

KNOWLEDGE SHARING BEHAVIOUR AND DEVELOPMENT OF SMALL AND MEDIUM-SIZED ENTERPRISES

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Summary: Modern organizations operate in an environment of constant change, even as some researchers and theorists of management indicate, in terms of chaos. In this situation, the crucial factor, which determines the survival and development, is organization flexibility (agility). This feature of the organization is based in large part on the reservoir of knowledge that is immaterial resource. Organizational knowledge can be of different origin. Considerations included in the study focus only on the knowledge possessed by each employee. In this context, the behaviour based on the exchange of knowledge between employees could provide an inexhaustible source of knowledge that might contribute to the development of the organization. This problem is particularly important in relation to the of small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs), which, due to economic limitations, to a greater extent than large organizations have to rely on the resources of employees' knowledge and their relations with the environment.

The aim of the article is to indicate the importance of knowledge sharing behaviour for the development of SMEs.

Keywords: knowledge, sharing knowledge behaviour, attitudes to work, SMEs,

1. Introduction – discussions about knowledge

Present day interest in knowledge as an asset that is creating the supremacy of a given organization, economy, or society is a continuation, or rather a re-discovery of the thesis claiming that knowledge is the basis of civilization and economic development. Although the notion of knowledge and in a result - innovation, is as old as human civilization, the concept of „society of knowledge” or „knowledge-based economy” is relatively new. Initially knowledge and its accumulation caused a creation of new inventions, discoveries and technological achievements corresponding to the human needs. Present day availability of various knowledge assets created a situation in which the inventions overtake the human needs and expectations, and in some cases even create them (Cichobłaziński and Słocińska, 2009). It is more common that what decides about the company value, according to the stock exchange, is not a tangible asset, but real potential measured as knowledge available for the company. As an example here may be used the organizations from IT sector, or e.g. training or consulting companies. Therefore, analysis of the processes of creating knowledge and its flow becomes one of the most important problems of modern economy and modern enterprises.

With reference to the flow of knowledge, it seems to be a key factor to create a network of contacts among various knowledge centres (individuals, organizations and institutions). Organization itself can be also understood as a social net of action (Czarniawska, 2013, p.61). In these, net impulse spreads in a flash. If this impulse is a knowledge or information it means that functioning of the net gives the access to quick information and almost unrestricted recourses of knowledge what plays a vital role for the organization success.

Modern meaning of knowledge is an effect of timing the countries, economies and organizations to development and reaching gradually better results. In case of organizations, it becomes more common to use the term of knowledge management. Its interpretation is an effect of acceptance of a particular organizational strategy and it is a clarification of the term of knowledge itself.

Knowledge is often confused with the similar terms such as data, information, or wisdom. Encyclopedic definitions of knowledge oscillate around the claim that knowledge in its narrow understanding is generally reliable information with reality together with the ability of using it, but knowledge understood broadly, is a general collection of information, skills, experiences, beliefs, etc., to which the cognitive, or practical value is added. It may even include superstitions, but also a vision of world included in the religious systems and systems of value. (Czarniawska, 1999)

The basic term connected with knowledge is data. It should be understood as a collection of independent, separate facts and events. Data are essential for organizations functioning, but itself they do not need any inherent meaning. Most of the organizations use special methods of gaining, gathering, ordering and transfer of data. In order to do this, special complex information systems are used. Nevertheless, data are only starting materials for decision-making process. In order to have the possibility to draw the conclusions on reality, it is necessary to have the possibility to analyse and interpret data. Here emerges the category of information understood in fact as transfer of information. In this frame, there are two elements important: sender and recipient. Information changes the perception of the recipient, his way of perceiving facts and events, which influences his evaluation of situations and behaviours. In this meaning, "information is data, that makes the difference" (Cichobłaziński and Słocińska, 2009). Opposing to data, information is characterized by relevance and purpose.

According to Davenport and Prusak (2000) knowledge is a shaped set of experiences, values, information, referred to the context and insight, which is the basis for evaluation and acquisition of new experience and information. Therefore, this process is initiated and occurs within human minds. Knowledge exists within people, and is developed by them. According to the idea of Nonaka and Takeuchi (2000, p.23) people do not obtain knowledge in a passive way; they interpret and adjust it to their own situation and perspective. Within organization, knowledge is stored not only in documents, or special databases, but also in the organizational routines, processes, practices and norms. As it may be noticed, knowledge is directly linked with the notion of organizational culture, in which it is encoded. Norms, values or network interconnections and relationships as the elements of organizational culture, include elements of organizational knowledge as well. This type of individual knowledge stored in the minds of employees, based on subjective effect of personal intuition and feeling, is more difficult or even impossible to be formalized.

2. Levels of the knowledge-flow

Transfer of knowledge may be considered according to the two aspects. The first one is knowledge transfer between the organizations (cooperating, or competitive) or between the organization and environment, particularly social, cultural, institutional in the local, national, continental and even global dimension. In this group of knowledge transfers there should be included the flow of patents, licenses, mainly in the technical and technological aspect. The second dimension is connected with the flow of knowledge within an organization. It is important here to focus on particular employees, their aims and interpersonal relationships, fostering or limiting the flow of knowledge, as well as inter-organizational factors (tangible and intangible), that foster these processes.

