

ABSTRACT – OLKC Conference

Everyday innovation in doing knowledge management: the case of the knowledge managers in a multinational

Scarborough (2002) quotes Harrington (1999) and states that knowledge management has been featured as one of the “big management ideas” of the 20th century. It has been given a popular image of having positive impact on the performance (Degeus, 1998). However, the concept is ambiguous and amenable to multiple interpretations and remolding across organizational settings (Scarborough and Swan, 2001). It can be argued that knowledge management, when introduced in an organization, is adapted to its local context and may become a function that is not entirely in line with what have been put forward in the literature. The knowledge managers, who are in charge of doing the tasks that are labeled knowledge management by the organization, do not necessarily follow the prescriptive sets of activities discussed by the literature.

In order to understand how the knowledge managers do knowledge management in reality, following the practice perspective, a prominent school of thought in the management literature (Gherardi, 2009), is a potentially fruitful way. The practice perspective enables us to examine how the knowledge managers work and what they really do. From this perspective, the knowledge managers can be seen as doing their job by creating their own practices that reflect the socially defined practices and the wider social, historical, and cultural context.

Identifying itself with practice-based research and attempting to enrich the knowledge management literature, this research studies the knowledge managers in a multinational to examine how they do their job and work as executors of knowledge management initiatives. Based on the findings, it argues that the knowledge managers make innovations on a daily basis in order to accomplish their mission. Their everyday innovations are crucial for the survival of the knowledge management function and their own place in the organization. This research contributes to shed light on the link between everyday local innovation of the knowledge managers and knowledge management.

To address achieve its research objective, the research develops an investigation framework based on the pragmatic philosophy of John Dewey, especially his perspective on the transactional relationship between man and the environment. The empirical investigation is carried out by the six inter-related procedures put forward by van Manen (1990). Data are collected during three years of participant-observation in different knowledge management projects of a multinational. Seven knowledge managers of its two branches are invited to participate in the study. Each of them is interviewed during two sessions of two hours. The interviews are semi-structured with open-ended questions. The interpretation relies on the

respondent's own terms and category systems rather than the researcher's, as the goal is to describe experience in lived rather than conceptually abstract terms.

It is found out that knowledge management in the multinational is narrowly defined as the management of a sharing database. The knowledge managers are responsible for making people use and contribute to the sharing database. They collect knowledge documents, such as best practices or lessons learned, to archive in the database. They motivate people to become users and contributors of the database by conducting training program and communication activities. With the responsibilities so defined, the knowledge managers encounter different difficulties stemming from the particular features of their organizational context. In particular, the knowledge management function has not been accepted by people in the organization as part of their working life. They also have limited resources. In one branch, there are only six knowledge managers in charge of the database that serves more than 40000 employees. In another branch, each knowledge manager's responsible zone is one business unit, which has about 4000 to 5000 employees.

In such situation, the knowledge managers work by making everyday innovations, as part of their daily coping with the hostile environment. All the knowledge managers claim to undertake the actions that can be labelled marketing in order to fulfill their responsibilities. They broadcast the existence of the sharing database, train people how to use and make contributions, position the database as a user-friendly and useful product, bring knowledge documents to end-users, and divide the end-users into different groups to serve their needs more adequately. However, to implement these "marketing" actions, they unwittingly engage in making innovations everyday. First, in order to make a place for the knowledge management function, they try to integrate their activities into the existing and accepted processes of the organization. They cannot create the processes, it is a daily effort to identify and take advantage of what processes might be useful for them. Second, due to their limited resources, they cannot work alone. The knowledge managers seek help from different people to do their marketing activities. They innovate everyday to make people willing to involve in knowledge management and become their strategic helpers.

References

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