for MMs, who will occupy a pivotal role in implementing changes. The same study points out that most of the MMs are positive about the changes and the ways in which their jobs have been affected by them.

**Diagram 1**

**The middle managers' synthesising role in the organisational learning process**



Source: Floyd and Wooldridge, (1996), p.73

Additionally, Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) argue that MMs' centrality in the information network creates the potential for them to become a driving force in OL. According to them OL improves when MMs actively participate in the strategy-making process. Diagram 1 illustrates the synthesising role of a MM and how it fits to the OL context. Core organisational values, which represent how an individual member of an organisation can see the world, "shape the experiences and interpretations of individuals and influence what the organisation pays attention to, and how members of the organisation come to a common understanding of the

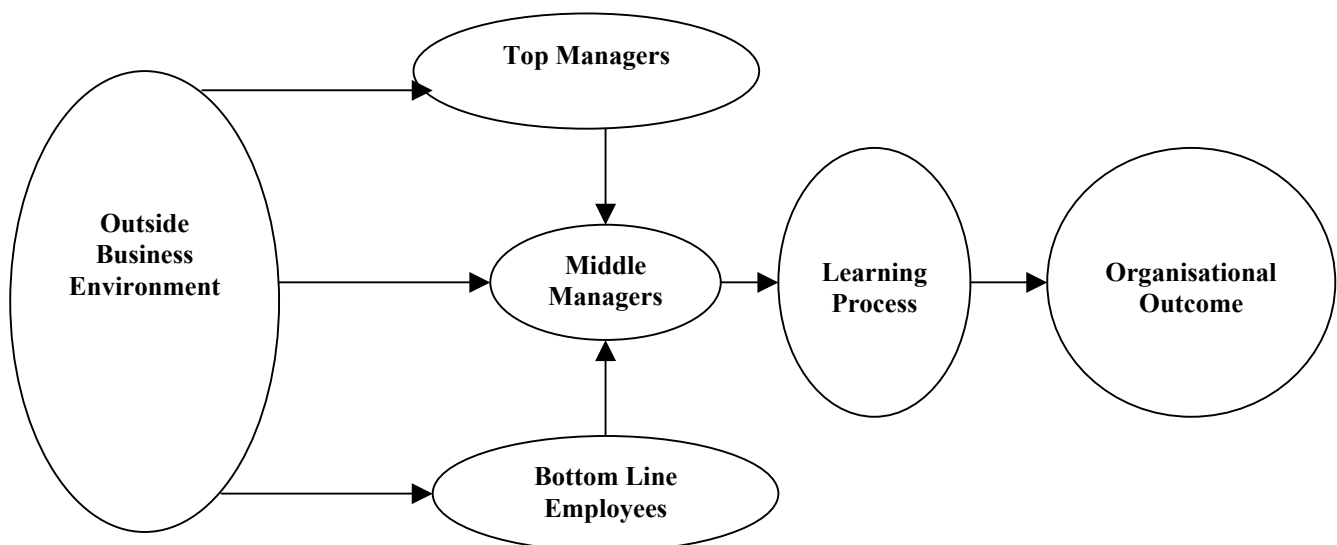
strategic situation" (p.73). In other words, through synthesising information, facilitating adaptability and implementing strategic decisions, MMs link strategic purpose with organisational action (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996).

Moreover, Larsen (1997) characterises MMs as 'strategic ambassadors'. According to his view, in knowledge organisations, bottom line employees are those ones that have direct contact with 'the outside world' (customers, suppliers, government policies, competitors, etc). They cannot transfer any valuable information taken from outside though. Therefore, MMs are those whom receive feedback from their employees and transmit this new information to the top of the hierarchy. Larsen (1997) called this as the 'bottom-up ambassador role' of MMs, who also have a 'top-down role' by helping to link the overall organisational strategies made on the top of the hierarchy with the tasks of each individual within an organisation.

Another aspect of OL results from the actual performance on the job, rather than participating in training programs (Revans, 1982). The MMs do not stay out of this process. In contrast, they have to play some crucial roles as well (Margerison, 1987; London, 1988). They are usually involved in the re-design of jobs, which is directly associated with learning opportunities for their subordinates. Furthermore, MMs are responsible for formal as well as informal training to their employees. Finally, they influence (negatively or positively) certain experimental learning by enacting the 'rules' of interacting with the business environment.

**Diagram 2**

**The role of middle management in a knowledge-creating organisation**



Nevertheless, the most influential work about organisational knowledge creation and distribution and the role of middle management in this, is given by Nonaka and Takeuchi in 1995. They place MMs at the core of the 'knowledge-creating company' by giving them the most significant role. As they point out "middle managers are the knowledge engineers of a knowledge-creating company" (p.154). Diagram 2 illustrates MM's position in Nonaka and Tekeouchi's view. More specifically, top managers create the vision, the general strategy of the organisation according to their views as well as to their interrelations with the outside environment. At the bottom line of the organisational structure, employees are faced with "the chaotic realities" of the day to day interactions with customer, suppliers and several other people from the inter or extra-organisational environment. However, it is quite difficult to creatively link these two extreme structural layers in order to improve OL and to operate successfully. There is thus a great need for a middle layer, which will work as a "bridge" between senior executives and bottom line workers (Nonaka and Takeouchi, 1995). Therefore, MMs "take the lead in converting knowledge" (p.154), by synthesising the knowledge of senior managers and front line employees and by facilitating the organisation to adopt this distinguished knowledge creation.

To sum up, MMs are the '*learning agents*' in a knowledge organisation. It seems that they are not only simply '*implementers*' of decisions taking at the top of the hierarchy. In contrast, they can be the knowledge '*synthesisers*', by linking the knowledge creating in the outside business environment as well as inside the organisation. They can also be the knowledge '*facilitators*', by transmitting this knowledge to a common organisational knowledge shared by every structural level. Thus, the question that now comes to mind is:

***Q2: Can Middle Managers operate as learning agents in every kind of organisations? Or more specifically, Can Middle Managers operate as 'knowledge engineers' in public organisations?***

## **Organisational learning and middle management in a public sector context**

Even though organisational learning is a concept that has been applied in the area of organisational analysis over the past 45 years, the major evidence has been taken by private sector organisations. As Rist (1994) points out "what we know of

organisational learning is what we know from private sector" (p.192). It is widely known that administrative changes first hit private management agendas and secondly the public one. Moreover, public organisations seem to move very slowly towards the adoption of new management philosophies and practices. Nevertheless, the concept of OL could not leave uninfluenced management in the public domain. Therefore, the systematic assessment of OL in the public sector started at the end of the 1980s and beginning of the 1990s.