Knowledge is treated as a kind of an asset in the organization, which is an element managed according to the management rules to the same extent as the remaining assets of a given organization (Probst, Raub and Romhardt, 2004). This thesis is true taking for granted that knowledge is identified with the possibilities of using information, especially the technical ones. Accepting broad understanding of knowledge as a factor characteristic for people, their experience, undergoing the process of constant changing of context, the approach to the knowledge management as an asset seems to be very difficult, if not impossible to be applied. Dynamic approach to knowledge is inseparably connected with people. This apparently clear statement requires additional explanations. In the organization the people possess and use knowledge, being the carriers of this asset. Sharing knowledge behaviour can be called an engine of exchange and creating knowledge processes (Lin, 2008). However acceptance of new knowledge is often inextricably linked to the need of abandonment of already held beliefs and what was obvious (Cichobłaziński, 2013). Knowledge sharing behaviour is a first step to knowledge transfer, which is one direction action, but yet the final and most desirable phase is knowledge exchange what reflects to knowledge seeking action (Wang, Noe, 2010).

Nonaka and Takeuchi claim that management of the knowledge exchange is like a football match. The ball does not move in any specific, orderly way. The ball movement is a result of common play of the team members. It is influenced by the place, direct experience of the players, their attempts and mistakes. It requires arduous and intensive interactions among the team members (Nonaka and Takeuchi 2000). It has to be noticed that individual knowledge expands while being shared – in this way a transfer from individual to organizational knowledge occurs (Davies, Stewart and Weeks, 1998). Organization cannot produce knowledge itself, without individual initiatives of the employees and mutual relationships between them.

3. Meaning of knowledge sharing for small and medium- sized enterprises

According to the trends in management, as well as an idea of knowledge management, organizations should have non-hierarchical, self- organizing structure and they should (Nonaka, Takeuchi 2000):

- be more flat than their hierarchical predecessors,
- be more dynamic, rather than static,
- foster building of close relationships within an organization and relations with customers,
- emphasize competence – unique experience and skills,
- consider knowledge and intellect as the most causative operation tools.

The above characteristics are mainly related to the sector of small and medium- sized enterprises (SMEs), nowadays dominating in the structure of world economy. Their sizes, regardless the branch they operate in, cause that establishing interpersonal relationships and understanding of the rules of functioning of the whole organization is easier than in case of large enterprises. Then the employees in a specific way understand the goals and needs of an organization and have significantly better insights of the location of knowledge within the organization. Information about knowledge possessed by other employees is often obtained as a result of informal interactions, within or beyond the nets (Wang and Noe, 2010), that are more common in SMEs. Location of such knowledge- centers is very important, because SMEs often do not dispose sufficient financial assets in order to obtain, purchase knowledge from the company environment. That is why it becomes significant to diagnose and monitor the reservoirs of the employees' knowledge, in order to have the possibility to use knowledge, if necessary.

Nevertheless, the level of the reservoir SMEs' employees' knowledge becomes a source of trouble. As knowledge is mainly based on the personal experience of a given employee, which regardless its value, cannot be referred to the latest technological innovations. In such situations a specific type of knowledge is required – knowledge based on personal relationships with other individuals- employees from the outside of the company. By means of them, the organization may acquire knowledge necessary for realization of the current tasks, or future programming. Solutions of this type are very rarely used in case of large enterprises, which are mainly based on formal contacts and hierarchical dependencies. Employees of SMEs often have the right to make autonomous decisions and resolve current problems. It is caused by the fact that selection of the personnel is rather based on trust, not pure qualifications. However, it must be noticed that just trust has been recognized as a crucial factor of sharing knowledge behaviour (Lin, 2007).

In this group of enterprises, it is also much easier to make some changes, even the radical ones, as the employees all the time function as if they were in a phase of thawing and they are ready for changing the direction of their activities. It is a result of an increased instability of SMEs performance.

The fact, that they do not have the leading position, make the SMEs to constantly look for new solutions allowing to develop themselves and reach their competitor. As a result, these companies are not loaded with arrogance and self- admiration, which is more typical for some of large organizations that win the race with rivals. Fear against failure make the SMEs to work harder on creating better rules concerning services, products and processes. Therefore, employees' behaviours from the area of knowledge sharing are perceived, and realized in a different way in case of SMEs than in case of large enterprises. While creating behaviours of this type, a key role is played by the management- the owners of an organization, often having the managerial functions. They are facilitators of the processes of knowledge exchange among employees (Słocińska, 2011). Nevertheless, the lack in knowledge concerning the awareness of the meaning of knowledge and its flow may block the flow of information between the employees and environment, at the same time negatively influence the development of an organization.

4. Conclusions

It should be noticed, that there is not many research results on creation of knowledge within organization and knowledge exchange among the employees. The basic assumptions realized by the theoreticians and practitioners in the area of knowledge management are obtaining, growth and using of already existing knowledge. There should be also highlighted a significant role of modern information technologies.

Organizations should transform, evolve and develop together with the knowledge flowing through them. Therefore, organization should not only process knowledge actively, but also produce it. At the same time, the members of an organization have to go over the passive attitude and become active advocates of knowledge and innovations. In case of sector of SMEs, with reference to the advantages of a simulating of sharing knowledge behaviours, there should be included: autonomy of the employees in the area of decision-making, agreement to experiments as a problem solving method and non-routine actions as well as close interpersonal relationships fostering building of trust. SMEs limitations in the area of knowledge acquisition in a process of knowledge sharing, are mainly the results of the limited own knowledge resources of a given organization (not many employees, poor qualifications), functioning rather on the basis of a survival strategy, not according to the strategy of development, propensities to literal duplication of action schemes realized by other

organizations and convincing the members of the company management staff that their decisions are infallible.

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