

DEVELOPING A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY FOR THE ARAB WORLD

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ABSTRACT

The aim of this study is to investigate the issue of knowledge sharing and knowledge management (KM) in an Arab context, by identifying the main issues and obstacles which arise as a result of the Arab culture. By using field data from questionnaires given to staff in an Arab firm, the research shows that western based KM practices should be applied cautiously in a non-western setting. The research concluded that the most appropriate overall knowledge strategy to adopt is a hybrid strategy of 'intellectual asset management' i.e. where existing company assets are more fully exploited and 'personal knowledge assert responsibility' i.e. where individual employees are encouraged to develop and share their skills and knowledge. This blended approach will nurture a culture of knowledge sharing amongst staff, which is often difficult to achieve. The research also demonstrates how the biggest barriers to knowledge sharing in Arab organisations are the people themselves together with their social and cultural beliefs. These results will be useful within the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and for other Arab governments and organisations (as well as multinationals who are looking to set up in an Arab country), when trying to formulate KM strategies. This research allows them to understand better the barriers that will prevent successful implementation of KM in an Arab setting. It also provides them with a series of recommendations to help overcome such obstacles, and thus seeks to find active solutions to ensure that the concepts of knowledge management and sharing are not lost in translation.

Keywords: knowledge sharing, knowledge management, strategy, Arab world, culture

1. INTRODUCTION

The aim of this study is to examine the applicability of knowledge management cross-culturally, as the concept of knowledge management is essentially a western construct, and few papers exist that deal with the effectiveness of knowledge management in a non-western context. Therefore, this work reports on exploratory research within the Middle Eastern context of the UAE.

Mohamed *et al* (2008) cite H.H. Sheikh Muhammad Bin Rashid Al Mokatoum (the ruler of the Dubai and vice president of UAE) as stating that there is a distinct need to build an 'Arab model' of KM, 'that reflects Arab culture' (pp. 111). Mohamed *et al* (2008) support this by stating that a complex mix of frameworks may be necessary, due to the large cultural differences between Arab and western cultures. Therefore, the literature acknowledges that the concept of KM cannot be directly applicable to non-western firms; rather such a model or concept would need changing to be more culturally adaptable or sensitive. This is concurred by McDermott and O'Dell (2001) who assert that successful implementation of knowledge

management strategy occurs when firms modify their approach to adapt and align it within their existing culture, instead of trying to change their culture and align it with standardized knowledge management practices. Although, it should be noted that McDermott and O'Dell's (2001) discussion of culture related to organisational and not national culture, however, many valuable similarities can be drawn from their work.

2. LITERATURE REVIEW

2.1 Context of Research: Barriers to Knowledge Management within Arab Countries

Culture has been identified as being a primary reason for preventing the communication and disclosure of knowledge (McDermott and O'Dell, 2001). While Mohamed *et al* (2008) offer key insights into reasons why the management of knowledge is lacking in the Arab region by summarizing a UN development programme report (UNDP, 2002). This asserts that the main reasons for KM deficiency are due to:

- differences in beliefs and culture between Arab nations and western nations
- high illiteracy rates amongst the population
- poor availability and reliability of technology and communication networks and lack of investment in R&D
- political factors, as many political dissenters leave the country, take their knowledge away, resulting in the 'brain-drain' phenomenon.

The skills shortage currently being experienced in the United Arab emirates region (Al-Ali, 2008) can be considered to be a prominent factor in the lack of successful KM implementation, as many of the UAE workers themselves are simply not well trained enough or unable to make knowledge management practices work effectively.

Furthermore, cultural differences pertaining to trust were highlighted by Weir and Hutchings (2005) who assert that within an Arab context, managers are only likely to participate in knowledge sharing with individuals with whom they have built up a firm relationship based on confidence and trust. This appears to be logical when one considers historical Arab knowledge sharing practices, which are based on tribal knowledge passed down orally from each generation to family and kinsmen (Mohamed *et al* 2008). Arabs have a tradition of sharing knowledge with those to whom they are close and trust, rather than with strangers. This emphasis on personal relationships may act a major hindrance in formal knowledge sharing within Arab organisations, as the high proportion of temporary immigrant workers may make it difficult for long term trusting relationships to be formed.