Yet it is quite unclear whether the nature of organisational learning can have a similar positive meaning in both the private and public sector. According to Mark and Willcocks (1989) if organisational learning is to be directed towards an inter-organisational competition then public services will adopt private management practices and the wider public interest is unlikely to be served. In addition, Handy (1990) characterises organisational learning as 'properly selfish' without clear role, goals and ethos for public services.

Beyond these negative reactions about the nature of OL and its relation to public organisations (POs), there is a small amount of literature considering the issue derived from public sector experiences. Attwood and Beer (1988), in examining development work in public health organisation in UK, argue that it is quite difficult for POs to become learning organisations. According to their view, POs need to adopt activities such as refining the organisational objectives for planned change. In addition, Edmonstone (1990) notes that organisations operating in the public domain meet more obstacles on their way to become knowledge organisations than private sector enterprises. He also points out that the major reason for this is the high degree of bureaucratisation of public sector bodies.

In more recent studies we still note pessimistic views about the concept of OL in public services. Wallace et al. (1997), suggest that there are a range of factors which inhibit the application of OL concept in PO. These factors involve fixed structures, a tradition of a non-participating policy making, government regulation and the expectation of public servants of act rather than to learn. This last factor seems to be quite an important obstacle of OL application in PO. For example, highly localised, interpersonal relationships between civil servants have a strong impact upon OL capability (Franklin, 1997; Murphy and Blanter, 1997). Another pessimistic view, drawing from the UK, is given by Smith and Taylor (2000). They attempted to assess the feasibility of the learning organisation ideal in public services by devising

and applying a measure comprising seven dimensions of organisational behaviour with eight dimensions of accountability. Their results support a non-progress "towards the learning organisation ideal" in the public sector.

Nevertheless, the above studies stress more what does or does not facilitate POs' ability to learn; leaving outside the agenda though the institutional actors "that serve as providers/filters/users of information relative to the governance of public sector organisations" (Rist, 1994, p.193). Thus, it is important to consider a second group of literature related to the individual managerial responsibility for ensuring OL in public services. Ventriss and Luke (1988), studying the US public sector, argue that public organisations need an "enlarged" conception of learning and they propose a "substantive learning" approach, meaning "the process of improving publication through knowledge that critically examines the domain assumptions and normative implications of public policies in an interconnected political environment". So, public service managers need to think and act within an organisation that operating "in an inter-governmental and intersectoral environment" (Ventriss and Luke, 1988).

Willcocks and Harrow (1992) provided an additional view about UK POs. Their research shows that MMs vary in their views about the capacity of public sector organisations to learn from private sector management practices. More specifically, they identify four categories of middle management response: "resisters", "doubters", "inevitable acceptors" and "welcomers" (Willcocks and Harrow, 1992, p.74). They also concluded that MMs have a minimal role as OL agents as well as they were uncertain about "the likely organisational effort to link individual learning to the organisation's present and future needs" (p.73). Undoubtedly, these results suggest that the OL process will face uncertain support from major organisational actors, like MMs.

If we relate these pieces of evidence with Morgan's (1986) argument about a number of barriers to OL which are particularly common in bureaucratic organisations (fragmented organisational structure, autocratic management style, etc), we can come up with the fundamental question:

***Q3: To what extent middle managers can operate as learning agents in more turbulent, mainly bureaucratic and non-competitive public organisational environments?***



In conclusion, we could argue that MMs do play an important role in the OL process. However, the evidence towards this conclusion mainly comes from private sector organisations. There is still a big question-mark on how MMs can contribute to OL in public sector bodies. This question-mark is even bigger in public organisations with 'defensive culture', where issues are obscured and problems are hidden (Morgan, 1986) and, which still delaying in adopting new management practices. Thus, it would be useful to examine to what extent OL can occur in these circumstances.

### **Middle managers in the Greek public sector**

The Greek public sector is highly centralised and continuously suffers from pathologies like fragmented structures, client relationships between citizens and politicians, and inefficient management practices (Papadimitriou and Makridimitris, 1991; Theophanidis, 1992; Makridimitris 1996; Makridimitris and Michalopoulos, 2000). The results are mediocrity, a lack of motivated personnel and poor organisational performance, which leads to a non-satisfaction of citizens' needs (Kofidu et.al, 1997).

Greek public management literature has almost nothing to contribute in middle management's roles and perspectives in modern organisations. A major reason is related to the fact that the idea that public management as a science as well as an art has been extremely delayed to be introduced in Greek public administrative system. The idea started to play an increasingly significant role over the last two decades. Before the 1980s and because of the situation (economical and political), business or public management had not been prioritised. In addition, the term 'manager' is very broad and has no legal status (Bournois and Livian, 1997). "Practically the person who acts as manager may cover several types of responsibilities depending on the company's policy" (p.32).

Nevertheless, there are two studies considering the roles and actions of MMs in Greek organisations. The first one is a piece of comparative research that was carried out in five countries, one being Greece (Vouzas, Burgoyne and Livian, 1997). According to this study, in organisations with strict and inflexible structure such as those in Greece, middle management cannot abandon their traditional role. They identified themselves as supervisors, with formalised lines of authority and a less autonomous role. MMs in these organisations were acting as guardians of well-kept

territories. Their major focus and preoccupation was the implementation of decisions taken at the senior management level.

The second study is more relevant to our work. More specifically, it is associated with a research carried out among MMs working in Greek POs (Kofidu et.al, 1997). One of its purposes was to assess MMs' activities and identify their actual roles. Their major conclusion was that "middle managers in the public services are heavily engaged in routine administrative tasks at the expense of managerial ones" (p.100). More specifically, they found that a large portion of their working time is lost in routines and paper work activities and less time is spent to more managerial ones.

In conclusion, these two studies indicate that middle management in Greece can hardly take initiatives and contribute to the introduction of new management practices. However, these studies are mainly focused upon the bipolar *bureaucratic vs. managerial* responsibilities of MMs. None of these are concentrated on the concept of the OL. More specifically, there is no study examining the synthesising, facilitating and implementing role of MMs in Greek public services. In other words, a new study will contribute in exploring the particular MMs' roles in the OL process. Moreover, none of them deal with inter-sector differences, such as different kind of POs. Finally, none of them examining differences neither in educational background nor between men and women. Thus, there is a need to remove the blinkers and put OL into a national context of POs, searching to what extent the three distinctive roles of OL are applied to MMs.

## **Research methodology**

As we have argued above, the literature emphasises the significance of MMs' role to the OL process. Thus, Our research is seeking to test two major hypotheses: *firstly*, that MMs in Greek public organisations cannot act as '*implementers*', '*facilitators*' and '*synthesisers*' and *secondly*, there are particular differences towards the responses of people according to three distinct elements like gender, educational background and the specific sector that they work in.

