COMMUNICATION SKILLS AS AN ENABLER TO KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER IN SMEs

Aziz Yahya

Centre for Languages and Human Development
Universiti Teknikal Malaysia Melaka

E-mail: aziz@utem.edu.my

ABSTRACT

The study was designed to discover the relationship between communication skills and knowledge transfer of engineers in SMEs. The communication skills involved are Listening skills, Seeking and Giving Feedback abilities, Understanding Others abilities ,Influencing and Relating abilities and Oral and Written skills. The findings were collected through a survey by means of questionnaire distributed to subordinates of engineers. The findings show that workers under engineers' supervision feel that all the communication attributes are important to be possessed by the engineers. However, there is a lack of communication skills in the part of engineers in delivering the knowledge. This, in turn, will affect the receiving of knowledge at the other end. Logically, this will give great impact to the productivity of the companies. This study is a preliminary approach in determining the factors to boost knowledge transfer in industrial sectors. Recommendations are provided to enhance communication skills for better knowledge transfer exercise in organizations.

Keywords: *Communication Skills, Knowledge Transfer, Engineers, Small Medium Enterprises*

INTRODUCTION

It has been widely acknowledged that the importance of managing knowledge and know-how in the present day is critical to organizations for a sustainable tomorrow. This is not difficult to apprehend because, without understanding their own process for knowledge

transfer, establishments may not be able to continue as performing enterprises. As such, successful 21st-century organizations are those that best use utilize their information and knowledge and use them to create sustained additional value for their stakeholders (Sallis and Jones, 2002).

Given the importance of knowledge, it is not surprising that organizations everywhere are giving prominence to knowledge discovery and ways to organise, share, and apply it more effectively. This is because, unless knowledge is efficiently managed, it may not transfer into intellectual capital or assets in which organizations can use to be more competitive and productive (Skyrme and Amidon, 1997). In this context, many researchers concur that Knowledge Management (KM) is more than just the storage and manipulation of information, but a process that requires the responsibility to create and disseminate knowledge throughout the organization (Parikh, 2001; Marshall *et al.*, 1996). Thus, in general, KM is widely recognized as a process involving knowledge generation, codifying, and transfer (Chong, 2006a; Chong, 2006b).

Generating knowledge basically refers to the sub-processes of searching, capturing, and creating knowledge. Knowledge is generated through discovery, that is, employees develop new ways of doing things or it is brought in through external sources. Research and development is one such knowledge creation activity. Codifying knowledge means translating data and information into symbols that others can understand. Codification encompasses a process where knowledge is codified and stored in a reasonable format so that others in the organization can access it. Database management and data warehousing technologies can help in this process. In universities, databases, directories, procedural handbooks, and email messages are among the examples of the knowledge codification process. Transferring knowledge refers to the sub-processes of data-mining, distributing, and sharing organizational knowledge. It involves personalizing knowledge and distributing it in a useful format to meet the specific needs of users. The knowledge is articulated in a common language using tools that are understood by all users. Among all the KM processes, the transfer/dissemination of knowledge is vital to organizational success, quality, and competitiveness. In industries, publications, presentations, websites and reports are examples of mechanism used to disseminate/transfer knowledge.

As KM requires significant investments of time, money and personnel (Chong and Lin, 2008; Parikh, 2001), a careful examination of the its key strategic enablers can determine its implementation success. The findings will serve to inform the extent of importance of knowledge transfer and key strategic enablers and suggest ways of how the

resulting gaps, if any, can be reduced for a more effective knowledge transfer implementation. Communication is recognised to be a key enabler to knowledge transfer (Sharimllah et.al, 2008). Effective communication plays a major role in employer-employee relationships in organisations. Effective communications strategies lead to successful organisations, while others tend to fall short of optimal performance (Argenti & Forman, 2002; Tourish & Hargie, 2004a). Despite the increasing awareness concerning the importance of communications to organisations, its importance for knowledge transfer is an area relatively least explored.

