



IFLA
2005
OSLO

World Library and Information Congress: 71th IFLA General Conference and Council

"Libraries - A voyage of discovery"

August 14th - 18th 2005, Oslo, Norway

Conference Programme:

<http://www.ifla.org/IV/ifla71/Programme.htm>

June 8, 2005

Code Number:

066-E

Meeting:

81 SI - Knowledge Management

Knowledge sharing practices in Asian institutions: a multi-cultural perspective from Singapore

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ABSTRACT

Research studies on knowledge sharing carried out in Singapore during the last five years are reviewed and special features of knowledge sharing practices in Asian institutions are discussed. Cultural traditions had positive and negative effect on knowledge sharing practices in the multi-ethnic and diverse society of Singapore. Understanding of these factors is important for information institutions and education providers to support knowledge management initiatives.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge sharing is central to the success of all knowledge management strategies. Effective knowledge sharing practices enable reuse and regeneration of knowledge at individual and organizational level. In recent years there had been considerable emphasis

on the need to create a culture in organizations that is pro knowledge sharing and implement strategies that are more knowledge friendly. Organizations worldwide have been trying to undertake initiatives for introducing effective knowledge management by embedding knowledge sharing practices in their work processes.

Chang and Ng (2003) stated that with only a few exceptions such as Nonaka, Takeuchi and Choo, many of the world's leading KM gurus are from the West and headquarters of most of the organizations active in KM work are also located in the West. They did take note, however, of some institutions involved in KM research and practice in Asian countries, e.g., Japan and Singapore. They highlighted the Asian cultural traditions of respecting knowledge and passing wisdom through ancestral clans as positive influences in knowledge sharing practices but pointed out several challenges that also arise from cultural traditions such as hierarchy consciousness, saying things nicely (politeness), and emphasis on memorization in the examination systems.

In Singapore there had been an emphasis on preparing the institutions for the knowledge-based economy by the Government of Singapore. This has resulted in introduction of knowledge management programs in public and private sector organizations requiring libraries and information centers to provide corresponding services and products to support these initiatives. Accordingly, education providers were expected to introduce new programs for cultivating information and knowledge professionals equipped with competencies required to support knowledge management initiatives. Local universities and professional forums have started a series of professional development activities and academic programs to meet these needs. There is a realization that to make the KM programs more relevant and beneficial understanding of factors that contribute to the success or failure of knowledge management initiatives is important. It is helpful if such understanding is based on objective reviews and analysis of knowledge management practices and related issues in local organizations.

Several studies have been conducted during the last five years to review knowledge management strategies and knowledge sharing practices in the local organizations. These studies have revealed interesting features that are peculiar to the Asian culture and seem to have implications for information institutions and education providers in the area of information and knowledge management. This paper provides an overview of these studies and highlights the peculiarities of Asian culture in the context of multicultural environment of Singapore. Singapore provides an interesting case study in this regard. Singapore is conservative in adhering to Asian cultural traditions and at the same time open to innovation and creativity. It is a diverse and multiethnic society that is eager to stick to meritocracy and system efficiency in its pursuits of innovation and creativity – crucial to the success of knowledge management activities.

RESEARCH STUDIES

Chaudhry and Ang (2001) found a considerable duplication of efforts in knowledge capturing because of lack of knowledge sharing practices in a large multinational company operating in Singapore. In a series of focus group discussions with the

managers in the company, they found that 30 databases of information related to products and customers were maintained in the company without interconnection. The study recommended implementing a corporate taxonomy to facilitate knowledge sharing in the intranet and other infrastructure services in the company.

Neo (2002) in a study of knowledge sharing practices in a Singapore news company found that cultural factors have significant impact on individual's decision to share or hoard knowledge. His study revealed that lack of motivation, management support, trust, and teamwork spirit were considered as major barriers to knowledge sharing. It was also observed that 'knowledge is power' mentality was hindering to promote a knowledge sharing culture in the company. Incentives and reward mechanisms were considered favorable components of organizational culture for creating knowledge friendly environment.

Ang (2002) conducted a study to assess the level of knowledge sharing in a Ministry in Singapore. The study indicated that possession of specialized knowledge and technical skills were perceived as source of personal power in the organization. There was a need to implement policies to assure employees that their value would not dissipate when they shared knowledge. It was suggested that appropriate reward mechanism should be put in place to strengthen these policies to create a climate of trust among employees. This was expected to send a message that employee's value might increase with willingness to share knowledge with their colleagues.

