

Knowledge Transfer among Employees in Organizations of Local Governments

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Abstract

Knowledge of employees is now considered an important asset in any organisation of productive or non-productive nature. Its efficient transfer among employees also brings a lot of benefits to the organisation, namely, knowledge ensures the performance of work tasks, it can improve interpersonal relationships and provide a competitive advantage. This issue is also addressed in the content of the article, which focuses on knowledge transfer among employees in organisations of local governments. The first part of the article contains a theoretical basis for knowledge and its rapid transfer among employees. The second part documents the results of the research, which was conducted among employees of organisations of local governments. As part of the research a search was done to establish the importance that respondents attach to the knowledge they have acquired in various forms of learning and informal ways and willingness to provide knowledge to colleagues.

Keywords: Knowledge, Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Management, Willingness To Provide Knowledge.

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Introduction

One is preparing for a future profession by studying either at high school, university or by self-studying. Knowledge and skills gained by studying should form the basis which should be developed and expanded during work activities. In an organisational environment this base can be expanded through knowledge transfer among employees themselves and through knowledge transfer, which is recorded in organisational documents and in the management information systems. Knowledge that is shared among employees is called tacit knowledge and knowledge that employees obtain from organisational documents is called explicit knowledge. Nowadays, when a lot of public organisations are concerned with the idea of transition to knowledge-based organisations through the process management, tacit and explicit knowledge is, therefore, the key to a successful transition.

Knowledge transfer

Knowledge management has been developed to facilitate the exchange and sharing of information, knowledge and expertise. Workers' knowledge is in their minds, therefore, from the organisation's perspective, it is very important to know how to make employees share this knowledge voluntarily. Čarnický and Mesároš (2005) indicate that in order to achieve that the employees share their knowledge voluntarily, a company should first enable its employees to develop, improve and explain to them the importance of knowledge, not only for themselves but also for the whole company. This approach of organisations is also important because, as indicated by Garud and Kumaraswamy (2005), employees play an important role in managing knowledge - they are the ones who need the knowledge in order to do their work and who must initiate its creation and exchange. Bieliková (2008) states that the purposeful creation, development, use and exploitation of knowledge is of crucial importance for enterprises in terms of ensuring their further development as well as in terms of gaining and maintaining a competitive advantage. There are several definitions of knowledge management. According to Truneček (2003) knowledge management involves linking those who know with those who need to know, and the transformation of personal knowledge to knowledge of organisation. Debowski (2005) thinks of knowledge management in the context of its contribution to a long-term prosperity of a company and sees it as a process of identifying, collecting, organising and expanding of intellectual assets that are critical to a long-term performance of the organisation. Even Butler (2000) understands knowledge as an asset and according to her, as a general rule, knowledge management is a discipline that promotes an integrated approach to identifying, managing and sharing all information assets of the organisation, regardless of where it is and in what form. Knowledge transfer is an important part of knowledge management. Its importance is also highlighted by Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), who argue that knowledge transfer is a dynamic process of knowledge production and that human knowledge is created and expanded through social interaction among people transferring tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Within the knowledge management Broadbent (1997) drew attention to the importance of tacit knowledge of employees because, in her view, those organisations that value the importance of this knowledge, do not delimit the obligations of employees to those they derive from traditional job descriptions. They enable employees to develop their creative potential in order to increase competitiveness.

Knowledge management began to develop in the business environment. Roberts (2010) states that so far only a little attention has been paid to knowledge transfer on micro-organisational level within the business sector as well as in public organisations of local governments.

After further examination of the principles and rules of knowledge management it can be concluded that it is possible and desirable to apply knowledge management also in public administration organisations and in local governments. In the context of knowledge transfer in organisations of public administration, it is possible to apply four known phases of rapid knowledge transfer: searching and receiving such knowledge, which has been proven in practice; acquisition, understanding and knowledge sharing; the creation of intellectual capital and transformation of knowledge into a value for a client (citizen) in the organisation of local government. The rapid transfer of knowledge is important for the implementation of process management because key skills form the basis of individual processes in the organisation.

Materials And Methods

The aim of the research was to determine, to what knowledge respondents attach the greatest importance, while knowledge could be obtained through various forms of study (high school study, university/college study, self-study and knowledge from practice. Secondary goals of the research were to determine whether employees are willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues and whether the knowledge gained in the organisation informally is useful for their work. Another sub-goal was to determine whether gender, level of education and length of practice affect the knowledge transfer among respondents.

An authorial questionnaire was used to collect data. For the needs of this study a part which focuses on well-known forms of knowledge acquisition, on willingness to provide knowledge and on the knowledge transfer in informal meetings in an organisation.

