
Organisational Culture as a Knowledge Management Enabler in Selected Private Higher Education Institutions in Botswana: A Question of Fit or Misfit

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This paper intended to determine the role corporate culture plays in facilitating or hindering knowledge management (KM) practices, especially knowledge sharing, in selected private higher education institutions in Botswana and whether there is a fit or misfit between organisational culture of these institutions and international KM best practices.

Several key literary KM sources were consulted in which the theoretical underpinnings of the study were firmly grounded. This study used a quantitative method through the questionnaire as a data collection instrument.

A sample comprising 132 respondents was chosen from a total population of 670 comprising academic staff from five selected higher education institutions. The culture of these institutions was found to be negatively impacting on KM practices by, for example, not recognising and rewarding employee effort in promoting KM behaviour, not involving employees in decision-making, and failing to cultivate trust among employees and between employees and management.

Keywords: *Organisational culture, trust, collaboration, people, knowledge creation, knowledge sharing.*

Introduction

Organisational culture is a social consciousness that can assist in shaping individual employee behaviour toward innovativeness and it may support or impede innovation and hence is a critical factor in the way employees of an organisation behave (Kao, Wu, and Su, 2011). Smith and Lumba (2008) argue that organisational culture reflects the behaviour of people within an organisation which enables or hinders effective KM practices that include knowledge sharing. The important role of interaction between employees should not be underrated and it is therefore imperative that the culture of an organisation does not hinder the interaction which forms the basis of knowledge creation and sharing by not stigmatising failure but rather looking at it as an opportunity to learn (attitude towards mistakes and how leadership deals with employees who commit mistakes (Tseng and Kuo, 2010); regarding the recording and sharing of knowledge as routine in the organisation; considering knowledge sharing to be a strength and knowledge hoarding a weakness; allowing time for creative thinking; encouraging employees to learn more and to develop themselves; and ensuring that there are no restrictions on access to information except that which is regarded as confidential or personal (Smith and Lumba, 2008). This paper seeks to establish whether the culture of selected private higher education institutions in Botswana fulfils these important requirements.

Literature review

Definitions of culture

Different definitions of culture have been proffered by different authors and have been collated as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1: Definitions of culture

| Author(s) | Definition |
|------------------------|---|
| Soley and Pandya, 2003 | Culture is a shared system of perceptions and values, or a group who share a certain system of perceptions and values |
| Hofstede, 2001 | Culture is the collective programming of the mind that distinguishes the |

| | |
|--------------------------------|--|
| | members of one group or category of people from another. |
| Schein, 2005 | Culture is a pattern of basic assumptions invented, discovered, or developed by a given group as it learns to cope with its problems of external adaption and internal integration that has worked well enough to be considered valid, and therefore, to be taught to new members as the correct way to perceive, think, and feel in relation to those problems. |
| Mckinslay and Williamson, 2010 | Culture is the way we do things here and the way we treat one another around here. This means employees will eventually share and exchange knowledge and ideas with each other because it is natural phenomena in the organisation rather than being forced to do that. |

Knowledge-sharing culture

According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), since knowledge originates from the human brain in the form of tacit-personal and context-specific forms, it needs to be expressed through explicit ways in order to achieve its explicit-formal and systematic form. It is therefore vital to inculcate a culture of sharing both tacit and explicit knowledge among employees within an organisation. Since knowledge in KM is considered a systematic set of principles, processes, organisation structures, and technologies that assist employees to share and leverage knowledge to fulfil business objectives, the viable sharing of knowledge through formal and informal interactions and collaboration will be helpful in supporting KM initiatives and practices (Kuo and Young, 2008; Friesl, Sackmann and Kremser, 2011). Collaborative innovation has become a very popular business strategy for enterprises to enhance their competitiveness in an environment characterised by cutthroat competition (Niosi 2010; Chen, 2012; Rosell and Lakemond, 2012). Mercier-Laurent (2011) is of the view that collaborative culture results in complementary knowledge sharing and effective use of information and technology leading to win-win relationships.

Riege (2005) argues that knowledge sharing is a type of social dealing among individuals as a result of the fact that effective knowledge sharing is individual-based rather than people-based. This explains why it is important for organisations to understand the thoughts, minds, as well as behaviour of its employees considering that knowledge requires a culture that facilitates employees to exchange knowledge as a component of their

daily routines. For effective knowledge sharing to occur, a favourable environment – the ‘Ba’ (Nakano, Muniz, and Batista, 2013) – must exist.

