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Unlocking the Catalysts for Organizational Development Program Success: A Case Study of Knowledge Management Challenges in an International Context*

This article explores Knowledge Management (KM) and Knowledge Sharing (KS) challenges in the context of an Organizational Development (OD) program. Our research questions are: How can OD program effectiveness be enhanced from a KM perspective? What are the key KS challenges that must be tackled to foster an OD program? We identify four KM domains (planning, people, processes and IT tools) and relate them to KS challenges (awareness of knowledge needs, involvement and trust, evolution of organizational routines, and IT support). Through an in-depth case study analysis, we advance understanding of key KM challenges in the context of OD programs, and pose relevant managerial implications.

Keywords: knowledge management, knowledge sharing, organizational development, case study.

Introduction

Companies are facing extreme competitive pressures in today's complex and rapidly changing environments. Accordingly, organizational development (OD) programs aim at fostering corporate change and transformation (Darling et al., 2012) in conjunction with knowledge management (KM) (Zaugg and Thom, 2002). Considering knowledge as a key strategic asset and agent for change in turbulent environments, it is crucial employees contribute to optimizing organizational repositories of knowl-

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edge, thus sustaining competitive advantage through enhanced organizational learning (OL) (Alegre et al., 2013; Easterby–Smith and Prieto, 2008).

Knowledge sharing (KS) is essential for optimizing OL processes (Balbastre et al., 2003; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Hence, KM strategies aim at boosting knowledge creation, transfer, and utilization throughout the organization with the purpose of dynamically (re)building and sustaining competitive advantage (Alegre et al., 2013; Easterby–Smith and Prieto, 2008). However, multiple barriers to KM—and particularly to KS—are common (Cabrera and Cabrera, 2002, 2005; Newell et al., 2001, 2006). Knowledge hoarding is the rule in many cases (Hooff and Otto, 2012), a behavior triggered by low trust or inappropriate incentive systems as well as other reasons (Oltra, 2005).

Notwithstanding the role played by information technology (IT) in KM strategies (Cerne et al., 2013), aspects related to human/social concerns, human resource (HR) practices, and/or corporate culture values have been pinpointed as potential facilitators for successful KM and KS (Cabrera et al., 2006; Gupta and Govindarajan, 2000; Oltra, 2005). Enhanced values and practices revolving around trust, cooperation, commitment, teamwork, empowerment, creativity, and innovation can be highlighted from among these aspects (Camelo–Ordaz et al., 2011; Han et al., 2010; Liu and DeFrank, 2013; Liu and Liu, 2011; Shen et al., 2014; Zárrega and Bonache, 2003).

All in all, research taking a deeper look into specific KM and KS challenges in the context of OD programs is still immature, so a research gap can be found. Consequently, this paper empirically explores KM and KS challenges in the context of OD programs. Our research questions are:

- How can OD program effectiveness be enhanced from a KM perspective?
- What are the key KS challenges that must be tackled to foster an OD program?

We empirically explore these questions through a case study of a recent OD program launched by the Slovak subsidiary of a multinational company operating in the global IT industry. Our qualitative research analyzes the dynamics of several projects that nurtured the OD program's planning phase. Our findings help understand key KM (and particularly KS) challenges in OD programs in substantial detail. Our results also help identify further research opportunities and managerial implications.

This paper is structured as follows: After this introduction, the next section develops the conceptual framework. The third section is devoted to explaining our research setting and methods. The fourth section includes a preliminary description of the case studied and, in the fifth section our study results are explained and discussed. The paper finishes with a brief concluding section.

Organizational Development and Knowledge Management Challenges

OD programs are usually launched through a number of coordinated organizational projects (Cusick, 2005). Learning within and across projects depends on the learning capabilities of individuals, such as reflective practice, the ability to communicate ideas with colleagues, and the unlearning of old ways of doing things in order to learn new ones (Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001). In this sense, relevant research on project management supports the shift from technical aspects to people-oriented factors as key contributors to projects, and thus OD program success (e.g., Bartsch et al., 2013; Han and Hovav, 2013; Park and Lee, 2014). For example, the allocation of the right human resources (e.g., with the right profiles and motivations) to IT projects has been identified as a vital project success condition (Camara e Silva and Cabral Seixas Costa, 2013). Besides, project-based learning often struggles with seemingly different problems that nonetheless repeat similar patterns (i.e. “reinventing the wheel”), whereby more energy is often devoted to exploration to find solutions within projects than exploiting knowledge that may already exist in the company (Newell et al., 2006).