A statistical sample consisted of randomly selected employees of local governments (mayors and officers of municipal offices) in the Slovak Republic. Selection of respondents was narrowed to staff of local governments deliberately, because the study is a partial output of a project focused on a transition of organisations of local governments to knowledge-based organisations. The research involved 96 respondents, of which 23 were men and 73 women. Demographics of respondents are documented in Table 1. For the needs of the research an educational attainment and a length of practice of respondents were also surveyed in addition to gender. 34 respondents reached secondary education and 62 respondents higher education. Within seniority, respondents could classify themselves into one of five groups, whereas most respondents - nearly half - have worked in an organisation of local government for over 20 years. The least number of respondents, namely, 9 classified themselves to the group 0-5 years.

Methods of descriptive and inductive statistics were used to evaluate data in a statistical programme SPSS Statistics.

Fig. 1 Demographic data of respondents

Independent Variable	Criterion	Number	%
Gender	Male	23	24,0
	Female	73	76,0
Education	Secondary	34	35,4
	Higher	62	64,6
Length of Practice	0 - 5 years	9	9,4
	6 - 10 years	16	16,7
	11 - 15 years	10	10,4
	16 - 20 years	16	16,7
	over 20 years	45	46,9

Results

The respondents could express a percentage which represented a level of importance of knowledge that employees use at work to the question, 'What knowledge is the most important for your work?' It was the knowledge acquired either through studying at high school, university, through self-study or knowledge acquired in practice. The data was averaged as documented in Table 2.

Fig. 2 Importance of knowledge gained through various forms of study

	Mean	Difference
Knowledge gained through university/college study	16,88	
Knowledge gained through high school study	17,99	+ 1,11
Knowledge gained through self-study	19,98	+ 3,10
Knowledge gained in practice	45,06	+ 28,18

Knowledge acquired in practice is considered most relevant by respondents because their average reached a value higher than 45. It represents a significant difference compared to other three forms of knowledge acquisition. According to respondents, knowledge acquired in high school is least relevant in their work and in contrast to knowledge acquired in practice the average stands at 28,18. Employees of local governments should be familiar with economics, relevant legal norms and management at least. No secondary school provides such a complex education. Business academies are closest to this but they focus more on an economic aspect. Some universities such as Faculty of Public Administration at University of P. J. Šafárik in Košice are currently preparing qualified employees for organisations of local governments. A lot of respondents are graduates of this faculty and they stated that knowledge acquired by studying at the university is really important to them. Nearly two thirds of respondents attained university education, nevertheless, they stated that they consider the knowledge gained by studying at the university only of a little importance in their work. This raises a question whether these respondents are graduates of a study aimed at management of public administration.

If respondents possess knowledge gained in practice, did they acquire this knowledge by their own efforts or was it provided by their more experienced colleagues? An answer to this question was sought through two statements: "Colleagues readily provide me with their knowledge" and "I am willing to provide my knowledge to colleagues." The data obtained are documented in Table 3. Respondents were given the opportunity to express themselves within the five-point Likert scale.

Fig. 3 Provision and acquisition of knowledge

Options	I provide knowledge to colleagues	Colleagues provide knowledge to me		
	Number	%	Number	%
Definitely yes	28	29,2	12	12,5
Yes	64	66,7	60	62,5
I cannot comment of this	3	3,1	14	14,6
No	1	1,0	9	9,4
Definitely no	0	0	1	1,0
Together	96	100,0	96	100,0

Answers to both statements are almost identical in option "yes". Taking into account both favourable responses (definitely yes and yes) then more than 95 % of respondents are willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues. But these respondents perceived willingness of colleagues to provide them with knowledge about something less. By counting the positive answers, it is exactly 75 %, which is 20 % less. More than 10 % of respondents think that colleagues are not willing to provide them with their knowledge. A hypothesis H1 was

formulated on the basis of these results and it was used to examine whether there is a mutual correlation within knowledge transfer among colleagues.

H1 There is a statistically significant correlation between willingness to provide knowledge to colleagues and willingness of colleagues to provide knowledge to me.

Given the uneven distribution of data, the Kendal Correlation Coefficient was used to either confirm or reject the hypothesis. The coefficient amounted to 0,324 while the correlation is significant at a value of 0,001. On the basis of these figures it can be concluded that the hypothesis was confirmed. There is a statistical significance between the willingness to provide knowledge to colleagues and willingness of colleagues to provide knowledge to me, but it is rather small. It can be assumed that about a third of respondents, local government employees, are ready to provide their knowledge only if their colleagues provide the necessary information to them.

Knowledge transfer in an organisation of a local government is implemented in formal and informal ways. Assuming that local government employees are more willing to share their knowledge informally, a statement was formed "I also obtained new knowledge in informal meetings and discussions with colleagues." A statement "The knowledge acquired informally is very useful for my work." was formed to determine whether knowledge obtained in this way is useful. The results are documented in Table 4.