Tan, Lim and Ng (2009) propose that businesses create a desire to share knowledge as a guiding principle in organisational survival, that is, a culture that shares knowledge. Also, leadership’s level of tolerance for error affects trust and employees’ readiness to share knowledge (Tseng and Kuo, 2010). The culture that exists in an organisation is tremendously important for realising that a strong culture that inculcates the sharing of knowledge among employees helps the organisation to enhance its competitiveness (Alam, Abdullah, and Zain, 2009). Karlsen and Gottschalk (2004) argue that shaping culture is central for an organisation’s ability to manage knowledge more effectively. Culture interacts with, and influences, knowledge sharing in many ways (Karlsen and Gottschalk, 2004; King, 2007; Schein (2005) such as shaping assumptions about what knowledge is worth sharing among an organisation’s employees, defining the inter-relationship between employee knowledge and organisational knowledge, influencing the process whereby new knowledge is created, validated and disseminated throughout the organisation, and establishing the context for social interaction that plays a pivotal role in how knowledge is exchanged. This paper seeks to establish if this is happening in selected higher education institutions in Botswana.

Methodology

This study used a questionnaire survey (quantitative method) for understanding the perspective of academic staff on the appropriateness of organisational culture as a KM enabler in their institutions. The study’s target population was all academic staff of selected higher education institutions in Botswana offering degree programmes ranging from lower level to senior management. The sample frame thus comprised, firstly, a list of five higher education institutions that have been operating for the past twelve months or more. Secondly, the sample frame also comprised the list of all academic staff members who have worked for the institution for at least 12 months. The units of selection therefore are the education institutions in the first instance and academic employees in the second instance. The total population surveyed (that is, all academic employees of these institutions including top management) came to 670.

The sample size based on the sample size calculator was 130 (The Research Advisors, 2006). Table 2 shows the population of academic staff in the selected education institutions in this study and the sample size from the different strata.

Table 2: Strata, population, and sample size

| Strata | College 1 | College 2 | College 3 | College 4 | College 5 | Total (N_i) | Sample size |
|---|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|--------------|----------------------------------|----------------------------|
| Middle Management (N ₁) | 33 | 28 | 13 | 9 | 8 | N₁ = 91 | n₁ = 13 |
| Lower Management (N ₂) | 39 | 33 | 15 | 11 | 9 | N₂ = 107 | n₂ = 15 |
| Non-managerial teaching staff (N ₃) | 181 | 142 | 58 | 47 | 44 | N₃ = 472 | n₃ = 104 |
| Total (N) | 253 | 203 | 86 | 67 | 61 | N = 670 | n = 132 |

This study adopted the stratified sampling technique which is used when the population to be sampled does not constitute a homogeneous group. The researcher formed strata on the basis of common characteristics of the items to be placed in each stratum thus ensuring that elements in each stratum were most homogeneous within each stratum and most

homogenous between the different strata implying that strata were purposively established based on the past experience and personal judgment of the researcher. Different strata comprised academic staff in middle management, lower management and non-managerial teaching staff and then units were selected from each stratum to comprise a sample as shown in Table 2 above. This is stratified random sampling using proportional allocation.

Results

The mean scores of items on organisational culture and KM range from 'strongly disagree' to 'strongly agree' with mean scores of 1.88 to 4.07 and a standard deviation (S.D) ranging from 0.70 to 1.36. The highest score of 4.07 indicate that the employees agree that crucial information is concentrated in the hands of a privileged few, followed by a slightly positive perception of 3.24 showing that employees of selected higher education institutions covered in this study have the required competencies such that other employees can rely on them to obtain the knowledge they need. The respondents 'slightly agree' that there is dependency of employees on other employees to get the job done (interdependency) and to meet organisational goals (3.10). Further, the respondents indicated that employees were not involved in decision making (2.38), that management in their organisations does not readily and publicly acknowledge the source of knowledge even if it is a junior employee and give him/her due recognition for it (2.32), that leadership of their organisations does not penalise employees who make mistakes while trying out new ideas (2.08), and that management of their organisations has not created an environment where trust exists among employees and between employees and senior management (2.03). The employees also indicated that there are no obvious benefits to the employees who share knowledge as evidenced by a low mean score of 1.88. All these views are indicated in Table 3 below.

