

## Knowledge Transfer Strategies in Sports Organizations

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### Abstract

Sports play a vital role in the development of the country. When a world-class athlete emerges, it will be able to promote the country. The country will be recognized in international level. Thus, there are various activities that have been conducted in sport organizations to enhance and increase knowledge. This study uses the qualitative interview methods. Managers of sports bodies were interviewed to understand and explore how sports organizations maintain and manage knowledge in their organizations. From the findings, employees engagement and narratives and stories are the two main categories of knowledge transfer strategies in sports organizations. The results obtained from the interviews conducted can be used as an early framework to assist sports organizations to improve their working systems and processes. This is done in an aim eventually to produce medal-winning athletes in international sports arenas.

**Keyword:** Knowledge Transfer, Employees Engagement, Narratives and Stories, Sports Organizations

### Introduction

Many organizations are aware that their greatest asset is the knowledge held by their employees and, the need of leveraging the value of knowledge is also increasing (Wiig, 1993; Zack, McKeen, & Singh, 2009). Knowledgeable employees are indispensable for organizations as their contributions enhanced the organization's performance. Therefore, organizations are becoming more knowledge-intensive by focusing more on people's minds rather than their hands (Wiig, 2012; Wong, 2005),

The success and survival of every organization will depend on the performance of its knowledge assets (Drucker, 2002). Knowledge assets are the skill, experience, and unique employees who are the brains behind the success of any organizations. Knowledge assets of an organization are vital in giving it competitive advantages because of its employees' profile that are unique and cannot be imitated or easily duplicated by competitors (Larson & Luthans, 2006). Knowledge can be obtained from experienced and skilled workers. For sports

organizations, they would normally hire, develop and retain excellent personnel who possess valuable knowledge to train their athletes in order to compete successfully in tournaments. However, a study done by Toracco (2000) found that although knowledge is considered as the most valuable asset, most organizations lack the supportive systems required to retain and leverage the value of knowledge. In order to maximize efficiencies and the effectiveness of sports organizations, it is important to find ways to best utilize and maintain the intellectual assets of knowledge workers before they leave the organization (Liebowitz, 2009). Therefore, organizations need to develop a strategy to prevent critical knowledge loss as employees leave, by keeping track and capturing what knowledge workers have, and by documenting that knowledge and passing it to new employees. However, the case in Selangor, Malaysia, where sports organizations face problems in retaining their best coaches who sometimes resign to pursue better job opportunities elsewhere so how sports organizations creating appropriate method for transferring the knowledge of experienced workers before they leave the organization and make accessible when required.

### *Background of Sports Organizations in Malaysia*

Malaysia is a Federation that comprises thirteen States of Kedah, Selangor, Penang, Negeri Sembilan, Kelantan, Terengganu, Johor, Melaka, Pahang, Perlis, Perak, Sabah and Sarawak and three Federal States of Kuala Lumpur, Putrajaya and Labuan. Generally sports organizations can be classified into three sectors, which are the public sectors, the non-profit or voluntary sectors, and the professional or commercial sectors (Hoye, Smith, Westerbeek, Steward, & Nicholdon, 2005). The development of sports performance in Malaysia is undertaken by public organizations, many of which are affiliated with the Olympic Council of Malaysia (National Sports Policy, 2003). The Malaysian Government's role has been confined to those carried out by the Ministry of Youth and Sports, the National Sports Council and the Malaysian Schools Sports Council. The various sports bodies either under the Federal or State governments of Malaysia also works together for the development of sports in Malaysia (National Sports Policy, 2003).

As a young nation, sports play a very special role in Malaysia's nation-building process and the government is wholly committed to build a culture of sports in Malaysia that stretches from the grassroots to the elite (Mohd Najib, 2011). Each State Sports Council (SSC) are given responsibilities to plan, develop, implement and nurture sport development programs at grassroots level in Malaysia.

