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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AT THE FINNISH GOVERNMENT – NOW, NEVER OR LATER

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Abstract:

In the paper, knowledge management is seen as an element of strategic management for which the highest level of the organisation is responsible. Knowledge management is discussed in the framework of the current reform of the central government in Finland. The main goals of the reform are: to strengthen the cooperation in the central government: to develop the strategic planning and its tools and to develop the cooperation among ministries.

- *to analyse the role of the Ministries in guiding the administrative sector of the Ministry*
- *to improve the confidence of the citizens and civil servants towards the administration and to empower the citizens in public affairs.*

Knowledge management has explicitly been taken as a part of the reform.

At the end of the paper the intranet of the government as a tool for KM is discussed. The intranet creates a common information portal for user organizations: the Ministries, Chancellor of Justice, the Cabinet of the President and the Parliament. The aim of the intranet is to support the working processes and the culture of interaction, learning, and cooperation. It is planned to be based on user friendly technology and common standards. The features of the next version of the intranet are discussed.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Central Government in Finland, Intranet

Content

<i>1. Introduction</i>	2
<i>2. Values and Goals of Knowledge Management</i>	3
<i>3. The Reform of the Central Government in Finland</i>	4
<i>3.1. Present State of the Central Administration</i>	4
<i>3.2. Background for the Reform</i>	4
<i>3.3. Goals of the Reform</i>	5
<i>3.4. Knowledge Management as a Part of the Reform</i>	5
<i>3.5. Reorganising the Information Management of the Government</i>	6
<i>3.6. Building the cooperation</i>	6
<i>4. The Intranet as a Tool for KM of the Government</i>	7
<i>4.1. The Idea of the Senator</i>	7
<i>4.2. Content and Functionality</i>	7
<i>4.3. Personalisation</i>	9
<i>4.4. Common metadata and XML</i>	9
<i>4.5. Search</i>	9
<i>4.6. Increasing Interaction</i>	10
<i>4.7. Mobility</i>	10
<i>5. Conclusion</i>	10

1. Introduction

Knowledge management (KM) is widely discussed – it is discussed so much that many persons already have got tired, and some have started to wait for new trends to come. International consulting companies have sold us several management trends: management by objectives, performance management, process management, quality management, value based management, business intelligence, balanced scorecard, etc. Anyhow, I find it sad if we take knowledge management just as one of the trends that come and go, without assessing the positive capabilities of the concept.

Knowledge management can be seen as a method – as one of the methods – of improving the functionality of the organisations. Knowledge management, if taken seriously, may lead to rethinking the whole working process of the organisation. I understand knowledge management as an element of strategic management for which the highest level of the organisation is responsible. The organisation has to have a vision: what will it achieve, which are its goals. This vision should be expressed in a simple way and communicated to the whole organisation from the top to the bottom. The vision should be summed up in a strategy, which also has to be made known in the whole organisation. KM leans on the strategy and supports the realization of the strategy.

This also means that the specialist departments, as e.g. the libraries or the information services have to integrate in the organisation. I do not know whether this is common in all countries, but in Finland we have noticed that libraries and information services have a long tradition in networking among themselves, that is with other libraries and information services, but until recent years there have been deficiencies in networking or integrating inside their own organisation.

2. Values and Goals of Knowledge Management

I find the values of KM very essential. The values are: openness, knowledge sharing, confidence, working and learning together. The basic principles of KM can be described as follows¹:

- Open communication culture that supports networking
- Decision making that is based on open interaction
- Leadership that empowers individuals
- Organizational culture that appreciates all forms of knowledge (explicit, tacit, potential).

The goals of KM can be described as follows:

1. To build such a knowledge management system that enables

- open communication
- effective information retrieval
- document management and reuse of documents
- networking of experts
- diffusion of best practices
- constant development of the system

2. To develop cooperation forms and decision making conventions that

- are based on dialogue
- support empowerment of the individuals
- add comprehension of how one's own work is associated with values, strategies and goals of the organisation
- include constant evaluation of the results and methods of the work

3. To create methods and practices that

- support interaction and networking with contact groups,
- enable the recognition of weak signals
- help to develop ideas into innovations.

4. To develop indicators with which it is possible to follow the development of knowledge assets and added value.

Developing KM challenges one to ask, why the organisation exists, what are the basic reasons for its existence. It also challenges to ask, whether the organisational structure corresponds with the goals and tasks of the organisation.

Processional approach instead of functional approach may offer a better basis for the planning, at least in organizations like the governments, where the processes go horizontally through several organisations: from an administrative sector to a ministry and further to the Government and to the Parliament.

In the following I will discuss what has been planned and put into effect at the Finnish Government concerning knowledge management. The advancement of knowledge management is intertwined with the reform of the central government.