In Malaysia, the criteria and standards of programs in the field of Engineering is set by the Department of Higher Education and the Board of Engineers, Malaysia (BEM) (Department of Higher Education, 2002). The general objectives of Engineering Education outlined by the BEM require graduates to be able to:

- design and analyze engineering products, systems and processes.
- critically analyze and identify engineering problems and formulate appropriate solutions using a system approach wherever relevant.
- prepare, submit and present technical reports.
- assess and make use of new technologies.
- demonstrate technical competencies in their field of specialization.
- communicate effectively with colleagues as a team, customers and clients.
- demonstrate professional ethics and moral responsibilities in their practice.
- initiate and adapt to changes, taking into consideration cultural, political and environmental issues.
- demonstrate leadership skills in managing both individual and team engineering projects.
- carry out their duty with sensitivity to safety, occupational health, the environment and people with special needs.

The above objectives combine the need for technical and analytical aspects as well as soft skills such as communication skills, personal skills, business skills and such which are still lacking engineers (Chong et.al, 2007). Hence, it is against this backdrop that this study draws its aim. In that, this article aims to identify the ways in which communication skills impact the level of knowledge transfer among engineers in Malaysia.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge Transfer

Davenport and Prusak (2000) suggest that there are three main components of knowledge management: knowledge generation, knowledge codification and coordination, and knowledge transfer. While knowledge transfer is just one of three aspects of knowledge management, it is a very important one. Carlile and Rebentisch (2003) stated that knowledge transfer is part of knowledge management which focuses on the movement of knowledge across the boundaries created by specialized knowledge domains or the transfer of knowledge from one place, person or ownership to another. Successful knowledge transfer involves with the transfer results in the receiving unit accumulating or assimilating new knowledge.

According to Van den Hooff and De Ridder (2004), knowledge transfer involves either actively communicating to others what one knows, or actively consulting others in order to learn what they know. When organizations or employees within an organization identify knowledge that is critical to them, they can use knowledge transfer mechanisms to acquire the knowledge. They can then constantly improve it and make it available in the most effective manner for others who need it. They also can exploit it creatively or innovatively to add value as a normal part of their work. Takeuchi and Nonaka (2004) define knowledge transfer as the process of continuously creating new knowledge, disseminating it through the companies and embodying the knowledge quickly by producing new ideas, system.

Communication and Knowledge Transfer

Communication is a process in which senders and receivers of messages interact in a given social context. Interpersonal communication refers to the exchange of information and transmission of meaning between two people. Organizational communication is the subject that deals with the exchange of information and transmission of meaning throughout the organizational hierarchy.

The quality of the knowledge to be transferred (tacit versus explicit) affects knowledge transfer (Nonaka, 1995). Specifically, the more tacit the knowledge is, the more difficult it will be to transfer that knowledge. However, if all knowledge has a tacit component, then some form of relational channel, defined broadly as two-way human-to-human contact, is necessary to transfer knowledge effectively. An organization with many

relational channels for transferring knowledge might expect more knowledge to be transferred than one that has few. Relational channels provide the human-to-human connection necessary to support the transfer of tacit knowledge. One of the ways is by means of communication.

Since the leader or the manager accomplishes organizational objectives through people, it is essential to communicate what the leader or the manager wants people to accomplish, how to accomplish, where to accomplish and more important, why to accomplish. To communicate the organizational philosophy, objectives, procedures, and practices to all employees is not easy, because communication is a very complex phenomenon.

Effective Communication Skills

The variables from the communication models are integrated to produce a communication model used for this study. Some of the variables are as follows:

- Listening skills
- Giving Feedback
- Understanding Others
- Influencing and Relating
- Oral and Written skills

Listening

Listening is a difficult process. While a typical speaker utters about 125 words per minute, the typical listener can receive 400-600 words per minute. Hence, about 75 percent of listening time is free time. The free time often distract the listener. Being an active listener is the solution. Supervisors , hence, must be able to listen to the view of others and answers relevant questions clearly to enhance communication. They must be approachable and respect view of other s and observe the turn –taking effectively in conversing.

