Aspects of Knowledge Management in the public sector

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The transition towards the information society, based on knowledge, is considered a necessary evolution to obtain a lasting development in the context of the "new economy", mainly based on intellectual-intensive products and activities and to realize an advanced civilization.

In this context, the organization realised that their main values are the knowledge and the ability to use it in the organizational processes to obtain competitive advantage. If in the industrial society were used different methods or organisation, coordination and scheduling of the technological and financial resources, the informational society based on knowledge, has in view the implementation of new principles, methods and techniques of investigation, scheduling and organisation of the critical resource-knowledge .

The concept of Knowledge Management is nothing new. Still 1950 Peter Drucker introduced the concept of "knowledge workers" for the employes able to use the organizations knowledge to develop intangible products. Many organizations have already used in an informal manner knowledge management methods to make decision or produce goods or services, though not in a deliberate and systematic manner. What is new in Knowledge Management is the act of being conscious about the existence of a knowledge management process. (Sarvary [10]). Organisations that use the KM practices without knowledge and awareness of it, will not reap the benefits to its full, if any at all. Deliberately managing knowledge in a systematic and holistic way can increase awareness of benefits to both individuals and organisations.

The term knowledge is one of the most confusing aspects in the Knowledge Mangement theory because of the frequent confusion between knowledge, information an data. Since the data reflects the digital or lettrical description of some actions, processes, facts or phenomenon, information brings added value reflecting an ensemble of data grouped in models and forms, and knowledge is perceived as meaningful information. Knowledge is an understanding, and one gains knowledge, through experience, reasoning, intuition and learning. A main difference between information and knowledge is determined by the way is realized its transfer. Meanwhile the information could be easily transferred from a person to the other, the knowledge has a lower degree of transferability, heaving a psychosocial content and reflecting the intuition, creativity and experience of the owner of that knowledge (Bhat [1]). Mc. Dermott ([6]) highlight the following features of the knowledge which distinguish them by information:

- The knowledge is a human act
- The knowledge is the result of thinking
- The knowledge belongs to the communities
- The knowledge circulates through communities in many ways.

Knowledge in organization is often classified into the following types (identified by Nonaka and Takeuchi [7]):

- explicit knowledge, that can be expressed by words and numbers. It could be easily communicated and distributed like data, scientific formulas, coded procedures and universal principles. Explicit knowledge can be categorized as either structured and unstructured. Structured knowledge is the data or information organized in a particular way for future retrieval. This includes documents, databases and spreadsheets, etc. In contrast, e-mails, images, training courses, audio and video selections are examples of unstructured knowledge because the information they contain is not referenced for retrieval.

- tacit knowledge, which is highly personnel and hardly to formalize, dependent on the human experience. It is much less concrete than explicit knowledge, is difficult to access and in many cases isn't shared with others. In fact, many people aren't conscious by the knowledge they posses or it's value for other people. Dr. Michael Polanyi [8] said "we can know more that we can tell". Polanyi is regarded as the founder of the modern theories about understanding tacit knowledge. He regards knowledge as a process where the individual aspects and culture interact. In this context Polanyi's researches are focused on the idea that is impossible to fit the totality of knowledge in the current language, because his acts are based on his individual experience.

Since knowledge is only an asset that grows as it is used (Lang [4]) knowledge management could viewed as a set of tools and skills developed by an organization to manage the knowledge as a valuable resource. Based on Salisbury ([9]) "knowledge management could be defined as the development of a comprehensive system allowing the generation of new specific knowledge for an organization". This definition highlight that knowledge management is not only an IT system, but an entire system that should integrate the culture, technology and individual talents in a whole, with the goal to increase and improve the knowledge generated over the time.

Knowledge management is the process by the means of which is organized and coordinated the knowledge from the organizations knowledge base. This process supposes:

- Knowledge grouping in types, beginning with the main organizational processes, till the development of the internal memory

- Knowledge store with the goal of storing the knowledge in the special infrastructure in an efficient way

- Knowledge classification with the goal of evaluation the priorities reflecting the quality of knowledge

- Knowledge selection, through the user can use identification criteria to obtain the best knowledge

- Knowledge share, through the knowledge stored in various forms (tacit, explicit) is accessed by all the members of organization and it's stakeholders - clients, suppliers.