3. The Reform of the Central Government in Finland

3.1. Present State of the Central Administration

Let me first briefly describe the present state of the central administration in Finland. The legislative power lies with the Parliament; the Parliament also decides on State finances. The executive power lies with the Government and the President of the Republic; the Ministers must enjoy the confidence of the Parliament.ⁱⁱ

The general administration of state affairs rests with the Government composed of the Prime Minister and seventeen ministers.

The Government is to be understood on the one hand as the general meeting of the Government, which is a decision-making body, and on the other hand in the broad term as comprising all the 12 Ministries and the Prime Minister's Office. The Prime Minister's Office can be seen as one of the Ministries, too. Each Ministry has an administrative sector, which consists of different kinds of offices and institutions, government departments and agencies, state-owned enterprises or companies and expert organisations. When I in the following speak of "government" I will refer to this broader concept: to Government, the Prime Minister's Office and the other 12 Ministries, without the ministerial administrative sectors.

The Ministries are very independent and they have their own management. Cooperation exists among Ministries, but the coordination is rather exigous. There is an information network for the government and some joint information systems. The Ministries have their own information systems as well, some of them together with their administrative sectors. Most of the Ministries also have separate intranets, and each of them has an internet web site. The government has both the intranet and the internet web site (<http://www.vn.fi>).

3. 2. Background for the Reform

We can see several strategies both on European Union level and on national Finnish level, which make us to rethink the procedures of the government. On EU level we have **eEurope**ⁱⁱⁱ and **eContent**^{iv} programmes, with their aim to develop information society in Europe. Especially eContent is interesting for us information service professionals, because one of its action lines aims at improving access to and expanding the use of public sector information.

Also at the national Finnish level the information society strategies force the government to rethink its own activities.

The reformed **Act on the Openness of Government Activities**^v, which came into force in December 1999, can be seen as one symptom. The objectives of the Act are "to promote openness and good practice on information management in government, and to provide private individuals and corporations with an opportunity to monitor the exercise of public authority and the use of public resources, to freely form an opinion, to influence the exercise of public authority, and to protect their rights and interests." It is important to note that according to the general rule also the preparatory documents are public.

Law on electronic transactions in administration forces to rethink the processes of actions in government, too. By electronic transactions we tend to think the transactions between citizens and authorities, but it also can mean transactions between enterprises or communities and authorities or between authorities themselves. In the case of government, most of the transactions happen between authorities.

Further, the Government Resolution **Guidelines of the Policy of Governance: High-quality services, good governance and a responsible civic society**, from 1998, is an important strategic paper as a background for the reform.^{vi}

The lack of cooperation among Ministries was one of the reasons why the Government decided to start to reform the central administration. Deficiencies in strategic thinking and management were noticed, too. Further, there are concerns of how to keep the best resources in the public service: how to attract, keep and develop the best human resources in the rank of the public service.

The reform of the central government was prepared by a study by an international group of "three wise men"^{vii} who were assigned to analyse the central governments in EU Member and in some other relevant countries, and evaluate the Finnish central government in the light of this analysis. On the basis of this analysis the Government decided in June 2000 to appoint a project with a steering group with 6 ministers as members, and thirteen sub groups. The groups started their work in September, 2000.

3.3. Goals of the Reform

The main goals of the reform of central government are:

- to strengthen the cooperation in the central government: to develop the strategic planning and its tools and to develop the cooperation among ministries.
- to analyse the role of the Ministries in guiding the administrative sector of the Ministry
- to improve the confidence of the citizens and civil servants towards the administration and to empower the citizens in public affairs.

The project works between 1.7.2000- 31.12.2001. So, when writing this, the project has not yet made any proposals, and the Government has not made any decisions. That is why the title of this paper is cryptically "Knowledge Management at the Finnish Government – now, never or later".

3.4. Knowledge Management as a Part of the Reform

Knowledge management has explicitly been taken as a part of the reform. There are three sub-projects, which deal with KM:

- The development of the strategic and coordination tools of the Government, especially so-called Strategy Portfolio, in which the Government program takes shape as concrete projects. The Strategy Portfolio follows the realisation of the projects.
- Support in preparation of the Government program, especially concerning knowledge and information
- Evaluation of the governmental information systems

Intranet of the government, called Senator, is one of those governmental information systems, which were evaluated. The evaluation report has been completed in May 2001. When planning the Senator version 2, the project group has had in mind the goals of the reform of central government, and the ideas, which have been discussed around the reform. Even though we do not know the results of the reform we want to advance these

ideas. The goals of the reform and values of KM are very parallel. It is encouraging that the evaluation report supports the ideas of the Senator version 2, too.

3.5. Reorganising the Information Management of the Government

As mentioned above, the Ministries are very independent, also so in their information management. There has been no effective coordinating body. Networking and cooperation among information management personnel in Ministries has been quite defective.