Seeking and Giving Feedback

Feedback is the receiver's response to the attempt by the sender to send the message. Feedback is the key to determination by the sender of whether or not the message has been

received in the intended form. Feedback involves choice of channel by the receiver of the original message*(McGregor,1960)*. The channel for feedback may be quite different from the original channel chosen by the sender. A puzzled look may be the feedback to what the sender considered a perfectly clear oral instruction.

Understanding Others

The supervisors must consider the impact of their behaviour on others and identify the causes of people's long term attitudes. As supervisors, they should identify the body language and unspoken thoughts and feeling while treating others with dignity and respect.

Influencing and Relating

Supervisors must possess the ability to influence and relate to others. Some related attributes are by developing co-operative relationship with colleagues,encouraging open mindedness,involving staff in decision making process, being flexible and negotiable , creating trust , inspiring others ,updating information and presenting case persuasively.

Oral and Written skills

Communication skills is about how supervisors effectively and clearly communicating with the subordinates through oral and written medium. Supervisors must use language which avoids obscurity, inflated vocabulary and convoluted sentence construction. Link communication skills development to workplace processes, documents and activities will enable the new skills to be used immediately. Information bulletins, manuals, forms and other modes of communications should be communicated effectively so that

- readers understand documents better
- readers locate information faster
- documents are easier to update
- it is easier to train people
- documents are more cost-effective

Having reviewed the literature, the next section presents the methodology used in this study.

METHODOLOGY

The success of effective communication skills contributes to successful knowledge transfer which in turn can lead to considerable improvement to the performance of organisations. Based on the literature review, a research framework was developed to guide the current study. The research framework is divided into two parts: independent variables and dependent variables.

For the independent variables, the communication skills elements are gathered from various communication models. The skills are listening**,** Seeking and Giving Feedback, Understanding Others, Influencing and Relating, and Oral and Written skills. Firstly, the *Listening skills* was measured using 5 items which were modified from Evern, (n.d).Secondly, *Seeking and Giving Feedback* was measured using 7 items which were modified from Yamnill and McLean, 2001). *Understanding others* (5 items), *Influencing and Relating* (8) were modified from Evern (n.d). The last item is oral *and written ability* was measured using 3 items which were adapted from the Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Canada, (2006). All items were measured using a 5-item scale ranging from 5 - Very effective, 4- Strength, 3 - Competent, 2 -Need development, to 1-Urgent development needed

This study uses successful knowledge transfer as dependent variable. It analyses the respondents' perceptions towards the level of their knowledge transfer as the direct impact of their supervisors' (engineers') communication skills. All items were measured using a 5-item scale ranging from -5- Very high, 4- High, 3 -Moderate, 2-Low to 1 -Very low.