The most articles from the speciality literature treat the way of identification and codification of the assets represented by knowledge and how these could be used like a source of competitive advantage, the accent being put on the use of IT systems in these processes. Many times practicing knowledge management is reduced to the implementation of a new IT system with the purpose of knowledge sharing. This obsession for tools and techniques, according to Scarborough, Swan and Preston [11], fails because aren't taken into account at least a few basic aspects. The first error is to assume that all knowledge is codificable, which clearly isn't. Second, the tradition makes the error of overemphasizing the utility of IT in delivering organizational performance. Even if a perfect system exists this could fail because of the human resistance. This implies that people must be willing to contribute their knowledge to these systems, an assumption that is extremely optimistic. This things aren't uncommon, it specially appear in interdisciplinary fields.

Even the literature is plenty of references about the aspects, opportunities and solutions of knowledge management in the private sector, there are very few analyses over the public sector. In public administrations flows huge amounts of data, much of the work of public authorities refers to the elaboration of data, information and knowledge on citizens, business, society, etc. Even most products of public administration's and governace work are delivered in the shape of information and knowldege themselves. How, information and information processing is the core of the public administration, the capability to gather and to make useful information is a definig aspect of any modern state. Information is used to generate new information. But seldom this information is combined into patterns accross sectors or agencies and rarely are these patterns analysed with the purpose of obtaining systematic knowledge. Many times, because of the dimension, diversity and geographical dispersion of the public sector, knowledge available in one place couldn't be reused in other places. In this context, in the last decade appeared new techniques of managing the public sector, grouped under the term eGoverment. This techniques allow the electronical acquisition and distribution of the knowledge to various actors implied in these processes: citizens, state.

New trends in public management, such as those associated with New Public Management, suggest that the public organizations should import managerial processes from the private sector, emulating their successful techniques. However, significant differences in human resource management policies and practices, management of ethical issues and decision processes highlight the idea that is a need of strategies specially designed for the public sector, in the field of Knowledge Management. The challenges issued by the knowledge management in the public sector are characterized by:

- The pressure of competitiveness and the incentives to lower costs are traditionally less important in public organizations, although in time knowledge has become a critical determinant of competitiveness for the public sector. Service delivery and policy making are the main tasks for government. In a knowledge economy, governments are increasingly facing competition in these areas at both international level and national level. At the international level, for example, NGOs and governments are in competition with foreign organisations delivering similar service. At the national level, competition among public bodies is also increased following the decentralisation processes. Private firms produce goods and services that are increasingly intensive in intangible capital, directly competing with the public sector for the delivery of goods and services such as education, science, security and knowledge. For example, through distance learning, coaching, information and courses on the Internet, private firm have increasing influence on the public education and training of citizens, which was traditionally offered by the public sector. As customers demand and receive more customisation from knowledge-oriented private firms, they would also expect similar benefits from the public sector.

- Public organizations traditionally function with a vertical hierarchy, fewer incentives for innovation and team work and the outcomes are less clear and less measurable.

- The activities of public organizations are more knowledge-intensive and the staff is usually highly educated. These organizations would not be able to function properly if they did not have good mechanisms to manage knowledge. Knowledge is an important element of competition and is a central resource of any state. Effective functioning of the public policies rests on effective acquisition and dissemination of knowledge.

- The public sector operates in an environment in which, for reasons of wider public interest, transparency is widely encouraged and the bulk of knowledge is widely accessible.

- The frequent transfer of knowledge workers across public organisations departments also create new challenges for the retention of knowledge and preservation of institutional memory and the training of new staff.

- Analysis made in many countries show that many civil servants will be eligible for retirement in the next 5-10 years (71% of the US civil servants will be retired till 2007, in Finland 85% since 2012) (OECD [12]). For this reason, public organizations need to tweak their KM initiatives to start retaining the knowledge currently in the heads of these employees. Unless this is done, services to the public will suffer. Thus capturing tacit knowledge and then training the staff is important so that it can be passed on to new staff.