The research methodology is based mainly on a quantitative analysis. A survey was carried out among 250 middle managers working in Greek public services. Data was collected through a structured questionnaire that was completed

anonymously. The participants were asked to assess their synthesising, facilitating and implementing activities on a 3-point scale ('Rarely', 'Occasionally' and 'frequently').

The sample of MMs was drawn from a wide range of public services, classified in four general categories: central government departments, local government, social security/health services (including public hospitals, benefits agencies etc), and broader public sector (including public enterprises and independent administrative authorities). As it was quite difficult to have access to civil servants' data-base, taking names and working status information, helping in a randomly selected sample, the research participants were approached by a method known as the 'snowball technique'. The researchers approached a MM in the public service sector asking whether he/she knows anyone else with the required characteristics (working as MM in public services). In the identified individuals were given questionnaires in turn and the same question asked. This continued until no further sample members could be obtained. Afterwards, another member of the population of interest was identified, and the process of asking for other research subjects began as before.

One hundred and eight (108) questionnaires were taken back, which represents a response rate of 43.2%. From the total amount of the respondents 47.2% are males and 52.8% were females. This could indicate that most MMs in the Greek public services are women. It is true that the public sector is more attractive to women

**Table 1**  
**Educational background of the middle managers**

<b>Educational background</b>	<b>Men (%)</b>	<b>Women (%)</b>	<b>Total (%)</b>
Primary Education (high school, Lyceum)	17.6	10.5	13.9
Undergraduate Degree (BA or BSc)	64.7	70.2	67.6
Postgraduate Degree (MA, MSc, MBA, PhD)	17.6	19.3	18.5
<b>Total</b>	<b>47.2</b>	<b>52.8</b>	<b>100</b>

because it offers a permanent job position without many requests and a stable amount of working hours (eight). Nevertheless, this is related to the fact that the Greek public sector shows low attractiveness for 'career hunters'.

In other words, fewer highly educated and well-experienced managers will try to find a job in the public domain due to less career opportunities and the absence of

other incentives (e.g. salary, public relations etc) than the public sector offers. The last argument is illustrated by the research findings given in Table 1 showing the educational background of the respondents. The majority of the respondents are bachelor degree holders and only 18,5% of them have a postgraduate degree (Master's or PhD).

Moreover, the majority of respondents (45.4%) are in the middle age group (40-49) following by those between 50s and 60s (25%). The third largest age group appearing in this study was between 30-39 (20.4%). The smallest group of respondents were aged under 30 years old (3.7%). This finding indicates the fact that the job promotion in public organisations is associated with the working years of the employee as long as you can meet the majority of middle managers in the middle age group. Finally, it may be interesting to point out that the majority (63.9%) of the MMs who participated in the survey, work in big public bodies with more than 1000 employees. This evidence supports an image of a huge and bureaucratic public domain.

## **Research findings**

As the main objective of our study was to identify evidence towards the existence or not of the concept of the *'New Middle Manager'* within public services, we present our findings in terms of its three specific roles called *'implementer'*, *'synthesiser'* and *'facilitator'*.

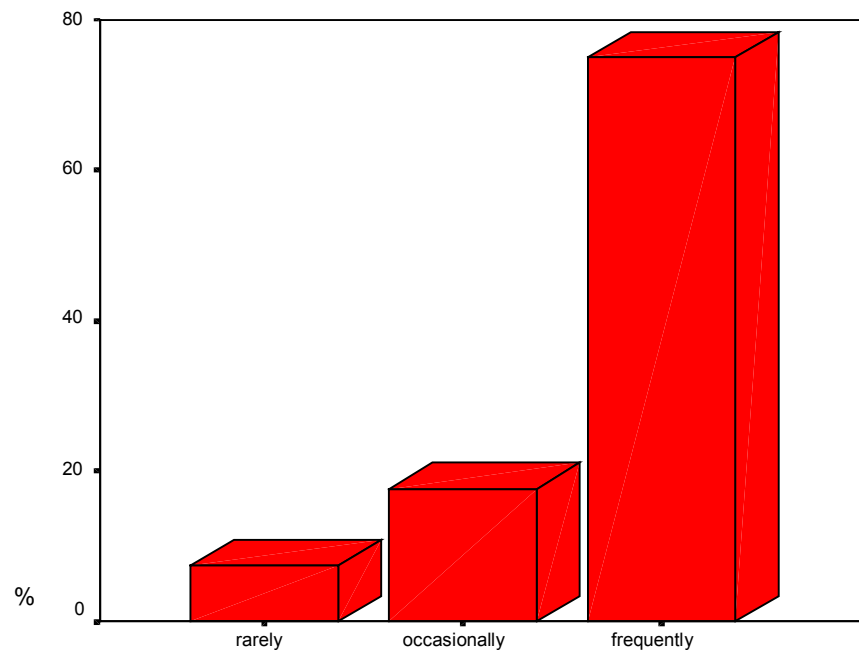
### **Middle managers as *'implementers'***

The most commonly recognised organisational role of MMs is this one, of implementing decisions that regularly are taken at the top-management level. Therefore, we can define implementation *as the process through which decisions, policies and strategies are translated into action plans and practical procedures within an organisation*. As Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) argue, "implementation is commonly perceived as a mechanical process in which plans are deduced and carried out from a master strategy conceived by top management" (pp.44-45). Nevertheless, the two authors argue that in today's business environment implementation is not just an administrative process but an intellectual one, which requires MMs to know "the strategic rationale behind the plan,..." (p.45). In addition, several authors (Kanter,

1986; Carr, 1987) claim that in a restructured organisation MMs need to act less as administrators and more as leaders, planners, and project leaders. In other words, MMs need to have an organisational understanding of decisions and not simply to apply and control top-management directions.