Fig. 4 Informal knowledge acquisition and its importance

Options	Informal knowledge acquisition		Usefulness of informal knowledge acquisition	
	Number	%	Number	%
Definitely yes	27	28,1	27	28,1
Yes	61	63,5	51	53,1
I cannot comment on that	3	3,1	10	10,4
NO	4	4,2	6	6,3
Definitely no	1	1,0	2	2,1
Together	96	100,0	96	100,0

Almost 92 % of respondents said that they obtained new knowledge even in informal meetings and less than 6 % think that they will not obtain new knowledge in this way. Regarding the usefulness of thus obtained knowledge, 82 % of respondents think that it is useful for their work. Less than 11 % of respondents did not know how to comment and almost 9 % of respondents considered the knowledge gained in this way would not be useful. Who is more willing to provide the knowledge - men or women? The Mann-Whitney U test was used to find an answer to this question and the data are documented in Table 5.

Fig. 5 Provision of knowledge by sex

Sex	Number	Mean	Coefficient	Value
Men	23	53,41	Mann-Whitney U	726,500
Women	73	46,95	Wilcoxon W	3427,50
			Z	- 1,177
			Asymp. Sig.	0,239

Calculated data show that men are more willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues than women.

Does the level of educational attainment affect the willingness to share knowledge? The Mann-Whitney U test was used to study the impact of education on willingness to provide the knowledge and data are documented in Table 6.

Fig. 6 Provision of knowledge by education

Education	Number	Mean	Coefficient	Value
Secondary	34	54,04	Mann-Whitney U	865,520
Tertiary	63	44,46	Wilcoxon W	2818,520
			Z	- 1,753
			Asymp. Sig.	0,080

Secondary educated respondents are more willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues than their higher educated counterparts.

Which respondents in terms of length of practice are more willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues? The answer to this question was sought by Kruskal Wallis test. The results are documented in Table 7.

Fig. 7 Provision of knowledge on basis of length of practice

Length of practice in years	Number	Mean	Coefficient	Value
0 - 5	9	48,89	Chí-Square	1,811
6 - 10	16	54,09	df	4
11 - 15	10	51,30	Asymp. Sig.	0,770
16 - 20	16	49,00		
above 20	45	45,63		

An analysis of the calculated averages show that respondents who work in the range of 6-10 years are most willing to provide their knowledge. Least willing are the respondents who work more than 20 years.

Discussion

The knowledge needed to work in an organisation of local government is obtained either by studying at an appropriate school, home study or in practice. In order for a candidate to work in an organisation of local government they must meet required qualifications. The first requirement, in accordance with current legislation, is completed university studies. But are the knowledge and skills acquired during their studies sufficient for the job? The results of the presented research suggest that thus acquired knowledge is insufficient. Respondents clearly indicated that they consider the knowledge acquired by practice most important for their work. Respondents even considered the knowledge acquired by self-study for more important than knowledge and skills acquired during the secondary or university study. Based on these results, it can be assumed that schools inadequately prepare their students for the exercise of their future profession. Why this is so might be a goal of a subsequent research. It is ideal for an organisation and its competitive advantage that its employees are willing to share knowledge which is related to efficient and effective performance of job duties with colleagues. The results of the presented research indicate that more than two thirds of

respondents are willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues and according to these employees most of the colleagues are also willing to provide knowledge to them. These results do not correspond with the results of Mesároš (2007), who examined the knowledge exchange in Slovak companies. He was investigating, inter alia, the knowledge exchange on a voluntary basis, which can be understood as a willingness to provide knowledge. If the willingness to provide knowledge on the voluntary basis is taken into account, then only those local government employees who participated in the research are nearly 50% more willing to provide knowledge to colleagues than respondents who participated in Mésaroš's research - only 31% are willing to share knowledge on a voluntary basis.

Informal relationships as well as informal communication through which the knowledge transfer is happening are both components of the management of an organisation. Are knowledge and skills obtained in this way useful for employees? Most respondents indicated that they obtained useful knowledge in informal ways. Shaw and Edwards (2006) pointed out that informal knowledge sharing in organisations is always happening. Should informal sharing of knowledge be supported by management? Opponents of informal knowledge transfer argue that knowledge acquired in this way might be just gossips, personal opinions and rumours that employees may consider to be facts. Its proponents, however, indicate that informal knowledge transfer can improve interpersonal relationships, lead to more efficient work, knowledge is shared in a more relaxed environment, innovative ideas may arise during discussions in the corridors.

Conclusions

Tacit knowledge which is found in minds of employees as well as explicit knowledge which is recorded in organisational documents play an important role in transformation of public sector organisations from traditional to knowledge-based organisations. Besides the knowledge itself, its transfer among employees is very important. Knowledge transfer takes place only if the employees have adequate knowledge and colleagues are willing to share that knowledge with each other. The research has found that the majority of respondents - employees in the organisations of local governments are willing to provide their knowledge to colleagues. The respondents consider knowledge which they acquired in practice for most important and the majority consider the knowledge they acquired informally useful for their work. The author is aware of limitations of the research, especially, in terms of sample size. Nevertheless, the results may contribute to the enrichment of knowledge in the field of knowledge transfer.

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