Research Framework

INDEPENDENT VARIABLE DEPENDENT VARIABLE

Perceived Effective communication skills of supervisor

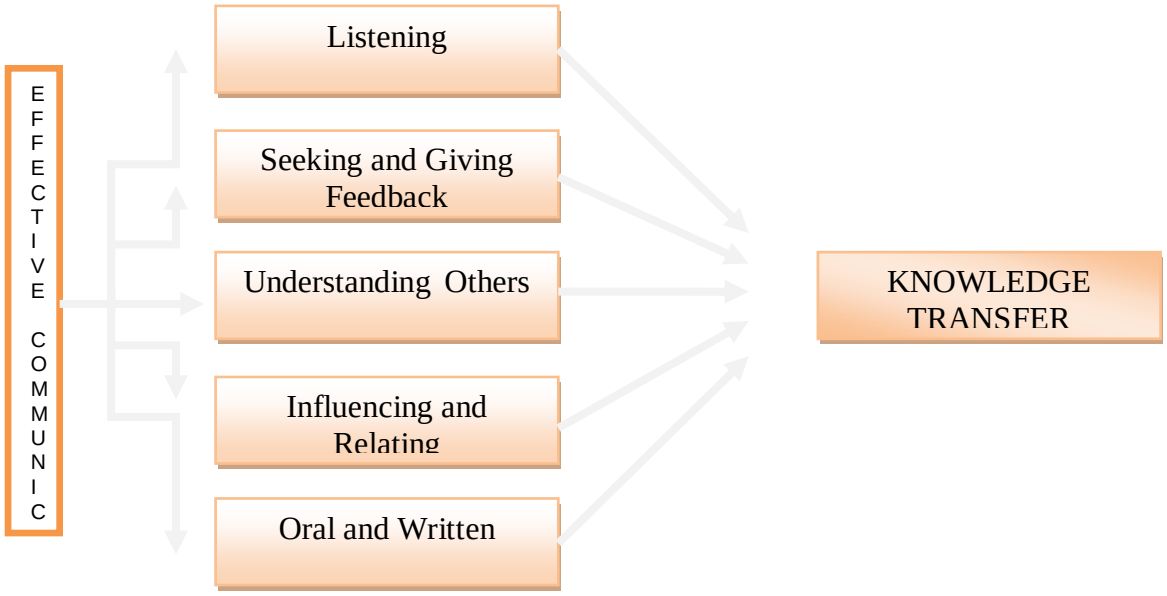

Figure 1: Research Framework

The survey method was utilized and specifically self-administered questionnaire was chosen to collect the data due to its efficiency and economical characteristics. The questionnaire is divided into 3 sections:

a) Demographic profile
b) Communication skills
c) Knowledge Transfer

The targeted population of this study is subordinates reporting to their supervisors who are engineers from various SMEs. One hundred questionnaires were distributed to subordinates. 71 usable questionnaires were returned to the researchers, yielding a response rate of 71%.The survey questionnaires were answered by participants voluntarily. The

Statistical Package for Social Science (SPSS) version 14.0 was used to analyse the data and test the hypothesis.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Table 1 shows the demographic profile of the respondents.

Table 1: Demographic Profile

Gender	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Male	36	50.7
Female	35	49.3
Total	71	100.0
Education Level	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
High school	32	45.1
Vocational	16	22.5
College	12	16.9
Bachelor	10	14.1
Master	1	1.4
Total	71	100
Experience	**Frequency**	**Percent (%)**
Less than 1 year	7	9.9
2-5 years	14	19.7
6-10 years	14	19.7
11-20 years	31	43.7
More than 20 years	5	7.0
Total	71	100

Position	Frequency	Percent (%)
Upper management	4	5.6
Middle management	12	16.9
Junior Management	12	16.9
Administrative staff	21	29.6
Support staff	11	15.5
Trained professional	3	4.2
Skilled laborers	3	4.2
consultant	2	2.8
Temporary employee	3	4.2
Total	71	100

The respondents consist of 35 females and 36 males. The table also shows the level of education for respondents. 32 (45.1%) respondents completed their high school, 16 (22.5%) are from the vocational schools, 12 (14.1%) completed their college education , 10 (14.1 %) have bachelor degrees and 1(1.4%) obtained a master degree. 7 (9.9 %) respondents have 1-2 years of working experience whereas 14(19.7 %) have worked for 2 to 5 years. 14(19.7 %) respondents have worked for 11 to 20 years and 5 (7.0%) have 20 years of working experience. In relation to positions held, 4 (5.6% respondents are from the upper management sector, 12 (16.9%) are from the middle management, 12(16.9%) are from the junior management, 21 (29.6%) are the Administrative staff, 11 (15.5%) the support staff, 3 (4.2%) the trained professional, 3 (4.2%) skilled laborers 2(2.8 %) consultant and 3(4.2%) temporary employee.

Based on Table 2, the highest mean for the skills is the *understanding* and the lowest mean is *influencing* others as perceived by the subordinates under the supervisors/engineers. However, it is obvious that all the skills above need development. Hence, it is vital for the supervisors to undergo training in order to improve their competence in the area of communication skills

Table 2: Level of Communicative skills of Superiors

Communication skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Influencing	2.70	.58
Understanding	2.85	.63
Feedback	2.75	.71
Listening	2.82	.65
Oral and written	2.75	.67

Table 3 shows that the communication skills used by the superiors to transfer knowledge as perceived by the subordinates also needs development. Again, the highest mean *understanding* and the lowest mean is *influencing* others.