The need for better cooperation in the information management was recognized long time ago. Now it seems that something concrete is taken shape: there is a plan to establish a special unit for the information management of the government, which also covers the coordination of the governmental information services. The unit would be a part of the Ministry of Finance.

The Unit for Information Management (IM) would be responsible for the development of the common information management of the government, including information network, data security, technology of the common information system, etc. Other Ministries, mostly Prime Minister's Office, still may own the governmental information systems and processes behind them, but the responsibility for their technology would be at the Unit for IM. – Again I have to emphasize, that when writing this, no decisions have been made yet.

3.6. Building the cooperation

Other knowledge, learning and communication professionals have had even less cooperation than the information management professionals, whereas the information service personnel has succeeded better. The information services have an established network, called Valtipa, the coordination of which is at the Ministry of Finance. Valtipa has an own budget, which allows to carry on concrete projects. Valtipa has organized training for the information professionals, taken initiatives in creating common information systems and government intranet (the Senator), it has updated a common thesaurus for the government etc.

We only can guess, what is the secret of the information service professionals: why we have succeeded in networking and why this cooperation has concrete results. One explanation is the tradition of our profession: we always have networked. Another explanation for the success is the broad basis of the networking: the cooperation covers all levels and all professionals, not only the chiefs. All persons working at the information services participate in the networks.

Valtipa network also has built cooperation among other groups of knowledge professionals: we have organised a training course, the idea of which was to develop synergy among information service personnel, IM personnel and communication personnel. A result of this training has been an idea to organise a regular synergy forum: a series of open meetings where actual projects can be presented and common problems and interests can be discussed. It is important to remember, that the dialogue is a very crucial element in KM.

Information service personnel also has made progress in cooperation with education and training professionals of the Ministries, aiming at the development of a common virtual learning space for the government.

An important tool for cooperation and communication is the intranet of the government, the Senator. Now at the end of this paper I shall discuss more in detail the ideas we have had in mind when developing the Senator.

4. The Intranet as a Tool for KM of the Government

The idea of the intranet for the government evolved about seven years ago. The concept has been changed during the planning process, but in its present form it was introduced to the users at the beginning of 1998.

When planning the intranet the time was not yet ripe to plan it together with the separate intranets and internet web sites, or other information systems produced by the Ministries. However, the intranet tries to create a common information environment for the government and other user organizations. The intranet can be accessed in the thirteen Ministries, Chancellor of Justice, the Office of the President and the Parliament, that is, 6000 persons altogether. The intranet was built to satisfy the common information needs of the user organisations, but not the special needs of the ministries.

The intranets seem to date as soon as they have been introduced to the users. That is the case of Senator, too. As told, it was opened in 1998 and as soon as in 2000 the Prime Minister's Office set a project to plan a new version of the intranet. The project should conclude at the end of this year (2001), but already now we know that all the tasks will not be fulfilled at that moment, but that the project continues in 2002.

4.1. The Idea of the Senator

When starting to plan the new version of the Senator we had a seminar where different groups of knowledge professionals created a vision on what the new Senator should be like. And this is the vision we created:

Senator

- is a common, interactive, changing tool for work and a knowledge portal of and for the government, which
- supports the working processes and the culture of interaction, learning, and cooperation, and
- is based on user friendly technology and common standards, and
- is a coordinated aggregate with the intranets of the Ministries.

We wanted to emphasize, that the Senator should be genuinely common for the whole government, both in production and in use. By this we want to promote cooperation among Ministries and lower the barriers among them. The lack of cooperation and the destructiveness of the bureaucratic competition among Ministries were understood as problems also by the earlier mentioned international analysis group.

4.2. Content and Functionality

When starting to plan the content of the first version of the intranet, the information needs were studied by recognizing the main tasks of the government, and then by studying what kind of information there was needed at each stage in the task processes. The main task processes examined were:

- national legislation-drafting process
- EU legislation drafting process
- national budget preparation process
- international agreements preparation process

When planning the 2nd version of the intranet we found that those task processes still are the central common processes. The information sources that form the content in the current version are still valid.

In addition we found that the management could use Senator as a tool in leading the government. We decided to plan profiles for:

- Professionals drafting a law
Guidelines and legal information sources would be elements in this profile.
- Planners of finance
Guidelines in national budget preparation process and other economic processes, and the documents resulting from those process would be the content of this profile.
- EU affairs
The guidelines and access to the EU information sources would be the central elements in this profile.
- Leadership
The results of the reform of the central government will be used. At the moment the central idea is to have the Government programme in focus, and build the profile around it. The following of the carrying into effect of the Government programme, statistics and other information on the state of the society etc, structured according to the structure of the Government programme, would be elements in this profile.

