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The Future for Knowledge Management: A Rocky Road or Sunlit Green Meadows? A Discussion of Eastern European Perspectives.

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1. Introduction

The question of whether post communist countries will take up the idea of “westernized” Knowledge Management (KM) is open to debate. There are of course alternatives to this and Eastern European countries may well evolve to produce their own particular style of KM. It is interesting to consider the different perspectives which are taken when sharing information is a new factor as new models and frameworks can then be devised to incorporate this changed organizational culture. The purpose of this paper is to explore these new perspectives and to present the results of one country study. The paper deals with two central themes, the different concepts of sharing in societies and the exploration of Knowledge Management in Poland.

Within these themes, there is a definition of Knowledge Management and a discussion regarding how organizations are coping with the changes in society, for example, from collective to individualistic societies. Finally, empirical results are presented of a study which examined the relationship between Knowledge Management and Polish SME’s. The paper concludes with thoughts as to the way forward and asks the question is the future for Knowledge Management a rocky road or a sunlit green meadow?

2. Sharing and societies.

In order to discuss KM sensibly, we must start with a clear definition. KM can be defined as being about the management of all information in organisations in such a way as to enhance the progress of the organisations aims and objectives. More formally, knowledge management can be defined as “the generation, representation, storage, transfer, transformation, application, embedding and protecting of organisational knowledge” (Schultze and Leidner, 2002). The overall success of the organisation, however, rests on one aspect, that of sharing information.

One of the new factors in Eastern European countries (and there is an acknowledgement that this aspect is inherent in other countries too) is this concept of freely sharing information i.e. the concept of what is known is KM literature of “Knowledge Sharing”. Sharing only takes place where there is trust and where there is a shared feeling of ownership of goals. The reasons behind the tendency to share are based on the kind of interpersonal relations between co- workers inherent within the organisation and the effects of social relationships on organisational teams. Strengthening the social

relationships between individuals in the team is crucial in motivating team members to share knowledge.

However, all organisations also operate within their external environment i.e. society. An analysis of types of society may be helpful as it allows us to consider the aspect of sharing information and the management of knowledge from quite different perspectives. For example, Perrill's (2007) work was concerned with the two concepts of societies which display characteristics associated with individualism and collectivism. These types of societies are important and means of charting differences in the concept of sharing (Chen et al 2001; Hofstede and Hofstede, 2005). Yet all the relatively newly "free" Eastern European societies have in common a sense of uncertainty about the future and it is this aspect which we will comment on next.

Uncertainty can be viewed from two areas, that of "relational uncertainty" (according to Berger, 1975) where it is difficult for employees to predict the beliefs and behaviour of colleagues and the that of "informational uncertainty" where the accuracy of the actual information is called into question - as addressed in the information seeking literature (Burke, 2003, 2006, 2007; Choo 2001; Kuhlthau, 1993; Davenport and Prusak; 2000). Both these areas are concerned with fear and trepidation experienced by organisational members about levels of accuracy, quantity of information - if there is sufficient knowledge to make quality decisions and issues about trusting the source of the information.

Three related factors impact on the ability and desire to share information which inevitably affects views and use of knowledge management. These are the type of society in which the organisation operates, the levels of uncertainty prevalent within that society and the types of interpersonal relations in the organisation

Whether post communist countries should or could take up the ideas of westernised forms of Knowledge Management is yet open to debate. Research has been undertaken which looked at aspects of Knowledge Management in Russia, Hungary and Poland and the full report will be published in a future paper. However, the work which took place in Poland on the "Relationship of SME's to Knowledge Management" is reported here in the next section.

3. The exploration of Knowledge Management in Poland: an empirical study.

The aim of the study was to explore Knowledge Management in Small and Medium Sized Enterprises in Krakow and surrounding regions in Poland. The research was a joint venture between the Institute of Information Science at the Jagiellonian University and the Information Systems Institute of the University of Salford.

In order to achieve the aim, three objectives were set. The first objective was to investigate how far SMEs have been able to implement KM strategies into their every day practice; second to highlight any need for training and third to highlight business performance. There was also an overarching objective to investigate the performance of a general nature after Poland became a member of the EC.