The success of sports organizations depends on several factors. It includes development of holistic pathway and processes to assist in the recruitment, retention and development of athletes (Warner, Tingle, & Kellett, 2013). In addition, the main responsibilities of a coach are to train and manage the athletes so that they can win competitions (Cote & Gilbert, 2009). However, one of the reasons why Malaysian athletes could not really excel in the Olympic Games 2012 in London was because of the lack of sport science experts and coaches for their training (Ahmad Shapawi, 2012). Therefore, the hiring and retention of qualified coaches in Malaysia are sine qua non for the success of athletes and the organizations that they represent. However, the retention of talented employees including coaches is difficult and is a challenge for most sports organizations today (Taylor, Doherty, & McGraw, 2008). Consequently, when experienced staff retires, resigns or were terminated from the organization, not only that their services were lost, critical knowledge and experience will also leave with them. Sports organizations need to put processes in place to manage the storage of knowledge in

the organization, especially when employees retire and dealing with problems such as knowledge loss, shortage of skills and staff.

Tacit knowledge must be attached to explicit knowledge for the explicit knowledge to be processed, codified, stored, understood and retrieved successfully (Hamza, 2009). This happens regardless of whether these knowledge workers resign or retire, organizations could still retain some account of knowledge during their tenure (Bender & Fish, 2000; Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Thus, many would question on how knowledge is transferred from the skilled coaches to the junior coaches and athletes in any sports organizations. This is vital for the organizations so that knowledge will still be retained in the organization even though the experienced coaches leave the organization. In this paper, several knowledge transfer strategies conducted by several sports organizations in Selangor will be discussed as well as how knowledge can be transferred from the experienced to the new employees.

### **Literature Review**

According to Cote and Gilbert (2009), coaches must have three specialized knowledge that includes professional, interpersonal and intrapersonal. Professional knowledge will be knowledge in the sport sciences, sport-specific knowledge and pedagogical knowledge. Interpersonal knowledge focuses on interpersonal skills such as communication between coach and various stakeholders. Intrapersonal knowledge examines how coaches could translate the experience into knowledge and skill. Expertise in coaching is developed through long years of efforts and experience (Bell, 1997; Côté & Gilbert, 2009). This would mean that coaches should be employed on long term contracts to develop their knowledge and expertise. Since knowledge accrues through experience and experience is earned by doing things, ample time is needed to enable new employees to have the necessary tacit knowledge to do a successful job (Hamza, 2009).

Knowledge can be divided into two types; explicit and tacit (Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Polanyi, 1966). Nonaka and Konno (1998) further showed that explicit knowledge can be thought of as an artifact and an object such as information that is captured, taught, written down and stored in books, manuals, reports, databases and images. It is concrete and can be transferred and explained easily (Martínez, 2007) either in formal or systematic language. In sports organizations, explicit knowledge can be found in written documents such as organizational reports, periodization training program, post mortem report, and sports books. Even though this information is in externalized forms such as in files, databases, books and manuals, if other organizations do not know how to access it, it is of no use. Basically, codification strategy is quite effective for sharing explicit knowledge (Choi & Lee, 2002; Hansen, Nohria, & Tierney, 1999).

Tacit knowledge comes from the Latin word *tacitare* and means something that is very difficult to articulate, to put into words or an image (Dalkir, 2011). It was originally introduced by the famous polymath, Michael Polanyi. According to Polanyi (1966, p. 4) the concept tacit can be explained as “we know more than we can tell”. He pointed out that,

*This fact seems obvious enough, but it is not easy exactly what it means. [he chose the example of knowing person's face, and says that] we can know a person's face and can recognize it among ..... a million faces. Yet, we usually cannot tell how we recognize the face we know. So most of this knowledge cannot be put into words. (Polanyi, 1966, p. 4)*

