Knowledge Management: A Public Sector Perspective

By Dr Avain Mannie
Introduction: Ancient Knowledge ‘Lost’- Seeking Past Solutions for Future Problems
Introduction
KM-Private or Public?

Theme: From Competition to Collaboration

“If you want to go fast, go alone. If you want to go far, go with others.”

~ -African proverb
The US Capone Story
Problem Statement

• Knowledge sharing amongst SA government agencies is limited.
• In Thabo Mbeki’s address at the KM Management conference at Stellenbosch Bus. School, he pointed out that the purpose of the conference was to discuss: ‘the role of knowledge in the betterment of society’. This may be linked to the ‘Batho Pele’ (people first) principles, which aim to achieve overall service delivery.
• The problem may be stated succinctly as follows: There is insufficient and ineffective knowledge sharing between government agencies in South Africa in the pursuit of effective problem solving.
Objectives of the Study

The primary objective of this study is to investigate and test the impact of independent variables on the perceived effectiveness of knowledge management in government agencies.

- Identify the existing barriers for knowledge sharing, within and between the relevant government enforcement agencies where collaborative sharing practices are required.
- To formulate a knowledge management model, which will enable knowledge sharing between the relevant government agencies and which could be extended to other government agencies.
Scope of the Study

• Whilst government has many departments looking over many sectors, this study had to focus on a particular sector. As such, the criminal sector, based on the example of abalone poaching, was selected primarily due to the statement made by Prof Britz, “the various government agencies associated with combating the illegal industry are not working effectively with each other”.

• In essence – no collaboration existed between the relevant government agencies.
Research Methodology

- Quantitative Study- Data was gathered using an electronic survey made available to different national government agencies within the security sector.
- Responses were analysed using structural equation modelling (SEM).
- Literature Review conducted with focus on prior KM research globally and within the public sector
- Anonymity required
Knowledge Management Pillars

Leadership

Organisation Culture

Learning Organisation

Information Communication Technology

Pillars embedded to align and secure KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

KM Pillars Commonly Identified in Global Literature

Adapted from Cranfield and Taylor (2008)
KM in Public Sector – An International Perspective

• In *Malaysia*, Quin, Hamdan and Yusoff identified KM as a strategic discipline in transforming governments. Authors found no model to measure the state of readiness in implementing KM and thus developed the **Knowledge Management Readiness Model**, incorporating four readiness factors, namely organisational, practice and approach, driver and technological factors.

• In *Austria*, Traunmuller and Wimmer proposed that KM be used as a discipline in enhancing the quality of public service. One of the emerging factors in their presentation was the acknowledgement and focus of an electronic government or ‘e-government’
• In Iran, the study by Salavati, Shafei and Shaghayegh examined KM in public organisations. They found an increasing trend for KM implementation in organisations, although “KM in public organisations is a toddler and little has been done to bring the subject to use in the public sector”.

• In the Republic of Korea, the need to enhance public trust due to increasing administrative demands and complicated social problems resulted in the Korean government placing KM at the forefront of its efforts. According to Joon, “the concept of KM is not new”. Joon stated that in Korean history the discipline of KM may be found as early as the seventeenth century, in the beliefs of ‘Silhak’, a school of practical learning.
• In the *Korean* experience, the defining moment for KM came about after the **inauguration of the Roh Moo-Hyun administration**. In August 2005, and after acknowledging that the failure to implement KM would lead to poor administration and service delivery, President Roh “**issued an order to develop and roll out information and data gathering and sharing system throughout government**”. Joon clearly highlighted the importance of **leadership** towards the actionable rolling out of knowledge management.
In a review of the *Irish Civil Service*, O’Riordan explained that KM is nothing new but merely establishing methods to improve the codification and sharing of knowledge.

- A tremendous effort is required to change the organisational culture. Furthermore, “a comprehensive approach to the management of organisation knowledge” also needs to be adopted, rather than mere discreet efforts which may only focus on technology. O’Riordan highlighted the strategic benefits of KM, whilst pointing out how to overcome resistance to its implementation from colleagues who see KM as “a time consuming fad”. More importantly, O’Riordan identified the convincing of senior managers (leaders) as the biggest challenge.

- Recommends KM become a part of the organisation culture, by including staff on all initiatives.
• In Finland, Puonti did a study on constructing a common understanding between police officers and tax inspectors. Puonti’s study concluded that the collaboration between the agencies posed a learning challenge. The transmission of information in this instance was mostly verbal in nature and the lack of a joint focus was prevalent.

• Yao sought to investigate how culture, attitudes and barriers affect KM in a Hong Kong government department. Yao found that KM and knowledge sharing were both welcome ideas, but that, although informal and tacit knowledge sharing practices were prevalent, Chinese culture remained a barrier for knowledge sharing.
The case of the *United States* Intelligence Community (IC), Lahneman highlighted three major factors which hinders intelligence efforts, namely international terrorist groups (whose aim is to prevent the IC from obtaining important pieces of data and information); the “information revolution” (the flooding of information making it tedious for the IC to separate the relevant or useful from the irrelevant information received) and lastly, the issue of stove piping or knowledge “silting”, whereby each agency is reluctant to share its information with other IC members.