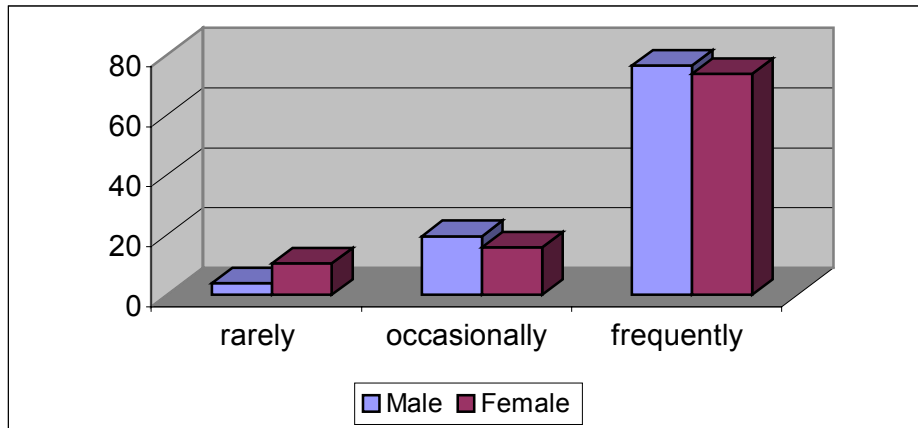
Our findings seem to support the fact that MMs in Greek public organisations are very much concentrated in implementing activities. More specifically, MMs were asked to assess their involvement in the implementation process based on five descriptive statements proposed by Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) and adapted to a PO context. Figure 1 shows clearly that the majority of MMs (75%) frequently perform the role of *'implementer'*. Less than 20% (17.6%) indicated that they occasionally act as decision *'implementers'*. Finally, only 7.4% of those questioned stated that in rare situations they implemented deliberate strategy.

**Figure 1**  
**MMs responses towards implementing role (%)**



It also, might be interesting to see the distribution of the two genders, the educational background and the four sub-sectors towards the implementing role. Figure 2 illustrates the responses between men and women. It seems that the two sexes more or less have the same score in implementing activities. More specifically, only 3.9% of the male respondents said they were rarely involved in implementing activities while 10.5% of females were in this same category. In addition, 19.6% of men and 15.8% of women occasionally act as *'implementers'*.

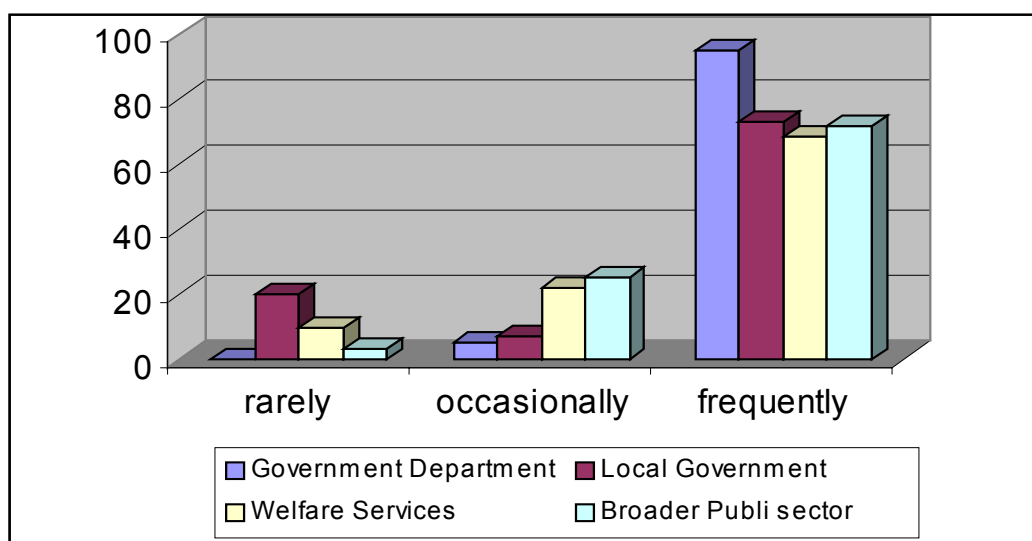
**Figure 2**  
**Responses of male and female MMs towards implementing role (%)**



Finally, both of them frequently perform this role but at a lower percentage of 23.5% (males) and 21.1% (females). There does not appear to be any obvious pattern between gender and the responses towards the implementing role. The visual impression (figure 2) is supported by the findings in the table presented in appendix when the possible correlation between gender and the responses towards this role.

No significant difference can be observed in the distribution of the responses among the four sub-sectors in which we have distinguished the operating areas of each research participant as well (see appendix). As figure 3 shows, from MMs who rarely act as 'implementers' 20% work in local government, 9.8% work in welfare services while 3.1% work in broader public sector.

**Figure 3**  
**Sub-sector and Implementing role (%)**



From those who believe that they occasionally involve themselves in implementing actions, 5% work for government departments, another 6.7% work in

local government, 22% work in welfare services and 25% in broader public domain. The MMs working in government departments seem to be the largest group (95%) who responded that they frequently perform the role of *'implementer'* followed by those working in local government (73.3%), those working in the broader public sector (71.9%) and finally, those in the welfare services (68.3%).

Finally, if we compare the educational background of the respondents with their answers towards the implementing role we observe no significance between any particular level of education and this role. Table 2 shows the absolute numbers as well as the percentage of the educational level of the MMs towards their responses to the implementing role. Once again it seems that the majority of the MMs who participated in the research, in almost every educational level, frequently (84.2%) prefer to implement decisions and to take actions towards deliberate strategy.

**Table 2**  
**Educational background and Implementing role**

	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
<b>Primary Education (high school, lyceum)</b>	0%	0%	100%
<b>Undergraduate degree (BA or BSc)</b>	9.6%	21.9%	68.5%
<b>Postgraduate degree (MA, MSc, MBA, PhD)</b>	5%	15%	80%

### **Middle manager as *'facilitator'***

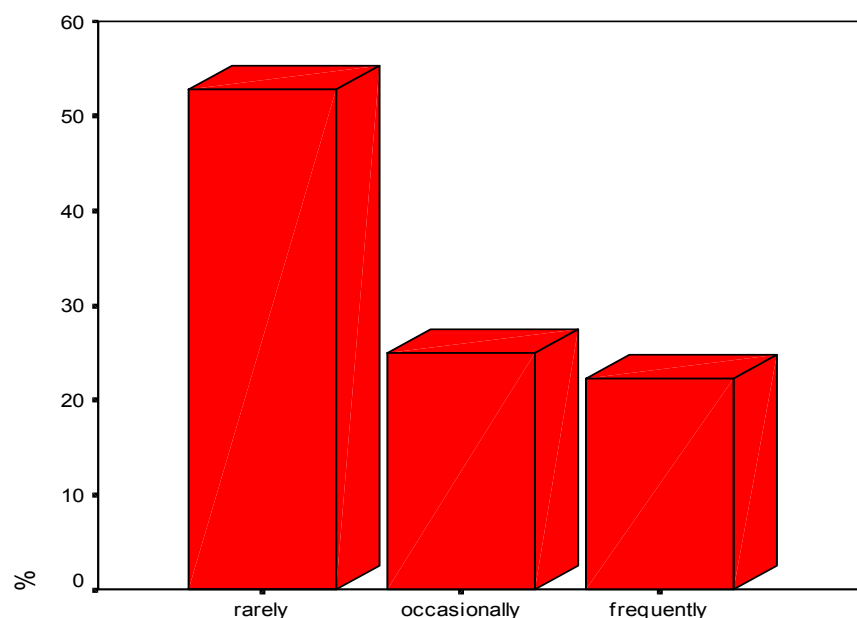
We can define facilitating as *the process through which MMs assist into the adoption and implementation of any kind of innovations by helping them pass through the organisational agenda*. The new middle manager has to create the potential situation for the organisation to adopt initiatives. As Kanter (1986) argues the new entrepreneurial managers combine ideas with actions. They need, for example, to act as 'teachers' helping employees to adapt to the changes. As Wisdom and Benton (1992) point out, since organisations give more authority and responsibility to their personnel, MMs will need to become more learning oriented. Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) give a more complex meaning to facilitate role of MM. They suggest that the middle management level is this one who should facilitate the four different modes of knowledge (Sympathised, Conceptual, Operational and Systemic) within a knowledge creating organisation.