Tacit knowledge is also known as the knowledge derived from personal experience, which resides in person's mind and people carry in their heads (Prusak, 1996), is elusive, and it is described as a person's know-how, expertise or capability (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka, Toyoma, & Nagata, 2000) and is abstract, complex and content dependent (DeLong, 2004). Grant (1996) asserts that knowledge, especially tacit knowledge, is the most important strategic resource for organizations. It provides context for people, places, ideas and experiences (Cong & Pandya, 2003). In addition, tacit knowledge is very difficult to identify in practical form and to isolate tacit knowledge is difficult because it requires clarification on tacit knowledge. Since, tacit knowledge is built by an individual and cannot be fully transferred (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007), rather than being transferred through documents or taught by experts (Matthew, Cianciolo, & Sternberg, 2005) it can only be transferred when parties involved are open-minded (Cavusgil, Calantone, & Zhao, 2003), therefore, tacit knowing embodied in cognitive skills is likewise learned through shared and collaborative experiences (Leonard & Sensiper, 1998) and requires participation during the learning process. Such knowledge will be bound by the workers, and transmitted better via training or gained through personal experience. It is transferred between people when they talk, collaborate and learn from each other and is rooted in the minds of workers on a project that implemented. Therefore, personalization strategy such as face to face meetings can be employed to sharpen and foster tacit knowledge (Choi & Lee, 2002; Hansen et al., 1999; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

Knowledge usually begins as explicit and becomes tacit with practice and experience. Therefore, tacit knowledge is more complex than explicit knowledge because it has not been articulated (Cole, 1998). The information such as with which people get help or consult regarding specific aspects of works and unique experiences, they have been also considered as tacit knowledge. It could not be found in manuals, books databases or files and people use metaphors, analogies, demonstrations and stories to convey their tacit knowledge to other parties (McAdam, Mason, & McCrory, 2007). In fact, Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) have suggested that one of the central dynamics of knowledge creation is the transformation of knowledge from tacit to explicit. However, the transfer of knowledge is considered a managerial task that remains challenging (Ichijo & Nonaka, 2007). The difficulty of managing these processes is due to the tacit nature of knowledge and the inability to understand knowledge because it is frequently tied to a particular context. Alavi and Leidner (2001) see tacit and explicit knowledge, as

*Mutually dependent and reinforcing qualities of knowledge: tacit knowledge forms the background necessary for assigning the structure to develop and interpret explicit knowledge. The inextricable linkage of tacit and explicit knowledge suggests that only individuals with a requisite level of shared knowledge can truly exchange knowledge. (p.21)*

The irony, is that the more difficult it is to articulate a concept such as a story, the more valuable that knowledge may be (Dalkir, 2005) because it is related to the skills, know-how and expertise of knowledge workers (McAdam et al., 2007). Therefore, any piece of knowledge or information that contributes to the performance of an organization should be captured and converted into explicit knowledge and stored in the

organizational memory (Dembla & Mao, 2002; Heijst, Der Spek, & Kruizinga, 1996). So that in return, people could retrieve and use it and make organizations more efficient even if knowledge workers retire or resign from the organization (Cruz, Pérez, & Cantero, 2009).

### **Research Methodology Research Context**

To explore and examine sports officers and coaches' experience in knowledge transfer activities, the qualitative approach was adopted to explore and understand the participants view on pertaining issues. According to Creswell (2009), "qualitative research is exploratory and is useful when the researcher does not know the important variables to examine" (p. 18). Since this study is exploratory in nature and the fact that there is lack an extant body of both theory and data done involving similar population (DeLong, 2004; Subramanian & Soh, 2009), there is a merit for a qualitative research approach to be considered (Creswell, 2009). The focus population for the interview consisted of sports officers and sports coaches from the State Sports Council (SSC) and State Sports Organizations (SSO) in Malaysia. The participants were identified through purposive sampling to acquire the experiences of sports officers and sports coaches on knowledge transfer activities. Through purposive sampling approach, researcher intentionally selects participants who have experience with the central phenomenon or key concept being explored.