Table 3: Analysis of organisational culture and KM

| | Mean | Std. Deviation |
|--|------|----------------|
| Q1 In your organisation, to what extent is crucial information concentrated in the hands of a privileged few? | 4.07 | .80 |
| Q2 To what extent do employees in your organisation possess the required competencies such that you can rely on them to obtain knowledge that you need but do not have? | 3.24 | .70 |
| Q3 To what extent do you depend on other employees to get the job done (interdependency) and to meet organisational goals? | 3.10 | .74 |
| Q4 To what extent are employees of your organisation involved in decision-making? | 2.38 | 1.02 |
| Q5 To what extent does the top management of my organisation readily and publicly acknowledge the source of knowledge even if it is a junior employee and give him/her due recognition for it? | 2.32 | 1.01 |
| Q6 Leadership of my organisation does not penalize employees who make mistakes while trying out new ideas | 2.08 | 1.09 |
| Q7 To what extent has management of your organisation created an environment where trust exists among employees and between employees and senior management? | 2.03 | 1.04 |
| Q8 In my organisation, there are obvious benefits to the employee who shares knowledge (e.g. promotion, salary increase | 1.88 | 1.38 |

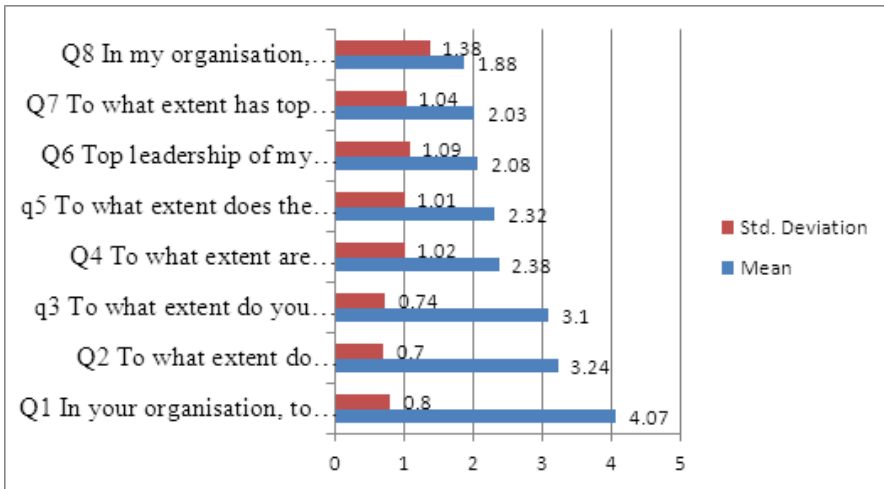


Figure 1: Analysis of organisational culture and KM

Respondents were asked to cite examples of lack of trust between employees and management (Open-ended question) and the following are the common examples mentioned:

- Close monitoring of employee activities;
- Restricting access to information for staff;
- Staff selling each other out to management;
- Staff members just disappearing to join other organisations without giving notice;
- Staff members interacting along nationality lines;
- Not recognising well-qualified and experienced academics;
- Staff not contributing in staff meetings; and
- Prevalence of fear among employees.

Conclusions

Questionnaire responses to the questions sought to determine the extent to which organisational culture of selected higher education institutions covered in this study facilitates best KM practices such as knowledge generation, sharing, and utilisation. The results of the study clearly revealed a heavy concentration of organisational information in the hands of management and a privileged few as indicated by a mean score of 4.07 on

the questionnaire. This means that employees feel very strongly that information in their organisations is inadequately communicated and is not accessed equally by those who deserve to have it. The results also revealed that management of selected institutions does not adequately acknowledge and recognise sources of knowledge even if these are junior employees. Failure to get recognition for promoting KM activities will demotivate employees such that they will not see the value of expending effort and time engaging in KM activities which mean the absence of will and zeal to generate, share, use, and reuse knowledge to enhance business performance of the selected institutions. Practising these activities would give them a competitive advantage thus bolstering their capability to survive in a competitive environment. Questionnaire responses (mean of 2.08) revealed that management penalises employees who commit mistakes while trying new ways of doing things. This is critical because it has a negative effect on the performance of these institutions. In an environment characterised by fear of penalties, employees are apprehensive about knowledge-sharing as it may jeopardise their job security and lead to stigmatisation as failures or incompetent (if the new idea fails) leading to loss of rewards.

The results of the study (mean score of 2.38) showed that there is little employee involvement in decision-making. This denotes an unpleasant scenario for KM practice because employees of selected institutions are not involved in making decisions on issues that affect them every day in their organisations hence do not feel part of those organisations. They cannot, therefore, be expected to take the initiative and come up with new ideas that promote organisational effectiveness and competency leading to enhanced organisational performance, hence a critical KM enabler is missing in these institutions. Again, the respondents were largely of the view that management of the institutions has not created an environment where trust exists (mean score of 2.03). In other words, there is a high level of mistrust in the institutions. Such high levels of mistrust across organisational hierarchy have far reaching consequences for knowledge creation and sharing because employees who do not trust each other will not share knowledge since they do not know how the knowledge will be perceived by the organisational leadership.

Regular exchanges of critical knowledge are crucial in organisations operating in a competitive environment since they keep employees and leadership up-to-date with the goings-on in the environment which readies

them as a team to effectively deal with any turbulent events that may occur in that environment (Robbins, Millet, and Cacioppe, 2009).

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