

Knowledge Management and the Role of the HRD Professional

R. Palan Ph.D.

**Specialist Management Resources (SMR)
March, 2000**

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“The beautiful thing about learning is that no one can take it away from you - No one can take away from you, what you have learned”.

Learning

This is a popular quotation, which demonstrates the importance of learning. Dr Peter Senge highlighted the impact of learning organizations, a decade ago. Organizations learn only when units of one learn. The organization’s competitive edge may well be its capability to learn faster than competition. The case for continuous individual and organization learning was made in a very powerful way that led to several training initiatives. Training Officers became Learning Officers. Team based flexible learning found a niche even in smaller organizations. However there were critics who pointed out that learning without any performance is of no use. Learning that is stored away safely without being accessible to the organization is also useless.

Performance

Much earlier than Dr Peter Senge, Tom Gilbert refocused the thinking among HRD professionals with Human Performance Technology (HPT). Tom Gilbert’s hypothesis that ***“that it is not lack of knowledge and skills but the lack of job aids that inhibit performance”*** indicated that training is not necessarily the only intervention possible to solve performance problems. To Tom Gilbert, ***what was ultimately important was not training but Performance***. He presented the case for a two-stage approach to Performance Problems:

- Analysis
- Interventions

The HPT movement led to the birth of several initiatives such as the Electronic Performance Support Systems (EPSS).

Once again, the emergence of the global economy gave birth to a lot of issues. All countries - developed, developing and under developed, experienced problems. Employee turnover, shortage of skills, rightsizing, the continuous need for productivity increases, the rapid pace of change due to technology and the

unpredictable nature of doing business raised new questions. Initiatives in the areas of Learning and Electronic Performance Support Systems were indeed very useful but how can we make the *know how* in people's heads accessible to the entire organization. Sometime ago, I had an interesting conversation with a colleague. A long serving employee was leaving our organization. Any such incident does have a major impact on a small business particularly when the employee is a high performer. I rationalized the incident stating that the skills can be easily replaced in the downturn economy that resulted in huge surpluses of great talent. His response shook me up – “ Yes, Palan, the skills can be replaced but what we are going to do with the knowledge the employee is going to walk away with”. That was just one employee resignation.

Knowledge Management (KM)

KM is an effort to make the *know how* that resides in people's heads as a result of all the learning and performance initiatives accessible and useful to everyone in the organisation. It is an effort to capture or tap an organization's collective experience and wisdom and make it available freely so that everyone in the organisation can use it for improved performance. It is much more than putting up an Intranet that very few employees access on a daily basis. Information is not knowledge.

Knowledge has always been vested in societies. Societies have codified the verbal versions to pass it on intra generation and inter generation. As society progressed, we used the qualification process by which knowledge was stabilized and transferred within the generation and to the next generation. So what is the Knowledge Management we now talk about? The collapse between the old and the new structures have unfortunately or fortunately linked knowledge management to the economy. The lack of knowledge requires people today to deal with turbulent times. The knowledge management that we talk about now means we can reduce the costs of our economic transactions. It means knowledge is no longer confined to a privileged few.

What's Your Strategy for Managing Knowledge?

Morton T. Hansen, Nitin Nohria and Thomas Tierney propose two basic strategies for Knowledge Management:

- Codification
- Personalization

They say that a company must use both though there is a need to emphasis one or the other. To them, the choice is not based on the industry the company is in but on the nature of its business strategy.

Codification approach

Large consulting firms such as Anderson Consulting and Ernst & Young, concentrates on ways to codify and store knowledge in computer databases. Once this happens, anyone in the company can access and use the knowledge. Knowledge is codified using a “people to documents” approach; it is extracted from the person who developed it, made independent of that person and reused for various other purposes.

Personalization Strategy

Consulting firms such as McKinsey & Co emphasizes people-to-people knowledge-sharing Knowledge is closely related to the person who developed it and the vehicle for sharing is mainly through direct person-to- person contacts. The chief purpose of computers at such organizations is to help people communicate knowledge, not to store it. Knowledge that has not been codified and probably that couldn't be is transferred in brainstorming sessions and one-on-one conversations.

Technology's Role

Whatever strategy organizations favor, the current enthusiasm for Knowledge Management is rooted in computer networks. The opportunities that computers now offer to store and codify information and also allow people in global organizations to communicate irrespective of where they work has intensified the Knowledge Management efforts. The dependence of Knowledge Management on computers has resulted in most Knowledge Management efforts being influenced or controlled by the IT experts.

While Knowledge Management operates through computers, effective Knowledge Management is not about computers. It is about learning that is directly useful to the job and potential for improved performance and improved performance. Finally, it is about culture change. It is about differentiating between information and knowledge.

Issues

There are several issues that crop up when we consider Knowledge Management initiatives.

- Knowledge is codified but there is lack of interest among the people to use it because organizations get into an activity syndrome. The knowledge stays on the computers.
- Knowledge is there on the computers but neither do the people know how to access it nor do they the location.
- Smaller organizations do not necessarily have the infrastructure to support Knowledge Management efforts. My colleagues always talk about the need for more communication in the organization. Neither

do we have the time and IT resources to codify nor are we there to talk to one another, as all of us are not there if not all the time, at least most of the time.