OL and KM are strongly interconnected. KM involves managerial decisions aimed at improving (naturally occurring) OL processes (Oltra and Vivas-López, 2013), while OL is nurtured by knowledge processes that are aimed at developing dynamic capabilities (Easterby-Smith and Prieto, 2008). Accordingly, inquiry into KM dynamics in project and OD contexts needs to encompass a comprehensive view of knowledge that considers the different types of complex processes involved (Bakker et al., 2011; Reich et al., 2012).

Organizations often struggle to achieve smooth knowledge flows due to the presence of various difficulties. Newell et al. (2006) identified three main domains of KS obstacles when learning across projects. First, *limited project-level learning* happens when employees work individually on their tasks using the knowledge they are familiar with, but without sharing it. Second, frequent *lack of awareness* of the necessary knowledge leads to missing demand, where, on the one hand, knowledge is preserved and available (databases, intranet, applications, wikis, etc.), but, on the other, it is not used. Third, the *inaccuracy of stored knowledge* refers to knowledge that is not of greatest use for other projects in terms of learning from it. This last point is closely related to the need for building sound knowledge inventories (Donk and Riezebos, 2005) and optimizing cross-project knowledge bridging processes (Han and Hovav, 2013; Newell et al., 2004).

In an attempt to make a more in-depth inquiry into the underlying causes of the above obstacles, Hooff and Otto (2012) classify the reasons for knowledge

hoarding into four basic dimensions. The first one, *ability*, refers either to cognitive limitations (e.g., expertise gap, overloading) or to situational limitations (e.g., time available for sharing, accessibility). The second one, *motivation*, relates to rewards received in return for KS (e.g., power, reputation), safety in terms of low risk-taking linked to KS (e.g., being responsible for sharing the correct knowledge, considering cost, time, and effort devoted to sharing), and to enjoying the current situation (e.g., being happy with the *status quo* and perceiving no need for change). *Awareness*, as the third knowledge-hoarding dimension, contains issues involving know-what and know-who (e.g., knowing who knows what), know-why (e.g., the perception of the benefits that sharing brings to the organization and individuals), and know-how (e.g., the ability to issue instructions, store, and process knowledge). The last dimension deals with *antecedents*, such as culture, structure, management, and IT structure. Furthermore, *discontinuity* in organizational change projects (Engestrom et al., 2007) can also pose serious problems for the effective management of knowledge in the context of OD programs.

Four broad domains of KM challenges in OD contexts that are consistent with the above reflections as well as with extant proposals for measuring KM performance (e.g., Shannak, 2009) can be identified. These, in their turn, reveal respective KS implications. First, proper KM *planning* is necessary so knowledge stored, retrieved, and eventually used is accurate and hence useful—thus, tackling the KS challenge of developing proper *awareness of knowledge needs* (Hooff and Otto, 2012; Newell et al., 2006). Second, *people* are crucial in creating and mobilizing knowledge, so building and maintaining *involvement and trust* pose another key KS challenge (Engestrom et al., 2007; Hooff and Otto, 2012; Oltra, 2005; Shen et al., 2014). Third, the ongoing dynamics of exploration and exploitation shape KM *processes* that help organizations develop and sustain competitive advantage (March, 1991; Eriksson, 2013). Being aware of the *evolution of organizational routines* appears as the related KS challenge, so “reinventing the wheel” is avoided and KM efforts are optimized (Newell et al., 2006). Fourth, technology is an essential aspect of OD (Levin, 1997) and IT tools underpin KM (Cerne et al., 2013). Thus, being able to provide proper *IT support* (e.g., through online platforms) emerges as an essential challenge for propelling the KS necessary for OD program success. These four KM domains (planning, people, processes, and IT tools), together with their respective KS concerns (awareness of knowledge needs, involvement and trust, evolution of organizational routines, and IT support), shape the underlying theory upon which our empirical analysis is based.

Research Setting and Methods

The target company of our case study was ITSK,¹ the Slovak subsidiary of a multinational company operating in the area of global IT services and consulting. ITSK was founded in 2006 and, with a staff of over 2,000, was one of the biggest IT employers in Slovakia in 2014. In 2010, the company launched the “From Quantity to Quality” (Q2Q) OD program. This program is aimed at refocusing from previous massive growth towards systematization and enhancement of quality (e.g., of processes, internal environment, etc.). The program was divided into two phases—planning and implementation. Our qualitative case study focuses on the planning phase, which was developed through eight projects over a period of six months.

Case studies investigate organizational phenomena in their own context and are appropriate to get a wealth of insights about specific issues that need careful attention to detail (Yin, 1994). Besides, qualitative methods help understand the complex underlying processes of the studied phenomenon (Mason, 1996; Maxwell, 1996). We collected data through semi-structured interviews, participant observation, focus groups, analysis of project documentation as well as some informal talks with project members. Accordingly, we covered different perspectives and enhanced data triangulation.