The profiles are one possibility to navigate, but there are two other navigation options. One navigation contains:

- Calendars
- Current affairs
- News and media
- Parliament
- President of the Republic
- Government
- Ministries
- State administration
- Regional administration
- International organisations
- Statistics
- Country reports and maps
- Documents and Archives
- Literature and Research
- Dictionaries

The third navigation is planned to contain:

- Contact information
- Directories
- Training

- Working in the government
- Internal services
- Feedback
- Search
- Help

The intranet will be a database, and the information from other information systems shall be transferred to the intranet as automatically as possible. We try to avoid manual work, because there are only two persons updating the intranet.

The database also makes it possible to offer an interface to the material in Swedish language, which is the second official language in Finland. We are not planning to maintain the whole intranet in Swedish, that is, we are not translating anything, but only offer an easy access to the already existing Swedish material.

4.3. Personalisation

Even though the content and the structure of the Senator are praised, the users need selective services. The current version of the intranet contains a huge amount of information, and every user needs only a part of that. The profiles are one attempt to solve the problem, the personalisation is another.

As a technical basis for the personalisation we need a common directory, by which the user rights can be managed. The technology has not yet been decided – whether it is a LDAP (Lightweight Directory Access Protocol) directory or something else.

The common directory also makes possible single sign on: the user only needs one password, which opens the access to all those information systems, he/she has rights to.

We have licences to several commercial information systems. At the moment the access is based on IP numbers, and all users of the intranet have access to all information included in the intranet. This is not rational: it is expensive to buy access to persons who do not need that information, and secondly it causes information overload. Personalization means, that we can direct the services to the real users and that a user can choose that information, which he/she wants and needs. I emphasise, that this is not a question of censorship, but of better service.

4.4. Common metadata and XML

In order to realise the personalisation, we also need common metadata. Common metadata is a crucial factor for the developing of compatible information systems. Common metadata is needed not only for the information retrieval, but for the information transfer between information systems, too. For example, the web sites of the Ministries use common metadata and XML, when transferring e.g. press releases to the internet and intranet web sites of the government.

We have chosen Dublin Core metadata format. Dublin Core is only a format: you have to adapt it for use. We have created common metadata elements, such as a common thesaurus and a common subject classification. This makes it possible e.g. to organise the press releases according to the subject theme, regardless of the Ministry, which originally has produced the press release.

4.5. Search

Search is an important element in any intranet. It is quite simple to build a search function in one information system, which may have search engine of its own. For a portal, which offers an access to various kinds of information systems with differing technology, the search function is a challenge.

4.6. Increasing Interaction

Increasing interaction, dialogue, networking and horizontal cooperation among Ministries is an important goal of the reform of the central government. The intranet can be a tool for that. The intranet cannot replace the face-to-face communication, but it can further it. The telephone catalogues or the “yellow pages” are commonly the most used parts in the intranets. The telephone catalogues can be processed as expert registers, where you can find not only the contact information, but also “who knows what”.

The expert register is one of the most desired parts in the intranet. The problem is, that there are several information systems, which contain information on the personnel: several electronic telephone catalogues, the registers of the personnel departments, etc. Much overlapping work is done. We do not want to develop one incompatible register more, but to make use of the existing information systems. One idea is to use the common directory (LDAP or other) as a base for the expert register as well.

Another urgently needed element is a common forum for the working groups. The members of a working group may come from any institution, not only from Ministries. This is technically a challenge. A second challenge is to avoid double work. The government has no common document management system, but the Ministries may have their own systems, different from the neighbouring ministry. EU documents are an exception: a common system based on *Documentum* is in hand. The new common forum for the working groups should be planned taking account of the existing document managing systems, both at the ministerial and at the governmental level. The principle should be to avoid the double work.

4.7. Mobility

The intranet will be planned paying attention to the future mobile use of the intranet. One should be able to use the information also by cell phones and other equipments. Telephone catalogues are an example of information, which would be useful to reach by the cell phone.

1. Conclusion

The intranet can be an effective tool for knowledge management. However, it is only a tool. Knowledge management is a wider concept, when it is understood as promoting strategic development and knowledge and expertise in an organisation. Knowledge management and development of expertise require a strategic and holistic vision at the highest level of the organisation. If the organisation has no knowledge management, the possibilities of various tools - as the intranet - remain partly unused.

We look forward to the reform of the central government. We hope, that it results in a practical realisation of the ideas of knowledge management. Even though the decisions are to be made at the highest governmental level, we, information professionals, can by several means already now advance the ideas and values of knowledge management: openness, knowledge sharing, confidence, working and learning together.

References

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- ⁱⁱ The new constitution of Finland entered into force on March 1, 2000, see unofficial translation address: <http://www.om.fi/constitution/index.htm>
- ⁱⁱⁱ See address: http://www.europa.eu.int/comm/information_society/eeurope/
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