- Less developed nations do not have the infrastructure or the resources to divert away from what they are doing now to mount a Knowledge Management effort.
 - Knowledge Management sometimes leads to more silos of information leading to an infoglut that tightens the stranglehold on our throats even more. What people need is information just in time to do their jobs better and more competently. If it is like looking for needle in a haystack, people give up. Jack Gordon says that if information is too complex or if it gets in the way of doing things, people just find other ways of doing things.

Approaches – the West

As demonstrated recently, most American rather than European or Asian Universities have documented their practices very successfully. They have also used the advantage they have with the media to publicize their work far more effectively than Asians whom have been differentiated by a plethora of languages. Our research clearly shows that Knowledge Management was alive and truly kicking long before the University Professors gave a name to it in the western world as well as before the computer age.

Knowledge Management – the Pre Computer era

Asia

Knowledge Management has been practiced as early as the 9th century. In my limited research on Knowledge Management, I have found the evidence of Knowledge Management practices in the Islamic world in Asia, in Indonesia, in China and in India.

Since the dawn of the Muslim faith, there has been a ceaseless quest to present the Quran's contents in a most visually appealing form of calligraphy. After the death of Prophet Mohammad in 632 AD, the Quran was transmitted from believer to believer through the existing oral tradition – a people to people approach demonstrating that the personalization strategy of Knowledge Management, which was practiced even then. During this period, there emerged the *huffaz*, a group of believers who memorized the verses by heart. Ford Motor Company practices a similar model but calls these key people as *focals*. Unfortunately, several of the huffaz lost their lives in the holy wars. Faced with the likelihood of losing this orally recorded version, Saidina Umar Ibn Al-Khattab r.a, then destined successor of the first Caliph Saidina Abu Bakr r.a, urged for the version to be committed in writing. The task of compiling and collecting the Quran revelations into a book was assigned to Zayd Ibn Thabit, once secretary to Prophet Mohammad. All existing scripts, which had been written on bones, skins, wood and papyrus, were gathered together. The third Caliph Uthman bin Affan codified Zayd's book. It was at this stage that calligraphy came to play an important role in Knowledge Management in the Muslim world. Puan Saadah Shaik Mahmood, Head of

Marketing at the Islamic Arts Museum Malaysia has planned to hold an exhibition on Islamic calligraphy. The Islamic world has for a long time has very successfully managed to perpetuate knowledge and the way of life in a variety of ways. Knowledge Management was not a stand-alone concept but integrated into the essence of life.

In Prambanan, Central Java, Indonesia, the sculptures in the temple complex codify the 50 poses of ancient dances. This ensured the dance was not lost over time.

In India, the Tamil kings and sculptors sought to perpetuate the karanas of that age through an authentic sculptural codification of the same in the Brahadeeswara temple at Thanjavur, the seat of the ancient Chola kingdom and at the Saragapani Temple at Kumbakonam and the Nataraja Temple at Chidambaram. While I was reviewing literature through ironically the World Wide Web, the amount of codification that has been practiced in Asia is unbelievable. The karanas or the dance poses were not static but passed through the guru sishya system – the master and the disciple system of education and performance management. Today, the Western University professors call this as the mentor and the protégé system.

The Chinese have also used calligraphy to document best practices and all the sayings of Confucius have been saved for the future. Paper factories built in Transoxania (Iran), India and Europe during the 13th and 14th centuries were attributed to Chinese calligraphy. This is one of the classic ways of storing knowledge, helping people learn and do the job.

West

Bell Labs used a deliberate, structured practice that employed both the codification and personalization strategies long before the age of e-mail and Intranets. The leaders in the organization consciously promoted Knowledge Management. Bell Labs, the research and development arm of AT&T, the Phone Company expected everyone to contribute to the knowledge base of the company. The moment, a project was completed, the team was expected to write a report on the problems faced, the approaches tried, the lessons learned and all the papers were accumulated into a company wide index and published every quarter. The hope was that when a new project was about to be started, the team knew whose work to look at. The goal was to learn from experience and not to reinvent the wheel.

This was very similar to the codification approach except it was slower on paper. The information was in binders and now it is in web pages. The company also had a company telephone directory stating the expertise and an employee was expected to call if a person's expertise was needed irrespective of the status.

It worked because the personalization strategy fed into the codification approach – people to people and people-to-people documents.

Knowledge Management – the Post Computer era

Asia

At Matsushita, the focus is on developing people to do the job faster, better and quicker for the customer. They do not wish to have market recalls (the term for rejects from the market). The goal is to define the competencies required for the position, audit the existing skills of the jobholder and determine the competency gap. This would enable the person to be developed on a regular basis based on the priority needs of the organization. All this information is recorded on a software program. Performance levels of the individual are recorded and the employee is developed on a continuous basis. Manuals for all technical processes and flowcharts are available at the workstation. Anyone can call for any information needed to do the job better at any time. Every employee is also expected to be competent in the core Matsushita competencies such as the Matsushita Business Philosophy, 5 S, Quality Awareness. The focus is on learning, performance support systems, competency management and above all developing a Matsushita culture all the time. In our experience, we found a passion in the company to share knowledge.