Regarding participant observation (Punch, 2005), one of the researchers was the project manager of one of the eight Q2Q projects. We also approached the other seven project managers. From among them we were successful in interviewing six. At the time of the interviews, project managers had already finished their Q2Q-related duties as the first six-month planning period had already been completed. Thus, they had a complete picture of the process and could offer highly valid and reliable accounts of the details involved. Respondents were asked to describe their experience as Q2Q project managers from a KM perspective, which involved both intra-project and cross-project learning aspects. Emphasis was placed on factors that were easing or obstructing teamwork progress within the Q2Q planning phase. Moreover, informal talks with project members were held in a flexible way, as this was considered necessary to complete and/or confront data. There were around forty people involved as Q2Q project members. Out of this number, about 50% actively presented their views on the discussed topics.

¹ The company does not wish to be named due to confidentiality, so we use the acronym ITSK (IT Slovakia).

Case Description

A broad organizational transformation was deemed necessary at ITSK in 2010. The following (mostly HR-related) *challenges* were the key triggers behind the Q2Q program:

- *IT specialist labor market shortage*: The expected growth of the company required active and innovative approaches to staffing needs.

- *Massive training and development needs*: The constant influx of new graduates demanded a systematic approach to large-scale training.

- *Dealing with organizational maturity*: The rate of growth of the company posed new challenges (e.g., a deep change in focus from quantity to quality).

Q2Q was designed as a triennial OD program in which participants would need to share knowledge in order to achieve the goals of the different projects involved. Top management invested considerable time and effort in explaining the long-term benefits of a KS atmosphere—properly tackling *motivation* issues to prevent knowledge hoarding (Hooff and Otto, 2012). All 120 managers attended a program initialization workshop that was aimed at identifying focus areas that would shape the Q2Q program. As a result, eight projects were launched as the Q2Q pillars (focus areas): quality, operational excellence, professional expertise, training and efficiency, global company, company ambassador, next generation communication, and innovation.

These highly diverse projects were categorized according to a “fix–transform–innovate!” logic. Fix projects were aimed at improving the performance of already established systems; *transform* projects should help the company to grow, learn, and be liked by employees; *innovate* projects focused on anticipating future needs and their solutions, with a longer-term focus. Definitely, the “fix–transform–innovate!” logic reflected organizational ambidexterity at ITSK—i.e. a sound balance between exploration and exploitation processes (Raisch et al., 2009), which was necessary for project success (Eriksson, 2013). In some cases, existing solutions needed to be refined without questioning underlying assumptions, implying exploitation processes at the “fix” extreme. Conversely, other Q2Q projects would fit the “innovate” extreme, involving the application of completely new knowledge (i.e. knowledge exploration, characterized by the need to analyze problems through new frameworks of reference).

The Q2Q program emphasized cross-functional cooperation and diversity. After choosing project managers, the program was massively publicized and employees assigned themselves voluntarily as project members. Eventually, each project included members from different units, departments, and hierarchical levels. Dur-

ing the half year, O2Q *planning* project teams—the focus of our study—proposed changes, activities, and incentives related to their areas. Subsequently, all proposals and their estimated budgets were presented to the CEO. Approved proposals proceeded to the next phase of the program and new Q2Q *implementation* teams, which are beyond the scope of our investigation, were established.

Results and Discussion

Our investigation results are discussed in four sub-sections that are respectively devoted to explaining the Q2Q program challenges found for each of the KM–KS domains introduced in the theoretical framework (see Table No. 1).

Table No. 1. KM and KS Challenges in the Q2Q Program

KM domains	KS domains	Implications for the Q2Q program at ITSK	
		Challenge identification	Challenge description
Planning	Awareness of knowledge needs	Type of knowledge required	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of fit between supply and demand of various types of knowledge creates mismatch/tensions and affects learning and project progress.
People	Involvement and trust	HR allocation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Lack of trust derived from hierarchical distance or different personality types within teams affect learning and project progress.
		Project member motivation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Various types of motives for participating were identified during the Q2Q program, which were either facilitating learning and project progress or harming it. ■ Positive intentions: part of change/curiosity/social relations. ■ Negative intentions: harming progress.
		Discontinuity in participation	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Project member discontinuity in program participation affected interest and involvement for taking responsibility.
Processes	Evolution of organizational routines	“Reinventing the wheel”	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ The frequently repeated problem or re-finding solutions. ■ Associated to the need to find balance between exploration and exploitation.
IT tools	IT support	Management of wiki platforms	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ■ Emergence of too many wiki platforms – as a result of fearing to make information available to other organizational units. ■ Situation recognized as an obstacle.