Chua (2002) pointed out that concerns for career advancement and performance appraisal were creating a mentality of fear called '*kiasuism*' deterring employees from sharing knowledge in organizations in Singapore. Such phenomenon was considered a major barrier to knowledge sharing in a study aimed at reviewing the level of employees' interactions and their perceptions about the value of sharing their insights and experience in an international company located in Singapore. The study concluded that it might not be advisable to try to change this culture. Knowledge sharing strategies should be based on policies that are formulated keeping in view the so-called 'kiasu' mentality.

Meenakshi (2002) and Sundari (2003) surveyed the perceptions of teachers in Singapore schools about sharing knowledge in schools. They reported that teachers perceived sharing with their colleagues very helpful in enhancing learning and also viewed their own knowledge worthy of sharing with other colleagues. Teachers were willing to share and preferred knowledge sharing through casual meetings with their colleagues, online communication, peer coaching, and interactive workshops. They took full advantage of information technology for knowledge sharing but found them stressed because of time pressure. These studies stressed that to make knowledge sharing popular in schools KM practices must be embedded into teaching and learning activities.

Chong (2003) conducted a study of knowledge sharing practices in a treasury environment. He found that knowledge sharing was taking place on informal basis through face-to-face communication and collaborative work groups. The study has revealed that knowledge is supported in this environment by a culture that encourages

sharing of knowledge, learning from failures, and developing people's skills. Employees were found enthusiastic about knowledge management and did not feel constrained in sharing because of lack of time.

Lim, Tang, and Yang (2004) reviewed the factors affecting the individual's knowledge sharing behavior in the organizational context focusing on the impact of financial rewards and organizational behavior on knowledge sharing. They noted that the knowledge sharing attitudes were more evident in a face-to-face context rather than the electronic medium. Employees were found to be more willing to share knowledge with increased rewards. The study recommended customizing the reward systems and knowledge sharing contexts in order to facilitate a smoother flow of knowledge in the enterprise.

Vairavan (2004), in a study of KM strategies in a bank, found that there was less concern for communication medium, social and psychological factors, culture, and measurement but more emphasis on actors, contents, technology, and leadership, and vision. Knowledge sharing practices were also found very encouraging in EAP Bank in Singapore where employees were active in capturing and codifying knowledge making use of knowledge repositories and enterprise portal (Chaudhry and Justin, 2005).

Fong (2005) carried out a study in the Economic Development Board of Singapore to validate performance measures for the knowledge-based economy. This study focused on four areas of knowledge management, one being knowledge transfer. The main aim was to find appropriate indicators that can be used to monitor the effectiveness of an economic system in becoming a knowledge-based economy. In the process, this study also served to create awareness and highlighted different aspects of knowledge transfer that can be used to promote knowledge sharing in different types of institutions.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING FEATURURES

The above-mentioned studies were conducted in different institutions using different procedures and methodology. Despite procedural differences these were helpful in identifying trends that can be used to highlight communalities highlight special features of knowledge sharing practices in Asian institutions with particular reference to Singapore. Salient knowledge sharing features are summarized in the next section.

Enthusiasm for KM

Most of the studies found that knowledge workers exhibited positive attitude towards knowledge sharing and knowledge management initiatives of their respective organizations. Employees generally believe that knowledge sharing enhances their relationships with colleagues. Contrary to a general belief, most respondents in research studies carried out in Singapore did not consider that by sharing knowledge they would lose their competitive edge. They were very enthusiastic and willing to actively participate in knowledge sharing initiatives.

Institutionalization of Knowledge Sharing

Most of the studies confirmed presence of knowledge sharing practices on informal basis indicating interest among employees in knowledge sharing. There was a feeling that organizations should take steps to realize the potential by institutionalizing knowledge sharing activities. Suggestions were put forward that employee interest in knowledge sharing should be used to nurture communities of practice. Some studies also suggested that a system for capturing and codification of knowledge should be put in place to transform tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge for common and wider use.

Communication Media

Medium through which knowledge is transferred has an impact on the attitude towards knowledge sharing. Compared to sharing knowledge through databases employees were willing to spend more time in sharing knowledge through face-to-face media. While informality prevailed, written communications were considered more effective than informal one-to-one encounters, emails, telephone conversations, and other informal means such as personal notes, chats, or communication through electronic discussion groups. Formality appears to be the most important consideration in the context of Singapore organizations. Formal team or one-to-one meetings were perceived to be the most effective medium. Likewise, official correspondence was preferred to other means of personal notes. Telephone is perceived to be a less effective medium as compared to official correspondence (textual) and emails. Though telephone in general is considered the most convenient means of communication in corporate communications.