There was considerable support for the project as both the importance of SMEs in the new economy and the skills of knowledge managers had been highlighted by various relevant bodies. For example, the following is taken from the “*Country Assistance Strategy Document*” prepared for Poland by the World Bank in 2002:

“Support for SME Development”

“The importance of small and medium enterprises (SMEs) for the Polish economy has been steadily growing – their contributions to GDP, to exports and to employment have all increased markedly since transition began. Besides the need to ensure a macro environment that is conducive to business development and structural reforms and to continue the move towards a market economy, it is important to alleviate microeconomic and institutional constraints that discriminate against small firms and reduce their growth and competitiveness. In financial markets, improving access to credits requires an increase in the number of financial institutions that find lending to SMEs to be profitable, and therefore sustainable. Government intervention should be aimed at strengthening laws governing the enforcement of contracts, forfeiture and collateral. While the government’s current restructuring programme gives prominence to SMEs support, lasting gains will only follow from an initiative to improve the business environment more generally.

With the unprecedented pace of modern technological development, ensuring an environment which promotes the appropriate development and adoption of new technologies is more important than ever before. This is an issue with many facets, for example, the development of appropriate education and training; access to information and the level of competition in the telecomm sector and incentive for technical change.

There is a strong case for the government to work in close consultation with the business and academic communities to develop, adopt, disseminate and implement a comprehensive knowledge management strategy.”

Since 2002, there have of course been many changes for Poland including the membership of the EU, and other bodies have taken a keen interest in the economical transition of Poland as evidenced by the following quote from Department for International Development (DFID)

“UK assistance to Poland started with an offer of a grant of £25 over 5 years made in June 1989 by the UK Prime Minister to the President of Poland. This event formed the birth of the UK’s Know How Fund (KHF), which was subsequently extended to other transition countries in Central and Eastern Europe. Since 1989, the UK has funded a wide

variety of projects to assist in Poland's transition to a democratic market economy. The total cost of these projects is estimated at a little under £150m (including projects managed by the KHF and DFID, but funded out of the Polish Stabilization Fund).

KHF was transferred to DFID in 1997, the programmes scaled down and the focus for new projects shifted towards assistance for disadvantaged communities. In March 2003 UK assistance to Poland and to most other transition countries that have opened negotiations with the EC is to end".

(Department for International Development (DFID) *Report on UK Assistance for Poland's transition 20003-2006*)

This will leave Poland to manage its own economy and business and to deal with knowledge management alone. Consequently, it was important to clearly identify the project beneficiaries which were first, the SMEs in Krakow and surrounding rural areas; second the Polish Government who will gain information on performance in this area and third the UK Universities who would provide any identified training needs

Results

Company owners and staff were asked various questions regarding views on the use of KM within their own organization. The results were qualitative as the data collected by interview. The major variables which affect their use of KM were identified as:

- Strong intuition of managers needed (5)*
- Web is good (6)*
- Local sources poor and not always available (11)*
- Competition strong (12)*
- Profit orientated (15)*
- Harnessing intellectual capital (7)*
- Keep abreast of current affairs (8)*
- Too much information hinders (4)*
- Age / Experiences of staff affect barriers to sharing (3)*
- Some business very niche – difficult to get information (2)*
- Confidentiality issues (17)*
- Some markets unstable and undeveloped therefore even more
Difficult to get information (18)*
- Range of knowledge is important (19)*
- Commercial software in use. (20)*

(The number in the bracket is the total number of times similar comments were made)

This list is not exhaustive but gives an example of the nature of the comments. Most companies were keen on KM and did attempt to use some kind of system. However, the most frequently occurring comment was the need for reliable technology for KM

systems. In order for this to happen Poland's technological infrastructure needs to be improved.

4. Conclusion

This paper aimed to explore new perspectives and to present the results of one country study. Types of societies and aspects of uncertainty both in society and in organizations are briefly discussed. The results of a Polish study are presented and interesting results are displayed. The intended impact of the Polish Project was to provide a sustainable method of assessing the effectiveness of Knowledge Management at regular intervals; to create a better understanding of the local situation; to provide training if appropriate and to leave a legacy of a stronger two-way partnership with local business and the local partner, the Jagiellonian University. It is considered that the work did influence in these ways but that there is more work to be done. Finally, it is expected that this project will be extended to other regions and to other countries new to the EU.

It is interesting to consider the different perspectives which are taken when sharing information is a new factor. New models and frameworks need to be devised in order to incorporate changed societal and organizational culture. Whether the future for Knowledge Management is a "rocky road" or a "sunlit green meadow" will depend on two factors - the cooperation of relevant bodies and the appropriate resources being made available. It is hoped that now, today in the freedom of the 21st century both these factors can be given reasonable consideration and a positive response.

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