Planning: Awareness of Knowledge Needs

KM planning requires being aware of knowledge needs. Within this domain, we observed a lack of fit between the supply and demand of various types of knowledge. This was subsequently reflected in mismatch/tensions affecting learning and project progress and resulting in the first specific challenge observed: type of knowledge required. Accordingly, projects within the “fix” category focused on exploitation processes and required specific knowledge from their members, which was not properly supplied in some cases. Hence, building a knowledge inventory (Donk and Riezebos, 2005) was the first step that some project managers took in their project activities. A project manager explained:

“First, I had to establish the common base of knowledge within the team because that was the unavoidable prerequisite for success. I perceived that there was a lack of necessary knowledge among project members and this was an obstacle. We had to dedicate a considerable amount of time at the beginning until everybody caught up.”

Conversely, projects within the “innovate” category focused on exploration were searching for “out-of-the-box” solutions requiring more general knowledge. A team member stated:

“Our project manager was searching for ‘bright minds’ to elaborate ideas on innovative improvements. We were supposed to propose solutions on more attractive working conditions, on positive enhancement of employee attitudes towards the employer, or on stimulating pride for being an ambassador of the company. We had to be able to think creatively.”

All in all, KS challenges arose when project members had different knowledge bases and cognitive abilities, causing intrinsic difficulties in sharing and building understanding jointly.

People: Involvement and Trust

Human issues are inherent to KM. It is people who are the bearers of human capital and the quality of learning and KS relies on individual capabilities (Ayas and Zeniuk, 2001). Employee involvement and trust are crucial for successful KM (Shen et al., 2014). Three people-related challenges emerged at ITSK that are closely connected to involvement and trust: HR allocation, project member motivation, and discontinuity in participation.

HR allocation refers to the need for carefully distributing employees across and within projects (Camara e Silva and Cabral Seixas Costa, 2013). Depending on project member personalities and hierarchical positions, a (dis)trustful atmosphere

may develop (Park and Lee, 2014; Verburg et al., 2013). Although cross-functional diversity within Q2Q projects was meant to facilitate change acceptance, some of the projects were harmed by a lack of trust among members. A project manager said:

“I found it very difficult to manage the knowledge of my project members due to the fact that they were coming from different hierarchical positions in the company. Any idea proposed by a non-managerial employee could be (and often was) confronted and judged by higher-level managers. I felt that trust was missing.”

The Q2Q program promotion strategy, aimed at winning emotional commitment and interest from employees, had mixed results. The (eclectic) combination of personalities often triggered disharmony and problems in social interactions and expectations. Hence, each team needed to autonomously plan HR allocation in a way taking into consideration any specific idiosyncrasies that might emerge.

Project member motivations to participate were also identified during the Q2Q program. While the majority of employees showed positive attitudes (e.g., being part of the change, curiosity, social relationships) and eventually facilitated project learning, there were cases where negative intentions harmed KS and learning goals. A project manager explained:

“In my project team, there was a ‘negative thinker’ who was constantly harming project progress and creating a negative atmosphere. I did not understand why he assigned himself to this project at the beginning. In the end, we had to exclude him to be able to make progress.”

Our research evidence confirms that individual motivations crucially influence expectations towards leaders, approach to work, and progress speed. Perceptions of (de)motivation of other project members are also important, as they may act as potential barriers or triggers of KS.

Discontinuity in participation, in turn, harmed project member interest and involvement with respect to taking responsibility. Consistent with previous studies on the phenomenon of discontinuity (Poole et al., 2000; Chudoba et al., 2005; Engstrom et al., 2007; Daoudi and Bourgault, 2012), we observed that individuals sometimes showed no willingness to be responsible for their duties. Besides, the division of the Q2Q program into two distinct phases—planning and implementation—contributed to building a perception of discontinuity and reduced project member involvement. Different project teams were established during each phase. Hence, while one project team prepared and proposed changes within its area during the planning phase, another team was established to implement those changes in the implementation phase. A project manager stated:

“I perceived that discontinuity in program participation caused effects on the morale of some of my project members. They expressed disinterest with respect to responsibility for the ideas proposed. I had to facilitate various discussions to make them see the issue differently. Even though I perceived rather vague attitudes at the beginning, as the project proceeded in time and they saw their results, they overcame such attitudes and started to behave differently.”