Wiig (1997) and the APQC (American Productivity and Quality Center) identified the following six emerging KM strategies in a study of organisations considered to be leading the way in this area (cited in Haggie and Kingston, 2003):

- Knowledge Strategy as Business Strategy
 - Comprehensive enterprise wide strategy, where knowledge is the product
- Intellectual Asset Management Strategy
 - Enhance or exploit current company assets
- Personal Knowledge Asset Responsibility Strategy
 - Encourage and support employees to develop and share their skills and knowledge
- Knowledge Creation Strategy
 - Emphasise the innovation and creation of new knowledge through R&D
- Knowledge Transfer Strategy
 - Transfer of knowledge and best practices to improve operational quality and efficiency

- Customer-focused Knowledge Strategy
 - Aim to better understand customer needs

Haggie and Kingston (2003) also believe that when selecting the most appropriate strategy, attitudes of culture with regard to team building, openness and sharing should be considered.

2.2 Framework Underpinning this Research

The framework used to investigate the research aims is that employed by Skok and Goldstein (2007), whereby they combine the frameworks offered by Nonaka and Konno (1998) with the Von Krogh *et al* (1999) classification of knowledge beliefs. The resulting framework asserts that knowledge can be considered, studied and created from four different perspectives: social, managerial, technology and individual. Therefore, these four key areas will be investigated in the chosen organisation to ensure that the research is clearly focused and theoretically underpinned.

The second aspect of the framework involves classifying the firm's current epistemologies, using the Von Krogh *et al* (1999) knowledge management classification framework, which asserts that there are three groupings of attitude to knowledge; cognitivistic, connectionistic and autopoietic. A cognitivistic view is concerned with explicit knowledge that is easily shared and obtained, such as that stored in IT systems. A connectionistic epistemology refers to knowledge that is explicit, but needs human communications to nurture and develop the information, while an autopoietic epistemology refers to knowledge that is created by people and their dealings with one another, allowing tacit (hidden) knowledge to emerge. This classification framework is applied simultaneously with the Hansen *et al* (1999) 'codification' and 'personalization' framework, as both have a similar knowledge spectrum running from an explicit to a tacit based focus.

The rationale and justification for adopting this framework is that it covers the key areas of knowledge management (e.g. human, technological, and social) and has also been proved to work in a cross cultural setting.

2.3 Research Aims

The aim of this study is to help develop a practical knowledge management strategy which is ideally suited to private UAE firms, and possibly other Arab organisations around the Middle East. It should also be culturally sensitive and consider the dynamics of the workforce composition and other cultural factors that can affect successful implementation.

The study investigates the topic from a 'white collar' worker perspective that includes managerial and highly skilled professionals (both Arab citizens and foreign workers).

3. METHODOLOGY

3.1 Sampling Method and Organisation Being Studied

The organisation selected for the purpose of the case study was a successful private sector Arabic company in the construction field. The organisation is a medium sized construction company, which employs almost 400 people, whose organisational structure is functional. The first stage of data collection involved personal interviews with upper higher management (white collar) workers. Secondly, questionnaires were distributed to a wider range of white collar employees (to include lower level managers, highly skilled foreign and national employees and supervisors). Table 1 shows the relationships between the research questions, objectives and the framework.