### **Research Instrument**

The interview was selected as the primary method for data collection in this study because it has the potential to elicit rich, and detailed description (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). It is also able to capture a person's perspective of an experience (Goodenough & Waite, 2012). Therefore, data for this research was collected using a semi-structured interview that was audiotaped which allowed participants to respond openly to the interview questions. Patton (2002, p. 278) described the usefulness of interviewing by stating that:

"We interview people to find out from them those things we cannot directly observe. The issue is not whether observational data are more desirable, valid or meaningful than self-report data. The fact of the matter is that we cannot observe everything. We cannot observe feelings, thoughts and intentions. We cannot observe behaviours that took place at some previous point in time. We cannot observe situations that preclude the presence of an observer. We cannot observe how people have organized the world and the meanings they attach to what goes on in the world. We have to ask people questions about those things".

Once the data has been collected, it was summarized by examining carefully all the data, coding the data, identifying patterns and themes, and interpreting the meaning of themes (Bloomberg & Volpe, 2008). Refer to Fig. 1 for a schematic diagram of a careful data analysis in qualitative research which was adopted for the present study.

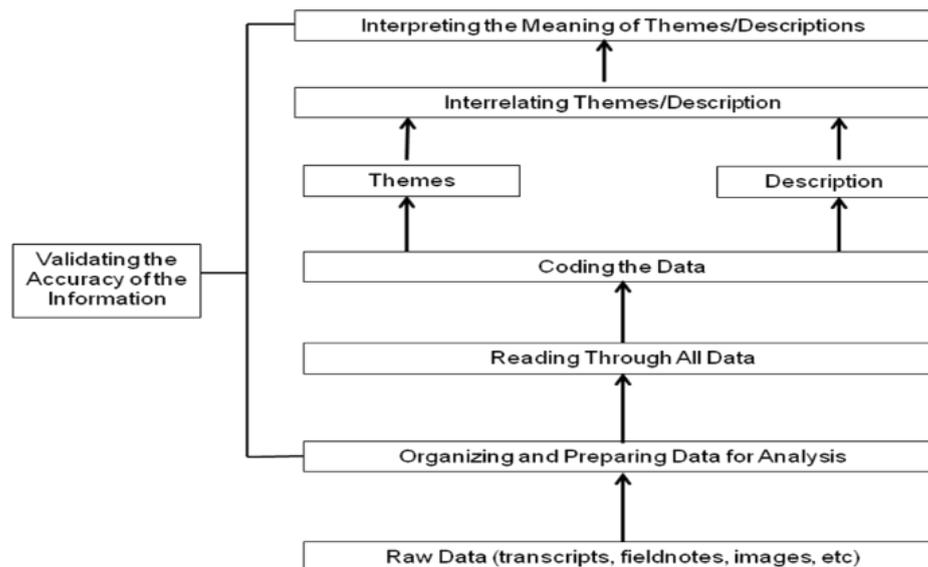


Figure 4: Data Analysis in Qualitative Research

Fig. 1. Data Analysis in Qualitative  
(Creswell, 2009, p. 185)

#### *Interview Procedure*

The interviews were scheduled according to the interviewees' convenience time. Most interviews were conducted at the Selangor State Sports Council except for two respondents: one respondent was interviewed at squash association in Petaling Jaya and another one at swimming association in Shah Alam. Before interviews were conducted, researcher provide a short briefing to explain the scope of the study and participants were given a chance to ask questions before signing a consent form. Once the participant understood the concepts, they are asked to fill a consent form, which allows participant to terminate the interview at any point. To make sure all interviews were captured, interviews were recorded using tape recording. The researchers began by asking a series of questions. The interview session would last for approximately 70 to 150 minutes, using semi-structured questions.

#### **Data Analysis and Findings**

There are several strategies that have been practiced for transferring knowledge in sports organizations. These include employee engagement and narratives and stories. Below are some of the results obtained from the interview with sports officers and sports coaches on the programs and strategies practiced in sports organizations.