Processes: Evolution of Organizational Routines

KM processes are often dysfunctional, as clearly exemplified by the common situation of “reinventing the wheel” (Newell et al., 2006). As KM processes are embedded into organizational routines, KS challenges may appear related to the need to find the proper balance between knowledge exploration and exploitation (Eriksson, 2013).

Despite sophisticated KM systems at ITSK (e.g., intranet, instant messaging software, document and workflow management), awareness and transfer of knowledge about current projects was often perceived as suboptimal. Consequently, some project teams had to consult each idea with other specialists in order to verify the accuracy and adequacy of the proposals. That was affecting not only the work rhythm of the project team, but also the motivation and learning of project members. A project manager pinpointed:

“In some cases, there was no general awareness about what was currently going on in the company. Our team put lots of energy into finding completely new solutions and, only after that, we became aware that those things had already been considered or were under development by another project team.”

IT Tools: IT Support

Technology is an essential aspect of OD and IT tools underpin KM (Cerne et al., 2013; Levin, 1997). Thus, being able to provide proper IT support emerges as an essential challenge for propelling the KS necessary for OD program success. In the case of ITSK, the problem of developing too many similar systems appeared due to widespread fear of undesired external knowledge spillover as well as perceived power loss when searching for information within a project team. A senior manager explained:

“At any single moment there were simply too many wiki platforms established; almost each team² had its own wiki. I believe that this was the result of the teams’

2 Team in this quotation does not refer to a project team within Q2Q, but to a “regular” organizational unit.

fear of losing their power within the organizational structure and reflected the conflict between altruistic and selfish behavior. Fortunately, there was a tendency to reverse the situation as the company started to reduce all these platforms.”

Hence, concerns such as security, control, and data migration should be addressed in order to realize the benefits of proper *management of wiki platforms* (Grace, 2009). Accuracy in accessing the right knowledge can have relevant consequences for an OD program. For instance, projects need to access knowledge to evaluate problems properly and propose feasible and adequate changes, not only within, but also across projects. However, if the access to wikis is not systematically and evenly distributed, the system might internally unify and integrate a single organizational unit (i.e. knowledge “bonding,” Han and Hovav, 2013), but it may simultaneously isolate this unit from other units (i.e. preventing successful knowledge “bridging,” Han and Hovav, 2013), so inter-unit knowledge may be eventually hoarded.

Conclusion

Our findings help understand key KM and KS concerns that are of special importance in OD contexts in substantial detail. Six KS challenges have been identified in our case study: type of knowledge required, HR allocation, project member motivation, discontinuity in participation, “reinventing the wheel,” and the management of wiki platforms. The discussion around these KS challenges offers stimulating opportunities for further research on the links between the fields of OD, KM and HR management.

As to practical implications, our findings can help managers establish links between the six KS challenges exemplified and existing HR policies so that some changes in these policies might be deemed appropriate. For instance, implementing knowledge databases and maps should facilitate task assignment to people in such a way so that knowledge supply and demand are better aligned. Besides, heterogeneity in personalities, hierarchical positions and individual motivations to participate can lead to different expectations from/by managers and team members and cause subsequent conflicts. Hence, devoting resources to trust-building activities and adjusting leaders’ approaches are recommended actions for minimizing the potentially negative effects of power distribution in OD program efficiency and productivity. Moreover, when assessing the feasibility of project proposals (within broader OD programs), project managers should be aware of potential (project) member attitudes in giving up their work responsibilities (i.e., discontinuity challenge) so ongoing monitoring and feedback should be considered.

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**Uwolnienie czynników sukcesu programu rozwoju organizacyjnego:
analiza przypadku dla wyzwań w zarządzaniu wiedzą
w kontekście międzynarodowym**

Streszczenie

Niniejszy tekst poświęcony jest wyzwaniom dotyczącym zarządzania wiedzą (ZW) oraz dzielenia się nią (DW) w kontekście programu rozwoju organizacyjnego (RO). Postawione przez nas pytania to: Jak z perspektywy ZW można zwiększyć efektywność programów RO? Z jakimi głównymi wyzwaniami dot. DW trzeba się zmierzyć przy rozwijaniu programu RO? Określamy cztery domeny ZW (planowanie, ludzie, procesy, narzędzia IT) i ich związki z wyzwaniami DW (świadomością potrzeb wiedzy, zaangażowaniem i zaufaniem, ewolucją działań organizacyjnych i wsparciem IT). Poprzez szczegółową analizę przypadku wnosimy wkład w zrozumienie kluczowych wyzwań zarządzania wiedzą w kontekście programów rozwoju organizacyjnego i tworzymy materiał do rozważenia przez kadry menedżerskie.

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