Table 1: Relationship between Research Questions, Objectives and Framework

Research Questions	Research Objectives	Aspects of the Corresponding Framework
What do the white collar workers know about the concept of KM? Are they educated in this concept?	Establish the extent of existing understanding of the benefits of knowledge management	Look at areas proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995): Individual – How detailed is their knowledge of KM? Do they support such practices? Are they willing to help the organization succeed in KM.
What is stopping or hindering KM being implemented properly?	Seek to uncover any cultural barriers which may actively obstruct successful implementation of KM within an UAE firm	Look at areas proposed by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995): Technological - Do they have the relevant technology to capture knowledge and do workers know how to use/ access it? Social - Are there language barriers to tackle? Are there other cultural issues such as mistrust between foreign and national workers? How does Arab culture view knowledge sharing within an organisation? How much does the loss of foreign workers impact the firm in terms of loss of internal knowledge? Managerial - Do management actively support KM, or do they support hierarchical systems which may promote division between different groups of workers?
What KM practices are used at the moment and are they working well?	Ascertain the extent to which KM practices are currently utilised within the United Arab Emirates (UAE)	Use Von Krogh <i>et al.</i> (1999) and Hansen <i>et al.</i> (1999) frameworks to understand and classify their existing strategy and attitudes towards KM. Evaluate the extent to which these are successful in the four key areas outlined by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995): <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Social • Managerial • Technology • Individual This will help to uncover which areas are currently performing well and which areas have been neglected or require attention.
What specific KM strategies work well in an Arab context, based on previous findings?	Develop a strategy which will help to overcome these barriers and allow Arab firms to benefit from KM as have many western firms.	Use Von Krogh <i>et al.</i> (1999) and Hansen <i>et al.</i> (1999) frameworks to suggest the most suitable approach to KM, by looking at the six strategies proposed by Wiig.

4. RESULTS

Initially, the research was to have included both a quantitative questionnaire and a series of personal interviews. However, due to high levels of bureaucracy and some resistance from managers, the interviews had to be omitted; this may reflect the organisational culture within the firm, which is secretive in nature. 31 out of the 50 questionnaires sent were completed and returned. In this section, the results of these questionnaires will be summarised.

Table 2 Respondents' Employment Details: Job Role, Nationality and Contract Type

What is your job role in the organisation?

Answer Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Manager	5	16.1	16.1	16.1
Unskilled	3	9.7	9.7	25.8
Supervisor	12	38.7	38.7	64.5
Skilled employee	11	35.5	35.5	100.0
Total	31	100.0	100.0	

Are you an Arab or foreign worker?

Answer Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Arab	10	32.3	32.3	32.3
Foreign worker	21	67.7	67.7	100.0
Total	31	100.0	100.0	

What type of employment contract do you have?

Answer Category	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Other	1	3.2	3.2	3.2
Short term	21	67.7	67.7	71.0
Long term	9	29.0	29.0	100.0
Total	31	100.0	100.0	

Table 2 shows that the respondents were mainly made up of supervisors and skilled employees (74% in total), although there was an element of managerial input into the questionnaire (16%). The sample was made up of a majority of foreign non-Arab workers (68%), and this shows the typical diverse workforce present in UAE firms. Finally, the majority of the sample were on short term contracts (these were all the foreign workers), which may raise issues of job security, etc. A summary of each area investigated is now provided.

4.1 Importance of KM to Organisational Success

Half of the sample felt that 'knowledge' was only *somewhat important* for the organisation, and this high figure shows that employees of Arab firms do not really fully understand the power of possessing unique 'knowledge', while only 9.7% felt it was *very important*.

4.2 Organisational Benefits

The main benefits (with a rating of either 1-2 *Very important- important*) were making sure knowledge was not lost from the organisation (87%), customer service (61%), ensuring work is not duplicated (81%), while only 19% felt that good KM would give them a competitive

edge. These mixed results show that employees do not fully understand how KM can affect their organisation's performance.

4.3 Personal Knowledge Sharing Practice

Almost 50% of the sample admitted withholding information, demonstrating a clear lack of the need for effective knowledge sharing within the organisation.

4.4 Effect of Management Attitudes, Ease of Communications, Job Security and Distrust between Groups on Knowledge Sharing Practice

When looking at the reasons as to why employees withhold knowledge from their organisation (answers with a score of 1-2: *very important- important*), a major factor was found to be job security (86%), while 90% also said mistrust and rivalry between departments was also a strong factor. Negative management attitudes (90%) were also a major concern for those who withheld information.

4.5 Organisational Knowledge Sharing Activities

The most regular types of knowledge sharing activities that occur are unofficial discussion (87%), informal meetings (71%) and one-to-one discussions (87%), which show a bias towards fast and private methods of communication, while the least regular types of activities were seminars which were reported as *barely occurring* (100%), mentoring programmes (97%) and external training programmes (90%).

4.6 Effects of Organisational and Arab National Culture on Knowledge Sharing

Nearly 60% of the sample felt that their organisational culture discouraged knowledge sharing, whilst over 93% felt that the Arab national culture discourages knowledge sharing; these results have strong implications for this study.