Cultural Conflicts

Knowledge sharing research in Singapore highlighted the need for innovation and creativity to reap maximum benefits from knowledge management activities. In practical terms it meant that managers must be open to new ideas and capable of managing conflicting discussions and deliberations. It has created challenges for career managers. These managers were used to a culture with colleagues with similar ideas and thinking. In the past, harmony was considered strength of the system. Researchers have pointed out that there is a need to change the mindset and also reflect this new philosophy in recruiting policies for young managers and professionals. Since Singapore institutions have been following a hierarchical structure, it is going to take concerted efforts over a long period of time to create a culture for accepting different views to support creativity and innovation. The Government is aware of this situation and has created new positions in public sector organizations to oversee the innovation and creativity initiatives. At the same time, more technocrats are being inducted in management positions indicating the importance of domain knowledge in the new era.

Technology Support

Strongest features of knowledge sharing in Singapore have been technological support and the availability of infrastructure services like intranets and enterprise portals. Most

studies confirmed that Singapore institutions were ready to embark on knowledge management as far as technology enablers were concerned. It was, however, observed in certain cases that the potential of the technological infrastructure was not effectively exploited because of lack of intellectual infrastructure required for effective content organization and management. Studies highlighted that there was a need to implement taxonomies and improve information architecture to encourage more knowledge contributions and easy navigation for enhanced resource discovery. Investment on intellectual infrastructure focusing on metadata, thesauri, and knowledge maps was considered essential for effective use of intranets and enterprise portals to facilitate knowledge sharing activities.

Kiasuism

The Kiasu attitude (afraid to lose mentality) is considered a distinct character of Singapore culture. 'Kiasuism' in Singapore society has been found a major barrier in knowledge sharing in several studies. A number of researchers have pointed out that there is no initiative to help knowledge workers cope with job insecurities resulting in a mentality of hoarding knowledge. It is a general belief that people do not share knowledge because they are afraid of losing their 'exclusiveness'. Kiasu mentality is also associated with 'knowledge is power'. It is difficult to eliminate 'kiasuis' but it can be managed to reduce the detrimental effects it has on knowledge sharing.

Rewards and Incentives

Research in the area of knowledge sharing in Singapore has highlighted that introducing rewards and mechanisms will encourage employees form attitude more positive toward knowledge sharing. It has been stressed that extrinsic incentives play more favorable role in promoting knowledge sharing in case of Singapore. Knowledge workers are more likely to participate in knowledge management activities if rewarded financially. This does not only exist in Singapore. Other societies and communities may have the same component of culture prevalent under other names. In general, the higher the level of financial rewards the better the chances of employees share knowledge.

Knowledge Metrics

Knowledge sharing research in Singapore suggests that Asian institutions are very conscious about the time and resources spent on knowledge sharing activities. There is a growing demand for developing metrics linked to performance appraisal. Suggestions have been made that taxonomies and enterprise portal capabilities should be used to identify knowledge workers contributing knowledge resources in relevant categories. Such information can be used to encourage participants in communities of practice in different roles: volunteers, coordinators, and subject matter specialists.

Preparation of Information Institutions

One interesting phenomenon noted in several studies was a minimal role of information institutions in facilitating knowledge sharing activities. It was noted that libraries and information center managers and senior information professionals continue insisting that they are participating in the knowledge management process by facilitating access to information resources in their respective organizations. While they seem to have great potential in contributing to knowledge management efforts, they are not forthcoming in expanding their roles to become active participants in the processes of knowledge creation and transfer. It is considered desirable that information professionals have proper understanding of knowledge management functions and factors that affect knowledge share activities.

CONCLUSION

Understanding the factors that facilitate knowledge transfer process will help managers, information & knowledge professionals, and education providers for deploying appropriate strategies to support knowledge-sharing activities. Policies that consider knowledge sharing as a social norm and encourage team-based incentives will be helpful in making the organizational environment more knowledge friendly. Research indicates that employees in Asian institutions are enthusiastic about knowledge management and they share knowledge on informal basis. Therefore, introduction of group-based incentive to promote knowledge sharing can help create communities of practice for sustained knowledge sharing. Despite differences in procedural limitations in studies of knowledge sharing, research highlights that cultural and organizational peculiarities warrant a fresh look at the theories of knowledge sharing. Information institutions should take into consideration these theories and transform information-handling skills of their employees to turn these into knowledge management capabilities.

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