#### *Employee Engagement*

The open category under **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT** involved strategies related to transfer knowledge through Observation, and Practice by Doing activities. Through **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT**, think and act behavior are most important so that the organizations can create, develop and transfer of knowledge activities between one and another. Observations are among the first concept emerge under **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT** category. Observation is the action of closely observing and monitoring someone in organization. Under observation concept, the first activities are job shadowing. Job

shadowing is a work experience option where new or junior coach learn about the tasks and duties by walking around and watch how senior or other coaches conduct activities. From the interview, it had shown that job shadowing is one of the strategies for junior coaches to enhance their knowledge.

I told him as a backup coach, now you need to learn everything from the foreign coach... You need to keep your two eyes.. See and write down in book.

(Interviewee 3, unit 142)

Why I appoint Mr. XXX as assistant coach. .. I want him to learn few things from the senior coach... He needs to know how to train athletes, dealing with State Association, State and National Sports Council.

(Interviewee 7, unit 101)

As new coach, they need to learn, and then, they need to see what the senior coaches are doing.

(Interviewee 3, unit 203)

I get two part time coaches; they follow senior coach Mr YYY (Interviewee 5, unit 65)

Informal Mentor Mentee is the second activities conducted under Observation concept. In Informal Mentor Mentee, the more experienced and more knowledgeable coaches will help and guide the less experienced coaches (junior coaches) and the process is more informal in the sports organizations.

Informal mentoring we need to inform MSNSelangor. You know, called the expertise to come. We don't have that kind of time. We only have informal mentoring... senior and junior together before competition.. (Interviewee 3, unit 204)

Once we have a new coach, the management will pair him/her with senior staff and they can learn about players and how to plan for betterment of sports organization. This one way how management want a new staff familiar with the system.

(Interviewee 1, unit 186)

We need at least two coaches, one coach and another one is assistant coach.

(Interviewee 2, unit 35)

The second concept is Practice by Doing under **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT** category. Under Practice by Doing, knowledge is transfer by interaction with people around them as well as gain by own experienced. Under Practice by Doing concept is hands-on- learning. Hands-on-learning is a process of learning through experience. Since most of the coaches were athletes previously, therefore through hands-on-learning, individual will be able learn and get information from his/her previous coaches (once they are athlete).

As for me, if you asked me to do something, I want to learn hand-on, I don't want to be like robot. Robot normally you just see but don't know what to do to solve the problem.

(Interviewee 4, unit 11)

No one will teach you everything that you want. You think your professor teach you everything? You learn through experience.

(Interviewee 3, unit 319)

Experience as athletes play important roles since those coaches had an experienced represent the country and already have result. They are not fresh.

(Interviewee 2, unit 10)

All of my coaches are experienced athletes. If you not an athlete, it's difficult to be a coach because as coach you need to play with your athletes and you need to teach them. We need to be hand on. So once you are experience athletes you have an advantage.

(Interviewee 4, unit 118)

The last concept under **EMPLOYEE ENGAGEMENT** category is Peer Discussions. Peer Discussion is the action and process of talking to learn something or exchange idea between one another. Face to face interaction is the first coded under Peer Discussion concept to get updated information about the latest performance of sports organizations. Thus, face to face interaction is one of the methods practiced when meeting with all the stakeholders.

Every 3 months, management will call liaison officer, coaches, sports association to discuss on the progress bases on monthly report submitted.

(Interviewee 2, unit 69)

After coming back from any course, we will sit round table and discuss new information related to athletes' performance. From there we will share all the information gather and use to improve our athletes' performance.

(Interviewee 7, unit 75)

He always updates and refers with other coaches who are close friend with him when facing with problem

(Interviewee 1, unit 79)

Dialogue and discussion is the second coded under Peer Discussions concept. Dialogue and discussion is an open discussion session where people can talk about something and share their ideas and opinions openly.

After every weightlifting event, we will have dialogue and discussion session to identify why we cannot perform and how we can beat other teams. We try to find solutions

(Interviewee 7, unit 83)

Normally we invite experienced coaches to share what they have done to their own athletes

(Interviewee 2, unit 76)

Then we meet up in big national event. You see... That time all the coaches will come around. Then we will have exchange idea, exchange view, exchange dialogue, exchange. That's the time we will meet and we were talk.