4.7 Barriers to Knowledge Sharing

The main factors which the sample felt were *very strong* to *strong* barriers for knowledge sharing in their organisation were short term contracts (90%), the fact that Arab culture relies greatly on verbal communications (97%) and a lack of education about KM (84%).

4.8 Rewards Related to Knowledge Sharing

Overall rewards given to employees who tried to improve knowledge sharing was low. The main type of reward offered was recognition (22% reported this occurred often), while other forms of reward such as promotion, financial rewards and non-financial rewards mainly occurred on a *not often* to *not at all* basis. This demonstrates a culture that does not actively reward employees or encourage knowledge sharing.

4.9 Dedication of Management and Resources to Knowledge Management/Sharing

When asked how facilitative they felt that their organisation was in providing resources to develop new knowledge, almost 50% reported that they were *not very facilitative* or *not facilitative at all*. This shows a lack of commitment towards nurturing new knowledge in the firm. Elements of preference or racism appear to prevail within Arab firms, as almost 50% of the sample report that they have witnessed Arabs being chosen over foreign workers for training purposes.

4.10 Effectiveness of Technology Related to Knowledge Management

When asked about the effectiveness of the current KM systems, not one of the sample rated any aspect of their KM technology as being very effective, with the majority of responses

reporting that current KM systems ranged from *merely fairly effective* to *not effective at all*. This shows a distinct failing of current systems to develop and encourage knowledge sharing.

4.11 Problems Pertaining to the Current KM System in Use

The main problems associated with the current KM systems are that they are too rudimentary/basic in terms of facilities (100%), contain outdated information (87%), are complex to use (80%), not supported with satisfactory training on their use (87%), and do not have sufficient emphasis placed on using them in daily activities (80%). Overall, this produces a very negative and non user-friendly picture.

4.12 Describing the Knowledge Sharing Process: A Verbal or Written Process?

100% of the sample unanimously agreed that the knowledge sharing was a verbal rather than written/recorded process.

5. DISCUSSION

The results obtained appear to not only support existing literature available on the subject, but also build upon it to provide some new empirical field data on cross cultural knowledge management issues in an Arab context. The key issues identified were:

5.1 Lack of Commitment to Knowledge Management

The results showed that there is a distinct lack of understanding of the importance of KM within the Arab organisation, as the sample seemed to be fairly confused on the wide range of benefits that KM and knowledge sharing could bring to their organisation. Respondents felt that a strong barrier to good knowledge sharing was a lack of education about KM (84%). Overall reward given to employees who tried to improve knowledge sharing was low, showing a culture which does not reward staff contributions and places little emphasis on KM itself. There appears to be a distinct failing of the managerial aspects of the organisation to promote the message about knowledge management and its importance. When asked how facilitative they felt that their organisation was in providing resources to develop new knowledge, almost 50% reported that they were *not very facilitative* to *not facilitative at all*, which shows a lack of commitment towards nurturing new knowledge in the firm. The Arab firm appears to place a low priority on creating new knowledge, and merely relies on the knowledge present within the organisation to progress. Therefore it appears that value of KM needs to be clarified.

In terms of solutions, management needs to create a knowledge management team or internal division, or alternatively hire an external consultant to train both management and employees about KM and its benefits. This should ensure that they are working towards the same goals and business objectives. Currently, their approach to KM is *ad hoc* and has little impact. Of these options, creating an internal team to educate the organisation about KM and its benefits is more feasible and would be culturally acceptable. The existing culture does not favour external and outside involvement in internal business affairs; this is evident from the data obtained which shows a strong aversion to the use of external training or seminars. Therefore, such a team would be responsible for educating employees, as well as overseeing initiatives to maintain quality standards.

5.2 National Culture as a Potential Barrier

It is difficult to distinguish whether it is the organisational culture of this particular firm that is causing such a poor view of KM, or whether it is actually the wider Arab national culture. The answer to this question appears to be inclined towards placing the blame on Arab culture, as the majority of the sample felt that Arab culture discourages knowledge sharing and that

the Arab culture relies a lot on verbal communications (97%). The most regular types of knowledge sharing activities that occur within this organisation are one-to-one discussions (87%) and informal meetings (71%); this shows a bias towards fast and private methods of communication, rather than using more formal knowledge sharing approaches.