Moreover, Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) argue that good facilitators help employees to built creative relationships not only among them but with customer/citizens as well. Moreover, Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) suggest five specific behaviours related to a good facilitator. MMs have to:

- encourage informal discussion and information sharing
- find time for new/experimental programs
- provide the appropriate resources for trial projects
- provide a 'safe' environment for the implementation of programs/projects
- relax regulations in order to create a flexible environment for new programs started

In our survey, we asked MMs to assess on a five-point scale whether their actions associated with the above five behaviours. The results are shown in figure 4. The evidence from our research can hardly support the existence of '*facilitators*' within public organisations. More specifically, we found that only 22.2% of the respondents frequently try to create the potential organisational climate that will encourage innovation and change adaptability.

**Figure 4**  
**MMs responses towards facilitating role (%)**



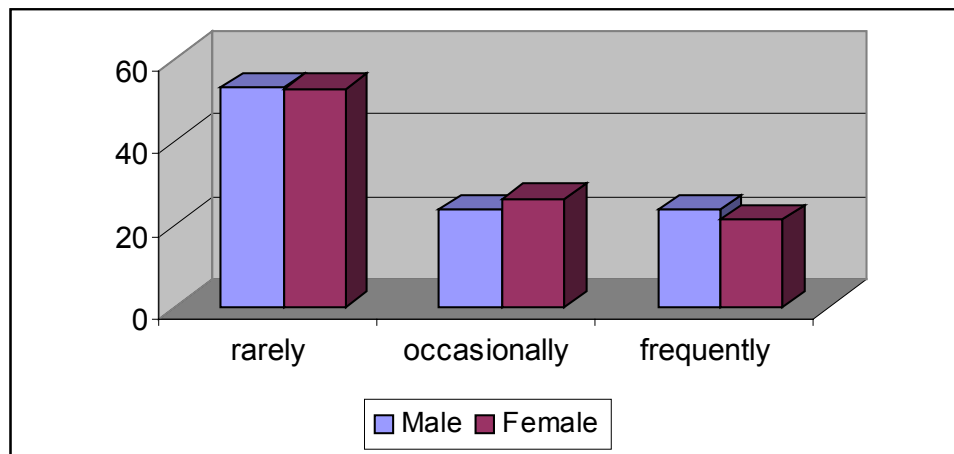
In addition, 25% of them seems to occasionally perform this role. However, more than half (52.8%) of our subjects rarely perform the five activities, which corresponds to the '*facilitator*' role.



If we distinguish our research participants according to their sex we can hardly observe any significant difference between the responses given by them (figure 5). More specifically, almost 21.5% of men in the sample seem to frequently act like *'facilitators'* while the female's responses to this category is 23.5%. From the MMs that seem to occasionally perform this role the 23.5% are men and the 26.3% are women. However, almost the same percentage of male (52.9%) and female (52.6%) responses can be observed in the category of those who rarely act towards facilitating.

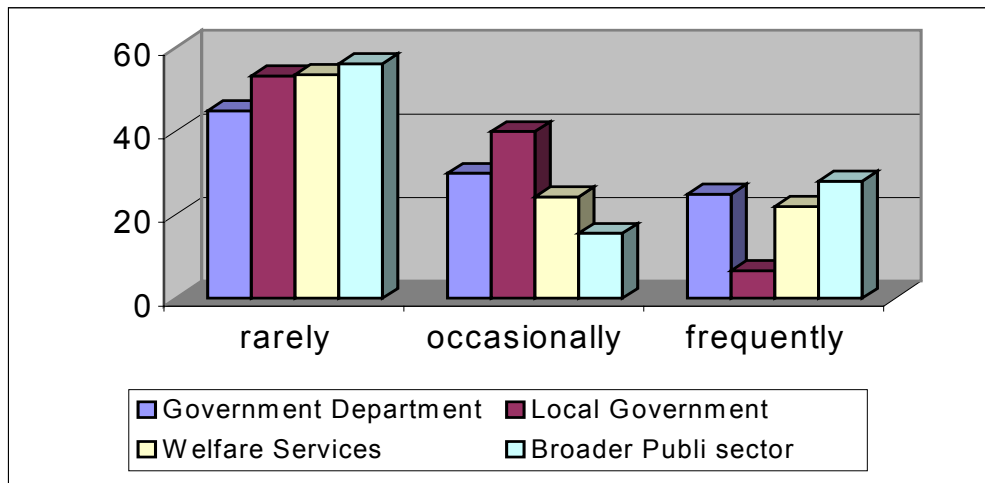
**Figure 5**

**Responses of male and female MMs towards facilitating role (%)**



As far as we are concerned each sub-sector, the research gives us an interesting result. According to figure 6, more MMs working in the broader public sector than central as well as local government and welfare services seem to react negatively towards facilitating activities. This result is interesting if we consider the fact that organisations in broader public sector are more 'free' to operate in a more competitive and private management oriented way. More specifically, almost 56% of the people working in the broader public sector appear to rarely perform this role. The same number in the other three sub-sectors is 45% in government departments, 53.3% in local government and 53.7% in social security and health services. From those MMs occasionally performing this role 30% work in government departments, 40% in local government, 24.3% in welfare services and 15.6% work in the broader public sector. Finally, 28.1% of those working in broader public sector frequently involve themselves in a facilitating role while 25% work in central government, 22% in welfare services and only 6.7% in local government.

**Figure 6**  
**Sub-sector and facilitating role (%)**



The most interesting result, however, comes from the educational background of the respondents and their preferences towards facilitating (see appendix). As table 3 shows the frequency of MMs acting as *'facilitators'* is strongly dependent on their educational level. More specifically, our findings seem to support that MMs who are holders of a postgraduate degree (Master's or PhD) more frequently perform this role than MMs who come from lower educational levels. Also, it might be interesting to point out that 65.8% of those holding a Bachelor's degree seem to react negatively (rarely) on the performance of the facilitating role, and only 8.2% seem to react more positively (frequently).