West

At Ford Motors, they relentlessly concentrate on the jobs that people are trying to do. The Knowledge Management system collects and shares ideas that those people can use promptly to do their jobs better. One of their initiatives, the best practice replication begun in 1995, that seeks to unearth the best ideas that show up in Ford's operations around the world on how to do the job and to share them with everyone else in the organization who does the same job. People who do the same thing are organized around what is called as the *communities of practice*. Ford has identified 19 of them. Everyone who does vehicle painting in any plant, for example belongs to the vehicle painting community of practice. Business practice replication begins with a team or a person who is proud of something they have done. If a person can show greater value, a better way of doing the job, the person goes to a person called a *focal point*, one of the 500 people around the world in Ford who are assigned to enter such ideas into a software that runs on the company intranet. The operators who constitute the same community of practice review the idea at all the plants and decide at the local level whether to adopt it or not. If adopted, the value and the costs savings are recorded into the system. This in turn enables Ford to measure the return on investment.

Another IT company that we worked recently has a virtual competency desk. All key staff and their competencies are recorded on a software program. When there is a need to respond to a customer, the employee e-mails the appropriate person with the customer request and the customer's needs are met just in time. In this way, the entire company's knowledge is available when needed to satisfy the customer.

Leadership

It is now abundantly clear that Knowledge Management is much more than storing information. It is about learning, communicating and culture change. There seems to be a convergence between training, electronic performance support systems, competency management and knowledge management with the goal clear – Performance Improvement. The distinctions are no longer clear. For example, the fundamental goal at Matsushita whether it be Training, Electronic Performance Support Systems or Knowledge Management is to reduce the cycle time to effective and hopefully expert job performance. If we are comfortable with Knowledge Management that it has relevance to the bottom line, we are then faced with the next question – who leads the Knowledge Management initiative. In an unscientific poll of 400 training directors conducted in June 1999, 42% of them responded that Knowledge Management is more of a shared custody rather than IT or training driven. 36% of them stated the training department does not have the expertise or credibility to lead the initiative while 54% said it was not appropriate for them to responsible for it.

The perception is that the IT people should lead it. However there is general agreement that it should be shared custody. No one is going to disagree if people from different parts of the organization are going to be there as they are the people who do the jobs and they must be in charge of the content. Even if the IT person has a high seat at the table, the question is who is going to sit at the head of the table.

Here is a golden opportunity for the HRD professional.

Role of the HRD Professional

This seems to be a golden opportunity for the HRD professional. HRD professionals focus on learning, performance and continuous development. They are the ones who do not just pass on information but help build real skills that will help people do the job not just know the job. The challenge now is how to integrate training with Knowledge Management.

There are instances when the HRD professionals find themselves lacking in the area of content but it is making an effort to accumulate our own knowledge. Recently, I was facilitating a Senior Manager's Technical conference, I was woefully short on content but I made an effort to learn as much as possible.

It is when the proactive HRD professional takes over; Knowledge Management will achieve its true aspirations of developing people to deliver superior performance. I use the word proactive because if we are going to be still reactive, someone else is going to seize the leadership from us. If we do not seize this opportunity, in another two years, it will be too late. Some one else would have taken control. At its core, there are very strong reasons for HRD to lead the Knowledge Management initiative:

- At its heart, Knowledge Management is not about technology. Technology is only a vehicle to store knowledge. There is a strong need to differentiate between information and knowledge. It is when we use the information with experience, does it become knowledge. Computers as good as they are in improving productivity still do not have the ability to discriminate between good and bad decisions.
- Knowledge Management is an effort in culture change. People must be comfortable to share knowledge. Performance assessments must be based on how much sharing a person has done.
- Though the leader needs to have the support of the top management and understand technology, there is no need for a CEO or an IT person. It requires a person dedicated to people management. The goal is to make it all happen i.e. superior performance not only today but also for the future.
- We all know old structures will not work in the new world. The nature of organizations have to change, hierarchical structures are being replaced more and more by flatter structures. In the transparent workplace, there needs to be more democratization. There needs to be a lot of learning about new ways of working, managing and sharing knowledge. People focused leaders are needed to drive the change effort.
- In the past, knowledge was top – down but in the new scheme of things, everybody and anybody should be able to generate knowledge, share it and transmit it intra and inter company. We cannot afford to have the tech savvy and the non-tech savvy differentiation, as that would not be equitable. The HRD professional with the learning tools is better placed to lead the team.
- Knowledge Management may seem to be about technology but as organizations get more and more into it, they realize it is more about learning, performance and people. This calls for the leadership to be vested with people who understand people.

The question is not if the leadership of Knowledge Management must be with HRD professionals, it is whether we are ready to seize the opportunity. Opportunities are like sunrises. If you wait too long, you miss them. Let us rise to the occasion now.

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