Consequently, from the four main aspects of KM (social, managerial, technological and individual), the most prominent factor which affects KM in an Arab setting is the social aspect, which is followed closely by managerial issues. This data regarding the hindrances to KM in an Arab setting identifies the obstacles that may prevent successful KM implementation.

Furthermore, this study was originally designed to include personal interviews, but there was clear apprehension from managers in being involved in such activities. This provides supplementary evidence to indicate a high level of secrecy and privacy. This notion of culture affecting KM is in agreement with McDermott and O'Dell (2001) who assert that culture plays a large role in preventing the disclosure of knowledge.

On the other hand, the private and secretive nature of the Arab culture is not that far removed from the British culture, which is renowned for being reserved and having a 'stiff upper lip'. Thus, the Arab culture should not be viewed as alien or weird, rather it should be viewed as a culture which has special values in its own right. In knowledge management terms, it should not be viewed as a nuisance, but rather it should be celebrated and considered, so that a more culturally sensitive knowledge strategy which works in an Arab setting can be introduced.

Ahmad and Dagfhous (2010) also emphasise the need to introduce trust building measures, suggesting a legal framework to promote the culture of information and knowledge sharing. This could be achieved via formal appraisal systems to promote and reward inter-organisational collaboration.

5.3 Job Insecurity, A Diverse Workforce Composition and a Lack of Team Spirit

Al-Ali (2008) asserts that there is an over-reliance on foreign workers in the UAE, and this leads to problems, as they are not given permanent contracts and therefore have a distinct lack of job security. This affects their willingness to share their personal knowledge, as they know that after a short period they will return home. This is confirmed by 90% of the sample, who reported that they felt that short term contracts are strong barriers to knowledge sharing. Maslow (1943) asserts that if an individual's lower order needs, such as those related to job security, are not met, then that person will not be motivated (and perform in the best manner). This is also in agreement with Riege (2005) who asserts that job insecurities lead to a reduction in knowledge sharing.

The survey found that 80% of the sample had in fact witnessed Arab workers being preferred over non-Arab workers for training purposes. Thus, this constant battle and division between Arab and non-Arab workers needs to be overcome to create a harmonious and non-divisive working environment in order to nurture trust, since the Arab workers whose culture is very private treat the foreign workers as 'outsiders' or 'newcomers'. The foreign workers reciprocate this feeling by being cautious and withholding information leading to a *catch 22* situation with little knowledge sharing.

One way to overcome such divisions is through team building between employees regardless of their nationality in order to foster trust and unity and to break down barriers. As the Arab culture is built around trust, there is no reason why knowledge sharing could not flourish in the long term.

5.4 Technology

Technology appears to be an area where Arab firms are trailing behind, as the main problems associated with the current KM systems used by the case study firm were that they are too rudimentary/basic (100%), contained outdated information (87%), complex (80%), employees are not given enough training on how to use them (87%), and there is not enough emphasis placed on their use (80%), resulting in a negative and non-user friendly picture of the KM systems. These findings support those of UNDP (2002) and Mohamed *et al* (2008), who assert that Arab firms do not invest significantly in their KM systems. There is no doubt that Arab firms, and this firm in particular are in need of a radical update of their KM systems.

The main recommendations are to radically update the KM systems with a particular emphasis on improving the system interface. This is vital for the Arab culture, which places less importance on recorded information. Only by making systems easy to use will employees begin to adapt their existing methods and record information. Furthermore, the results showed that the firm does not have a system whereby they can capture the emails sent internally. In a culture that values private conversations, emails sent between employees can hold a lot of valuable information about clients, projects, etc. Therefore, it is recommended that all Arab firms should implement a system which gives them the facility to store, and later retrieve internal emails. This will provide useful background information when new staff join a project team and help to make them effective more quickly.

Finally, training should be regularly provided for all KM systems, as this will constantly remind employees about the importance of using, maintaining and updating such systems.