### **Middle manager as *'synthesiser'***

Maybe the most well-linked MMs' role to the OL concept is under the heading of *'synthesiser'*. The position of MMs in the area between the strategy making and operations is a critical one, because this level has the ability to link creatively the two structural extremes. We can define synthesising as *the process through which any kind of information coming from everywhere inside or outside the organisation effectively transmitted everywhere within the organisation*. As it is argued MMs have a key role in translating strategic change into operations (Smiths, 1989).

**Table 3**  
**Educational background and facilitating role**

	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
<b>Primary Education (High School, Lyceum)</b>	60%	40%	0%
<b>Undergraduate degree (BA or BSc)</b>	65.8%	26%	8.2%
<b>Postgraduate degree (MA, MSc, MBA, PhD)</b>	0%	10%	90%

The new middle management has a much more important as well as complex job to do, by "synthesising the strategic significance of emergent events and information" (Floyd and Wooldridge, 1996). Their role is becoming more strategic (Dopson, 1993). According to Schilit (1987) MMs filter information and evaluate choices before the decisions reach the top level. Furthermore, Burgelman (1983) emphasises the critical role of them not only in supporting initiatives, but also by combining these with organisation's advantages and conceptualising them into new policies and action plans.

The contribution of MMs in the synthesis of knowledge seems to be vital in Nonaka and Takeuchi's work. The two authors believe that MMs "synthesise the tacit knowledge of both front-line employees and senior executives, make it explicit, and incorporate it into new technologies, products, or systems" (p.155). In addition, Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) link successful OL with MMs' ability to frame ideas and promote notions and concepts that have a positive impact on the organisation's shared understanding of its strategic circumstances.

Trying to identify evidence of the existence of '*synthesisers*' within the Greek public domain, we asked MMs to respond to five descriptive statements given by Floyd and Wooldridge (1996) which compose the synthesising process. As figure 7 shows 59.2% of the respondents seem that rarely perform the role of the '*synthesiser*'. Therefore, we can say that more than half of our respondents does not actually participate in the synthesising process. Nevertheless, it seems that there is a group of MMs who react more positively in synthesising information and promoting knowledge within POs. The rest group of our respondents (40.8%) seem to be divided equally between occasionally and frequently category. More specifically, 20.4%

occasionally perform this role while the last 20.4% seem to frequently link information and promote knowledge within their organisations.

**Figure 7**

**MMs responses towards synthesising role (%)**

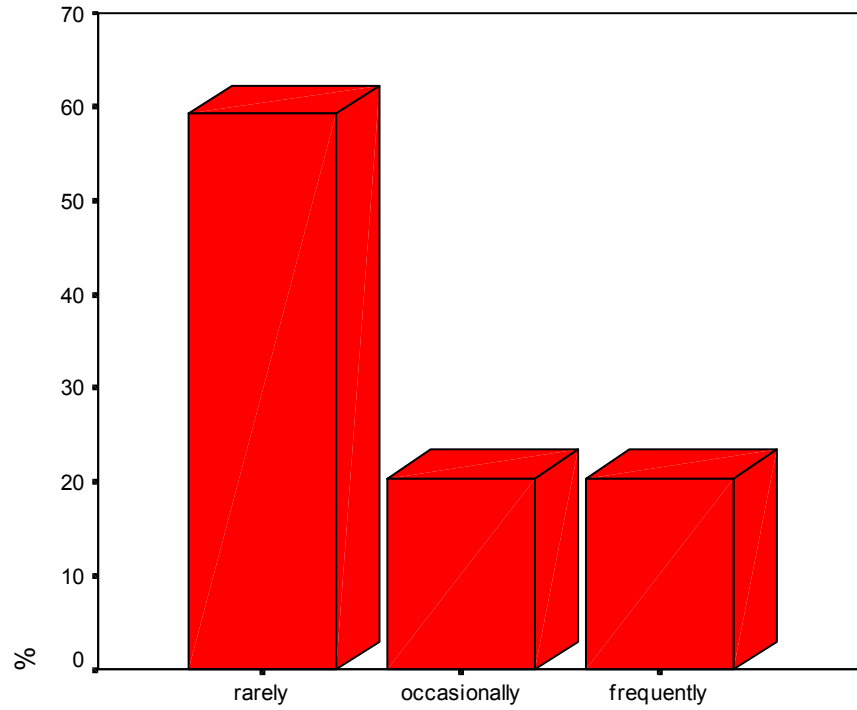
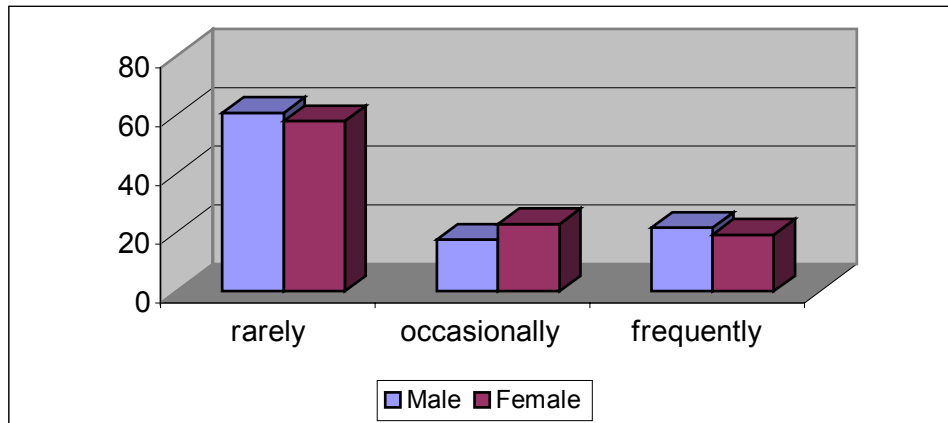