.

Table 3: Communication skills used by superiors to transfer knowledge

Communication skills	Mean	Std. Deviation
Influencing	2.70	.58
Understanding	2.85	.63
Feedback	2.75	.71
Listening	2.82	.65
Oral and written skills	2.75	.67

Table 4 shows the correlation between knowledge transfer and communication skills. All the communication skills recorded a very significant relationship with knowledge transfer. In other words, for knowledge transfer to be successful, all the communication skills are strongly required.

Table 4: Correlation between Knowledge Transfer and Communication Skills

	Influencing	Understanding	Feedback	Listening	Oral and written skills
Knowledge Transfer	.915**	.918**	.940**	.871**	.808**

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

RECOMMENDATION

The results in Table 2 and 3 show that the communication skills among supervisors need development, as perceived by the subordinates. Table 4 shows that knowledge transfer is positively related to communication skills. In that, the more the knowledge is transferred, the more communication skill is required in the process. Thus, it is indeed necessary that the SMEs follow through some of the recommendations provided in this article in order to make knowledge transfer a success in the organizations.

The top management needs to have a good understanding about knowledge transfer and its characteristics. Top management must continually stress the importance and benefits of knowledge transfer implementation. In addition, top management has the necessary authority to employ the right individuals and motivate them to constantly learn, communicate more and share their knowledge with other colleagues. To achieve this, top management must build confidence among its staff that valuable knowledge can be obtained, shared, stored and applied through communication, conviction, persuasion and interactive dialogue. All these efforts must be continuously undertaken in order to support knowledge sharing and learning activities. A culture of trust and reciprocity must be instilled within the organisation so that the staff understand the importance of sharing and thus, continue to contribute their intellectual assets for the general good of the institution.

In the private sector arena, it is common for organisations to encourage employee participation in knowledge sharing activities through financial incentives. While rewards are often referred to as financial and monetary gain, other types of incentives such as promotion and career development opportunities, training and development opportunities, annual leave, best staff award and other intangible benefits all becomes rewarding measures for the academics. The engineers, on the other hand, must understand their obligations where knowledge is shared not only between themselves but is indirectly dispersed to other parts of the same organisation (Chiem, 2001).

Subsequently, a measurement on improvement must also be done to ensure if tasks, in this case if knowledge transfer is in the right direction. A proper measurement system is important as it is a basis through which it is possible to control, evaluate, and improve knowledge transfer (Ahmed et al., 1999) so that organizational objectives can be attained. It enables organizations to track the progress of knowledge transfer and to determine its benefits and effectiveness (Wong, 2005). The findings imply that a proper performance measurement system should be established and adopted throughout the institution as without

it, enthusiasm and support for KM will cease to continue. Moreover, without a proper measurement in place, there may be untimely abandonment of the KM efforts

CONCLUSION

In order to successfully deal with the challenges of environmental uncertainties, SMEs are compelled to place more emphasis in managing their knowledge transfer in order to remain successful and at the forefront. Communication, in this respect, plays an important role in shaping KM transfer success in IHLs. It is hoped that the findings and recommendations made in this study would help the SMEs to properly manage their knowledge transfer processes. This would ensure that knowledge is effectively transferred not only between top management and engineers but indirectly to the society in order to allow SMEs to respond proactively to the changes in the environment. Moreover, the proper management of knowledge can provide an opportunity for organisational learning environment that improves and in turn creates a competitive advantage for organisation as it reacts to today's organisational demands in a much more dynamic environment (Melton, C.E., Chen, J.C.H. and Lin, B. 2006).

The limitation of this study rises from the limited sample. The sample size should be increased in the future. Furthermore, the study is confined only to communication skills, a small portion of the knowledge transfer aspects. Other skills like administrative and marketing should be explored. Moreover, the study analyses the effective communication skills possessed by the supervisors from the lens of the subordinates through questionnaires. The findings can be supported as well by interviewing the participants. This will provide more an in depth view of the matters.