5.5 The Way Forward

One of the key aims of this research is to devise a KM strategy which is ideally suited and culturally sensitive to the Arab context. After considering Wiig's (1997) classification of different types of KM strategies and the case study analysis, it appears that the most appropriate approach for an Arab firm to adopt is a hybrid strategy of 'intellectual asset management' i.e. where existing company assets are more fully exploited and 'personal knowledge assert responsibility' i.e. where individual employees are encouraged to develop and share their skills and knowledge, (as cited in Haggie and Kingston, 2003). The case study analysis shows that the biggest barriers to knowledge sharing in Arab organisations are the people themselves and their social and cultural beliefs. Therefore, this blend of KM strategies will encourage the required sense of knowledge sharing amongst individuals.

To summarise, these context specific issues to the Arab region of UAE illustrate that Arab firms require tailor-made knowledge management strategies. The key recommendations to create a culturally sensitive Arab knowledge sharing strategy are to:

- create an internal task force or knowledge management team, which is responsible for educating employees about KM and its benefits, as well as overseeing KM initiatives and administering appropriate rewards. This management of change programme is the first step towards integrating KM and knowledge sharing internally. This will not threaten the Arab culture, as this team will be internal and should be able to gain the trust of both management and employees.
- conduct team building exercises to help foster feelings of trust and unity between Arab and foreign workers.
- simplify the technology interface of current KM systems in order to encourage greater use.
- initiate regular training on use of new systems, so that system usage becomes natural, intuitive and part of normal working life.

- introduce an email scanning and storage system to help capture knowledge from internal emails. This would assist staff joining a project by quickly providing background details and the project context.

5.6 Further Research

As this research was based on a case study of a single Arab organisation, its findings cannot be generalised on a wider scale. Therefore a multi-case study approach, using triangulation to validate the results across a variety of different Arab organisations, is recommended. Also, this study was only carried out in the UAE, and the term ‘Arab’ encompasses a wide variety of countries located from Morocco to Iraq. Therefore there is a need for a more detailed study, which looks at cultural issues in relation to KM across a variety of Arab countries.

6. CONCLUSIONS

6.1 A Culturally Sensitive Hybrid Arab Knowledge Management Strategy

This research has concluded that the most appropriate overall knowledge strategy to adopt, when considering Wiig’s (1997) classification of different types of KM strategies, is a hybrid strategy of ‘personal knowledge assert responsibility’ and ‘intellectual asset management’. The study also found that the Arab culture, which relies on fast, discreet and verbal communications, hinders effective knowledge sharing, as it places less emphasis on recording and sharing knowledge through formal channels. As opposed to being open in nature, it is a culture which places a lot of emphasis on confidentiality, acting as a barrier to open sharing of knowledge between partial strangers or casual colleagues.

6.2 Barriers to Effective Knowledge Management Implementation in Arab Countries

As many foreign workers are on limited short term contracts, their lack of job security leads them to withhold their personal knowledge from their employers, thus greatly hindering any knowledge sharing initiatives. The most prominent factors which are hindering the implementation of knowledge sharing in an Arab setting are mainly attributable to social and individual factors.

6.3 Limitations

A key limitation of this study was the small sample size and that there was only a small number of Arab workers (10 respondents) studied. However, this small sample mirrors the nationwide problem in the UAE in terms of knowledge creation and workforce participation as previously discussed by Al-Ali (2008). Consequently, organisations in the UAE typically encounter high levels of foreign workers, leaving Arabs in the minority. Therefore, this limitation reflects current UAE workforce composition and may be considered representative of a typical UAE workforce. The paper does not discuss the difference between information and knowledge, the debate about whether knowledge can be codified, nor whether the current KM initiatives are really about managing information and changes in working practices to improve information sharing (Wilson, 2002).

6.4 Contributions and Usefulness of this Research

This study highlights how existing ethno-centric research on knowledge sharing shows a strong disparity between a typical western firm and an Arab one, and how the western based KM literature should be applied cautiously in a non-western setting. The contribution of this research will be useful to the UAE and other Arab governments and organisations (as well as multinationals who are looking to set up in an Arab country), when trying to formulate KM strategies. This research study allows them to better understand the barriers that will prevent

successful implementation of KM in an Arab setting, and also provides them with a series of recommendations to help overcome such obstacles. It proposes active solutions to ensure that the concept of KM and knowledge sharing is not lost in translation.

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