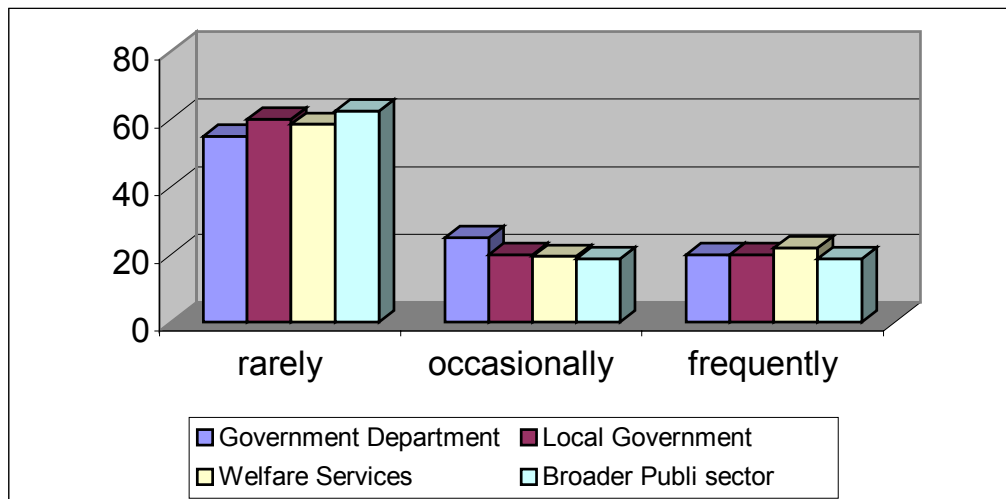
Figure 8 illustrates male and female responses towards synthesising role. More specifically, men seem to perform this role a little bit more frequently (21.6%) than women do (19.3%). Moreover, 17.6% of males occasionally act upon the synthesising role while the respective number for females is 22.8%. The largest number of responses though, can be seen in the 'rarely' category: men (60.8%) and women (57.9%).

There seems to be no significant correlation between the distribution of responses and the four sub-sectors. Figure 9 shows that the most negative reaction on synthesising activities seems to come from local government organisations (60%) while the less negative one comes from central government agencies (55%). The organisations belong to the welfare services seem to have the largest percentage of responses on the 'frequently' category (22%) where the lowest percentage appears to in the broader public sector (18.8%). Finally, the responses of all sub-sectors in the 'occasionally' category are 40% for government departments, 33.3% for local government, 41.5% for welfare services, and 44% for broader public sector.

**Figure 8**  
**Responses of male and female MMs towards synthesising role (%)**



**Figure 9**  
**Sub-sector and synthesising role (%)**



A very interesting finding though comes once again from the educational background of our respondents (see appendix). As table 4 shows the educational level is strongly correlated with the responses towards the synthesising role. It is quite clear that MMs with a Master's degree as well as those with a PhD react positively towards synthesising activities. It is characteristic that 70% of the postgraduates degree holders frequently perform synthesising role while the rest 30% occasionally perform this role. Once again our findings are quite disappointing for the great majority of the respondents who are bachelor's degree holders and in total 72.6% rarely perform the synthesising role. Only 8.2% and 19.2% of them frequently and occasionally act as *'synthesisers'*.

**Table 4**  
**Educational background and synthesising role**

	Rarely	Occasionally	Frequently
<b>Primary Education (High School, Lyceum)</b>	73.3%	13.3%	13.3%
<b>Undergraduate degree (BA or BSc)</b>	72.6%	19.2%	8.2%
<b>Postgraduate degree (MA, MSc, MBA, PhD)</b>	0%	30%	70%

## Discussion

Trying to put all of our arguments together we will follow an analysis based on the answers to the questions raised on the theoretical part of the paper.

*Question 1* focus on the extent of the importance of MMs in the OL process. As we have seen, they do play quite a substantial role (Dopson and Stewart, 1993) by help their organisations operating as 'learning organisations'. More specifically, it has been argued (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Floyd and Wooldridge 1996; Larsen 1997) that the OL process, activated by the '*New Middle Manager*', includes three major roles: the implementation of the deliberate strategic decisions, the facilitation of any new idea or innovation within the organisation and the synthesis of any information/knowledge coming from everywhere outside and inside the organisation. However, the empirical evidence in this direction mainly comes form private sector enterprises.

Therefore, *Question 2* asks whether MMs can operate as 'learning agents' in public sector organisations. We have seen that the most of the studies have been concentrated more on what aspects of the external environment do or do not facilitate public organisations' ability to learn (Attwood and Beer, 1988; Edmostone, 1990). In contrast, there is little research about the institutional actors that can be the providers (synthesisers), filters (facilitators) and users (implementers) of the knowledge related to the management of public organisation (Rist, 1994). The little evidence in that direction emphasises the 'should be' of managers in public administration and not the actual 'be' of them (Ventriss and Luke, 1988). Only one study focuses on the attitudes of MMs towards OL (Willcocks and Harrow, 1992). Nevertheless, this study is connected to a public organisation environment (UK), which is more certain and has been very well accepted managerial practices, which come form business sector.

Thus, *Question 3* asks to what extent MMs can operate as 'knowledge engineers' in uncertain and non-competitive public sector environments, such as the Greek one. There are two research studies exploring MMs role in Greek business system (Vouzias, Burgoyne and Livian, 1997; Kofidu et.al, 1997). Nevertheless, both of them are focused upon the bipolar *bureaucratic vs. managerial actions* of MMs. None of these are concentrated to the learning organisation concept, meaning that none of these examines the synthesising, facilitating and implementing role of MMs in Greek public services. Our study tried to put the concept of '*new middle manager*' in the Greek public sector context, exploring to what extent MMs operate as '*implementers*', '*facilitators*' and '*synthesisers*'.

From the analysis of the research findings we can conclude that middle managers working in Greek public sector are still far from the concept of '*New Middle Manager*'. The research evidence can hardly support that the MMs act as 'learning agents' or 'knowledge engineers' within the Greek public domain. More specifically, we found that the overall majority (75%) of them concentrate themselves in administrative actions, which more or less are associated with the implementing role. On the other hand, only a minority of them seems to facilitate innovations and changes (22.2%) as well as to synthesise and transfer information to every level of the organisational hierarchy (20.4%).

There are several reasons explaining these findings. First, it is true that the Greek public administration cannot operate independently of political integration. Client relationships are well established in the informal Greek public management agenda. The decisions determine the responsibilities of the civil servants are taken at a political and not at a managerial level. This means that these decisions are taken to serve political interests rather than serving the effective operation of POs. Also, the dominated political agenda over the managerial one makes the adoption of modern management practices even more difficult. Therefore, there is a lack of incentive for MMs to operate in a more managerial rather than in a more bureaucratic way. They seem to be 'trapped' in a political or even worse, in a party pathology, without having the potential to 'escape'.