In 2002, the PUMA (PUblic MAnagement) Committee decided on "Knowledge Management" as a priority area of work, and launched the first international survey of knowledge management practices for public institutions in OECD members countries. Unfortunately, in this survey hasn't participated any Romanian organization. The broad conclusions of this survey were as follows (OECD [12]):

- Knowledge Management ranks high on the management agenda of a good majority of organizations across OECD member countries, and is seen as one of the top five future internal management priorities.

- While increased openness, transparency policies as well as investments in information technologies have resulted in a perceived increased efficiency, some structural changes expected from better KM practices have not yet been achieved in many organizations, including: the improved competitiveness of the public employer, better recovery from the loss of knowledge, promotion of lifelong learning, etc.

- The improvement of KM practices goes beyond the need for new tools, processes and strategies, and require time and long-term efforts to change behavior and to impact on culture of the organization.

Analysing the main aspects of knowlwdge management in the public sector, it was proven that they are focused on:

- people and organisational culture to stimulate and nurture the sharing and use of knowledge

- processes and methods to locate, create, capture and share knowledge

- technology to store and make knowledge accessible and to allow people to work together without being together.

People are the most important component, because managing knowledge depends upon people's willingness to share and reuse knowledge.

People

The development of an organizational culture suitable for knowledge management is the most important and difficult challenge in KM. The success of KM initiatives depends on the motivation, availability and the skills of employee to share and exchange information.

People in organisation could act as either enablers of, or barriers to, effective KM practices. Barriers need to be identified and removed. Existing enablers also need to be enhanced and additional ones created.

The structure of the public sector organizations has traditionally been compartmentalized. In such an environment, information and knowledge are hardly ever shared across different units and different organizational levels. However, people do share knowledge for some reasons such as reciprocity, reputation and prestige, or sometimes just for altruistic reasons. This suggests that knowledge sharing is not a natural act in organizations. It needs a mental model change. To change the attitude and behavior of the people and reduce barriers, a knowledge sharing culture need to be created. To realise this are necessary the following:

- Raise awareness of benefits of KM.

- Build an environment of trust.
- Develop leaders who foster sharing, as role model.
- Establish a formal rewards and recognition system for knowledge sharing. Employees must be rewarded and recognised, not only for sharing their knowledge with others, but also for being willing to use others' knowledge.
- Development of centers in which peoples with the same responsibilities, but working in different teams, exchange their knowledge.

The process

Concerning the processes and tecniques for knowledge management, it could be identified the following steps:

- Knowledge identification: determine core competencies, recognise strategic capabilities, assess the expertise level for each knowledge domain, and focus on bridging the gap between the existing and needed knowledge.
- Knowledge capturing: attempt to obtain needed knowledge from both inside and outside sources and to formalise and document the obtained knowledge.
- Knowledge selecting: assess the value of the captured and formalised knowledge and filter it to obtain knowledge that seems appropriate.
- Knowledge storing: classify the filtered knowledge, get it organised in a standard format, add it to the organisational memory, review and update it periodically.
- Knowledge sharing: classify and retrieve knowledge from organisational memory, and make it available for the knowledge users.
- Knowledge application: utilise the knowledge in performing tasks such as solving problems, making decisions, researching ideas, and learning.
- Knowledge creation: discover new knowledge through a variety of processes such as surveys, best practices, research, pilot studies, and data mining.

Technology

Technology is a main factor used in knowledge management processes. Presently, there are already available a lot of technological solutions for knowledge management. To choose a proper architecture are necessary the following actions:

- Identify the appropriate hardware and software to conduct KM and make sure that the technology used fits the organization people and processes.
- Design a technological infrastructure as identified by employees' needs in knowledge resources.

- Establish an organisation wide intranet with extensive communicating and collaboration capabilities to share explicit knowledge (e-mail, discission lists, chat, audio and videoconferences).
- Build a knowledge portal accessible via Internet.
- Organize and store the knowledge assets in an electronic medium to enable efficient and faster access and retrieval.
- Provide customised access to knowledge resources to facilitate interaction with citizens, customers, suppliers, partners and others.

Knowledge management represents an important method in developing a new modern administrative structure in Romania, which will lead to increased professional and managerial skills of the civil servants, determining the identification of some special techniques of public management that could be successfully applied in our country, decreasing the duration of the reforms in the public sector and the transition of the Romanian society towards a real democracy.

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