(Interviewee 3, unit 176)

*Narratives and Stories*

The open category under **NARRATIVES AND STORIES** involved strategies related to transfer knowledge through narrated of connected activities through a story. There are few concepts emerged under this category such as Putting Experience in Stories, Information Sharing through Description and Fostering Reading Putting Experience in Stories is the first concept under **NARRATIVES AND STORIES** category. Coaches are required to produce specific sports manual to transfer knowledge in sports organizations. Once they have manual, it is easy for other people to refer, read and enhanced their knowledge.

The coaches themselves do the manual. They have people who suppose do it.  
(Interviewee 5, unit 75)

It is actually a coach manual. If I become a coach, I will get a copy, I get through then I follow.

(Interviewee 5, unit 79)

The second activities under Putting Experience in Stories are report writing. Report writing is one of the methods to transfer knowledge in sports organizations. Athletes' performance is one of the requirement and need to be shared in the report.

All sports associations are compulsory to submit report to us... All reports either the team success or not need to report to us.. The entire document we will compile.

(Interviewee 2, unit 78 & 79)

After coming back from the event, coach will submit the report on athletes' performance, what tournament they take part, latest result and the recommendation for improvement

(Interviewee 4, unit 92)

The third activities under Putting Experience in Stories are writing on the log book. Coaches always write down their own notes in a diary/ log book. As for junior coaches, the head coach will check their log book for endorsement. Log book is a record of coach used to fill in monthly reports.

I don't know in other sports but in swimming, when you are in training, coach, you need to record in the log book

(Interviewee 3, unit 185)

We not control the log book; however we encourage them to have their own log book. So that they have their own record and all the information recorded can be used for compiling monthly report

(Interviewee 2, unit 93)

Coaches will submit their log book... and I will keep the entire book (Interviewee 4, unit 93)  
Information Sharing through Description is the second concept under **NARRATIVES AND STORIES**. There are few activities that have been conducted under information sharing through description concept. Information sharing through description is more to knowledge transfer activities that are written and distribute to others. Writing on the whiteboard is an example of activities under information sharing through description.

The programme is all the time in the whiteboard there. If you want, you just snap and you write your own. We do sharing like that at the notice board..... Every training coach will write up the programme.....Everyday different, we share the training program on the whiteboard.

(Interviewee 3, unit 186 & 189)

FosterReading is also an example of activities conducted under **NARRATIVES AND STORIES**.

Management will buy books and link to foster reading activities in sports organizations. After I came back from any workshop, my coach will ask what have you done and all these things. Sometimes they come back with some books and all these things (other related information during the course), we will share. We will do the sharing (Interviewee 3, unit 35)

Normally now it's very modern, download from the website and then my coaches will correspond with overseas like Australia and America. And then they order a lot of books, normally they ordered a lot of books from US and you know video DVD. That what Mr. ABC is all the time doing. We keep a lot of DVD here, so we will have our own television there and our own. All coaches, they will sit down there and watch.

(Interviewee 3, unit 248)

Compiling all written reports is the second activity under Foster Reading. From tacit knowledge, coaches will transform all the information and report to the explicit knowledge, through documentation.

Every coach makes a report, then we compile. (Interviewee 5, unit 89) Every two weeks it's about 3-4 pages reports are submitted. Now, we will keep the information for future references.

(Interviewee 1, unit 179)

## **Conclusion**

In conclusion, sports organizations can use and adopt varieties of activities to transfer knowledge in organizations such as employee engagement and narratives and stories. Leveraging the knowledge workers effectively through the capturing and transferring knowledge within the organization has become an important aspect in any comprehensive organizations in order to sustain competitive advantage. According to Liebowitz (2009), knowledge transfer strategies can be used to capture, share, apply and leverage knowledge before knowledge workers leave the organization. In fact, most members in the organization can easily access the gathered knowledge and use them throughout the organization when it has been accumulated and organized in a proper manner.

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