A second reason is related to the delegation of power through the existed hierarchy. Every kind of decisions are taken at the top of the hierarchy leaving a limited space for independent action by the middle level and even less for the bottom line employees. The issue of MMs' authority in both private and PO has been

discussed in the literature (Kay, 1974; Nutt and Backolf 1993; Theophanidis 1992, Kofidu, et.al. 1997), which supports that MMs' decision power is quite insufficient, uncertain as well as limited. This lack of delegation of authority from the upper to the middle level of the hierarchy makes MMs concentrating to an old style of operation by translating plans into actions and controlling and monitoring activities. Adopting Floyd and Wooldridge's term, they are still the "watchdogs who kept things on track" (p.5). MMs are also, 'trapped' in a bureaucratic pathology, which does not let them operate autonomously. As one MM wrote in response to one of our open question given in the questionnaire:

*"Even though many times me and many of my colleagues we would like to adopt new practices in doing things, we feel that we do not have the potential due the limited power that we hold. Top-management has much more power and can do 'miracles' if it wants".*

Another reason is that civil servants are victims of a 'do not care' organisational culture well established in the public management system. MMs' permanent job position as well as the lack of motivation and intensive makes them indifferent about changing the way of operating. Even through some of them have the intention of taking initiatives, they cannot find the appropriate ground to develop them. In contrast, the majority of them are 'hidden' behind the job-description regulations without want to have any further responsibility. As another MM said:

*"The most of the activities referred to your questionnaire have nothing to do with our responsibilities and our work in this organisation. I think that all of them are things that only top-managers should do "*

The 'do not care' culture is associated with a bad image that the public has about the Greek public administration in general and civil servants in particular. Many people see the public domain as a very good opportunity of having a comfortable, life-long job without hard tasks as well as without many risks and responsibilities. This perception emerged from the outside organisational environment, makes POs attractive to people who do not want a career or to people who do not have the appropriate managerial skills. In contrast, it seems that there is a lack of professional managers or highly educated people who could assist public organisations create an environment that can adopt effective management practices.



This last argument can be strongly supported by our research findings considering the educational background of the respondents. We have shown that the majority of highly educated people respond more positively to the roles characterised by the *'New Middle Manager'*. More specifically, the MMs holding a post-graduate degree (Master's or Doctoral degree), are acting more frequently as facilitators as well as synthesisers. This finding could strongly suggest that the recruitment of highly skilled personnel might be a method of transforming POs to learning organisations. However, it might be worth pointing out that in a highly politicised public administration such as the Greek one, the initiative to recruit such personnel, is a political one.

## Conclusions

The role of middle management is an important issue in the OL process (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Floyd and Wooldridge 1996). With regards to this argument, there is still little empirical evidence of whether and to what extent MMs can operate as 'learning agents' or 'knowledge engineers' in POs. The question-mark is rather bigger in more complex and turbulent public administration environments. Our research study tried to give more light to this 'dark side' of empirical evidence regarding MMs' involvement in the creation as well as in the distribution of knowledge within organisations operating in the Greek public domain.

From the analysis of the results we can come up with the following conclusions referred to the MMs of our sample:

- MMs mainly concentrate their actions towards implementation of deliberate decisions.
- MMs rarely or occasionally operate towards facilitating role.
- MMs rarely or occasionally act as *synthesisers* of knowledge and information within a PO.
- Male and female MMs seem not to respond differently in the above three results.
- There are not particular differences in the responses of MMs working in a specific sub-sector.
- MMs with high educational background (Master's or Doctoral degree) seem to perform the facilitating and synthesising role more frequently than those with a lower educational background (Bachelor's degree or any lower diploma).

The above research results support the hypothesis that MMs in Greek public POs are still far from being 'knowledge engineers' or 'learning agents'. We have also discussed the reason explaining our research results. This reason, that we can call 'Greek PO's pathologies', can be further categorised into 'political pathologies', 'bureaucratic pathologies', 'cultural pathologies' and 'external environment's perception pathologies'. These pathologies inhibit MMs from being the core human resource of the OL process and additionally, inhibit public organisations of become learning organisations.

The above research evidence does not seem to support the second hypothesis though, at least as far as it concerns the gender and the sub-sector. More specifically, it seems that male and females acting more upon implementing roles and less upon facilitating and synthesising ones. Moreover, there are no differences between the responses of MMs working in different sub-sectors. This result is quite surprising because of the fact that some organisations (especially those operating in the broader public sector) are more private management oriented and, thus they can more easily accept and apply new management philosophies than organisations operating in the core of public administration (e.g. government departments).

Nevertheless, our study indicates that there is also, a considerable amount of MMs that react more positive towards the role of '*facilitator*' and '*synthesiser*'. If we consider the fact that the positive responses in our study came mainly from those participants with higher levels of education we can conclude that there is an optimistic view. That is a potential input of more educated people in the middle or even more in the upper management level can contribute to the transformation of POs towards learning organisations.

Without doubt our research can be criticised in having some limitations. First of all, the sampling method (snowball) cannot provide us with a representative sample (Saunders, Lewis and Thornhill, 2000). So a generalisation of the results might be quite risky. Second, the response rate to our study might be low to support such evidence. Third, the sub-sector distinction might hide a lot of risks due to the major differences characterising the legislative regime. For example, most of the organisations included in the broader public sector are free to operate in more private management orientation that those found in the other three sub-sectors. Finally, our research is purely quantitative trying to find MMs' general views on the three roles. A more qualitative approach (structured or unstructured interviews and/or observations

on MMs' work and responsibilities) might give richer results and be more useful to provide an in depth analysis of what is really happening in public services. The latter limitation might be a very good reason for further research on the specific field. Finally, a comparative study between the private and public sector or between the public sector of two different countries is also required to provide us with more evidence towards OL and middle management role in public sector organisations.

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## Appendix

### Chi-square and Pearson's R

Correlation	$\chi^2$ Value	df	Pearson's R
1. Educational background and synthesising role	45.712	4	.507
2. Educational background and facilitating role	67.333	4	.575
3. Educational background and implementing role	6.957	4	-.091
4. Sub-sector and synthesising role	.484	6	-.032
5. Sub-sector and facilitating role	5.196	6	-.011
6. Sub-sector and implementing role	11.411	6	-.121
7. Gender and synthesising role	.458	2	.004
8. Gender and facilitating role	.158	2	-.013
9. Gender and implementing role	1.836	2	-.077

**\*For 1 and 2 do not accept the null hypothesis**

**\*For 3,4,5,6,7,8 and 9 accept the null hypothesis**

- **$\chi^2$  refers to performed test on potential correlation between variables of interest, where under the null hypothesis, variables are independent. Rejection of the null hypothesis, implies that there is some kind of correlation between the variables.**
- **Estimated Pearson's R shows whether there is a positive or negative relationship and how strong it is. For positive values of R there exist similar positive relationship, and the closer R is to one (1), the stronger the relationship that it is. The opposite for negative values of R, between minus one (-1) and zero (0).**

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