REFERENCE

[1] Ahmed, P.K., Kok, L.K., and Loh, A.Y.E. (2002). *Learning through KM.* Oxford: Butterworth-Heinemann.

[2]Argenti, P.A., and Forman,J.(2002). *The Power of Corporate Communication: Crafting the voice and image of your business.* New York: McGraw-Hill.

[3]Carlile, P., Rebentisch, E. (2003), Into the black box: the knowledge transformation cycle. *Management Science, 49, 1180*-95.

[4] Chiem, P.X. (2001). In the Public Interest. *Knowledge Management, 8,*: http//www.destinationcrm.com/km/dcrm_km_past.asp. (24 April 2007).

[5] Chong, S.C. (2006a).KM critical success factors: A comparison of perceived importance versus implementation in Malaysian ICT companies. *The Learning Organization,* Vol. 13/ 3,pp.230-256.

[6] Chong, S.C. (2006b). KM Implementation and its Influence on Performance: An Empirical Evidence from Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor (MSC) Companies, *Journal of Information and Knowledge Management*, Vol.5/1,pp. 21-37.

[7] Chong, S.C. and Lin, B. (2006) 'Exploring KM issues and KM performance outcomes: Empirical evidence from Malaysian Multimedia Super Corridor companies', *Special Issue of International Journal of Technology Management*.

[8]Davenport, T.H., & Prusak, L. (2000). *Working Knowledge: How Organisations Manage What they know.* Boston :Harvard Business School Press.

[9] Jabatan Pendidikan Tinggi (Department of Higher Education), 2002, "Guidelines on Criteria & Standards for Programmes in The Field of Engineering", Bahagian Jaminan Kualtiti (Quality Assurance Division).

[10] Marshall, C., Prusak, L. and Shpilberg, D. (1996). Financial risk and the need for superior knowledge management. *California Management Review,* Vol.38 (3),pp. 77-101.

[11]McGregor, D.M. (1960). *The Human Side of Enterprise*. NY: McGraw-Hill Book Co.Ministry of Training, Colleges and Universities, Canada, 2006)

[12] Melton, C. E., Chen, J. C. H. and Lin, B. (2006). Organisational knowledge and learning: Leveraging it to accelerate the creation of competitive advantages. *International Journal of Innovation and Learning*, Vol. *3*(3), pp.254-266.

[13]Nonaka, I., andTakeuchi, H. (1995). *The Knowledge-creating Firm: How Japanese Companies Create Dynamics of Innovation*. New York: Oxford University Press.

[14] Parikh, M. (2001). Knowledge management framework for high-tech research and development. *Engineering Management Journal*, Vol.13, No. 3, pp.27-33.

[15] Sallis, E., and Jones, G. (2002). *Knowledge Management in Education Enhancing Learning & Education.* London: Kogan Page Limited.

[16] Skyrme, D. and Amidon, D. (1997). The knowledge agenda. *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 1, No. 1, pp. 27-37.

[17] Sharimllah Devi, R. Chong, S.C. and Lin, B. (2008). Examining the perceived importance and effectiveness of KM performance outcomes from the perspective of

institutions of higher learning, International Journal of Innovation and Learning Volume 5, Number 1 / 2008, 18-37.

[18]Takeuchi,H., & Nonaka, I. (2004). *Hitosubashi on Knowledge Management*, Wiley.

[19]Tourish, D., and Hargie, O. (2004a). "Preface", in Tourish, D. and Hargie, O (Eds). *Key Issues in Organisational Communication*. London: Routledge, pp. 1-16.

[20]Van den Hooff, B., De Ridder, J.A. (2004). Knowledge sharing in context - the influence of organisational commitment, communication climate and CMC use on knowledge sharing.*Journal of Knowledge Management,*. 8 (6), 117-30.

[21] Wong, K.Y. (2005). Critical success factors for implementing knowledge management in small and medium enterprises. *Industrial Management & Data Systems*, Vol. 105, No. 3, pp. 261-279.

[22]Yamnill, S., and McLean, G.N. (2001). Theories supporting transfer of training. *Human Resource Development Quarterly*. Vol 12: 195-208.