- Lahneman- move from a *technology-centric to a learning-centric model*. IT is not to be ignored but must be seen as an important tool. The issue of the *organisation culture* needs to be addressed and an atmosphere of trust must exist for knowledge transfer to take place.
Knowledge Management (KM)- The Dependant Variable

- KM has emerged as an important organisational concept and whilst definitions still differ on what KM is, consensus is emerging. In a study by Kippenberger consensus amongst respondents agreed that KM is defined as ‘the collection of processes that govern the creation, dissemination, and utilisation of knowledge to fulfil organisational objectives’.

- In terms of the global, strategic importance of KM, a report from the Economic Intelligence Unit, which assessed likely changes to the global economy between 2006 and 2020, stated that KM as a discipline would be the major boardroom challenge.

- Yuen , in a global workshop held on managing knowledge to build trust in governments, highlighted the explosion of digital connectivity and further stated that most governments had accepted the use of information technology (IT) for knowledge and ultimate public sector reform.
• KM, in its simplest sense, establishes the ways in which organisations create, retain and share knowledge towards ultimately resolving problems.

• As KM is a **broad discipline** (Dalkir), the thinking is that if organisations embrace the discipline, then knowledge sharing methodologies and processes will have a platform to ensure the success of knowledge sharing.
Findings

• The research has confirmed that the factors organisational culture and learning organisation have a significant impact on the effectiveness of KM. The literature revealed that there are numerous factors impacting on organisational culture, hence the need to identify what these factors are and their levels of importance.

• Understanding a culture and identifying the complex knowledge sharing processes is not an easy task. Further research required in the public sector in terms of understanding ‘what employees want’, what drives employees to hoard or share knowledge and what knowledge sharing methodology is best suited for the specific public organisations. In support of the critical factors found pertinent in this study, a model for knowledge management in the public sector is proposed.
Organisation Culture

• Defined as the **perception of the character of an organisation by its employees**. The individual perceptions combine to create the collective organisational culture. If the culture is collaborative, then knowledge sharing amongst employees should be occurring. However, a lack of important enablers such as rewards, or the presence of noticeable barriers, may inhibit a sharing culture (Riege). Critical to identify the barriers in order to remove them so that knowledge sharing may become a common culture with the relevant organisation.

• Kreitner, Kinicki and Buelens ID four functions of organisational culture: ‘it gives members an organisational **identity**; it facilitates **collective commitment**; it promotes social system **stability**; and it **shapes behaviour** by assisting members to make sense of their surroundings’. If the leadership commits and drives a collaborative, learning culture, then employees at lower levels will acknowledge that their leaders indeed reward innovative and collaborative work behaviour.
Campbell pointed out that social factors, like *trust and collaboration*, also form part of the overall organisational culture. Thus, by focusing on developing organisational culture, these factors will improve. Similarly, by acknowledging an organisation as a learning organisation, subject matter experts are more likely to be recognised, empowered and used in order to share their knowledge with employees and thus the overall organisation.

Globally, *trust in governments* has come under scrutiny because of the corrupt practices of leaders. Increasingly, people are losing trust in governments and their leaders- (Cloete).
Learning Organisation (LO)

• A learning organisation is one that **promotes the exchange of information** between employees and creates a more knowledgeable workforce. An organisation requires a particularly **flexible organisational structure**, in which people will accept and adapt to new ideas and changes through a shared vision (Schein). This brings a new perspective and growing importance to organisational knowledge, and the LO accepts the challenge of creating a culture of managing knowledge. Clearly, a LO is also driven by its leadership and culture.

• Goh viewed ‘**knowledge transfer**’ as a key dimension of a learning organisation and hence as a critical factor for knowledge management. One of the methods used for knowledge transfer is that of initiating **communities of practice**. Communities of practice are therefore viewed as ‘actionable’ means of creating a sharing culture whilst ensuring a sustainable platform with known knowledge workers and a suitable method for communicating, either in a virtual set-up or within an informal meeting strategy.
Collaborative knowledge tree model for government sector problem solving

Branches/Agencies of Government

Factors beneath the surface
- Organisational Culture
- Learning Culture
- SME Tacit Knowledge
- Trust

Leadership
Policy
Closing remarks

• The study has confirmed and exposed the two significant factors, organisational culture and a learning organisation, for leaders to pursue to enabling the KM agenda in public sector organisations.

• **Further research** may look at amounts spent by government organisations on technology as opposed to people (learning, rewarding, incentivising, etc.). This, in turn, requires deeper research into the organisational culture and questions such as ‘why’ people share, and what the barriers to and enablers of effective sharing are. Contrary to the question posed by Wilson, KM is not a fad but indeed a discipline that is continuously being embraced by visionary leaders.

• SA government departments currently face a serious challenge in terms of improving their service delivery commitments to the public. If KM is correctly addressed and implemented, this will certainly enable these departments to meet their national obligation to service excellence.
• Whilst there is universal consent as to the strategic importance of KM, actionable implementation of knowledge sharing initiatives appears to be lacking. Collaboration between agencies is key.
• Imperative for Leaders to acknowledge that KM is a multi-faceted discipline that offers strategic advantages and to instil a knowledge sharing culture by reviewing Policy and work procedures.
• This requires their organisations and SA as a developing country to be learning organisations, which necessitates a change in the organisational culture and knowledge interventions through their academies of learning.
"All things share the same breath - the beast, the tree, the man, the air shares its spirit with all the life it supports."

~ Chief Seattle