Sustainable Knowledge Management: The Role of Knowledge Management Audits

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Organisational interest in knowledge management has grown due to its promise of delivering strategic competitive advantage. However, the decision to implement knowledge management is often followed by the uncertainty of how to do it and where to begin (Earl, 2001). A prominent line of inquiry emphasises knowledge audits as a critical first step in implementing knowledge management in organisations (e.g., *Liebowitz, 2000; Burnett, et al 2004, 2013; Perez-Soltero, et al, 2006*). Knowledge audits are instrumental in understanding the organisational context and identifying specific changes or improvements that can be made in an organisation's culture, business processes and technological infrastructure to leverage its knowledge for competitive advantage (Burnett et al 2004). A series of methodologies and case studies has been presented in the literature discussing the application of knowledge audits in practice (e.g., *Burnett, et al 2004, 2013; Perez-Soltero, et al, 2006; Cheung, et al 2007*). Here, the focus is predominantly centred on a systematic assessment of the organisation's knowledge resources, that is, what knowledge is available, what is needed and how it is being created, captured, stored and shared. Knowledge audits thus involve a gap analysis between the organisation's current and ideal knowledge capability, resulting in recommendations for specific knowledge management solutions.

A review of the wider knowledge management literature, and indeed the practice of knowledge management in the real world, suggests that this approach may be too simplistic. Despite apparent implications for changes in the organisation's culture and business processes, the existing knowledge audit case studies fail to include a comprehensive discussion on how audit findings can lead to the successful design and implementation of integrated knowledge management initiatives, aligned to the organisation's core strategy. An integrated knowledge management effort is warranted, owing to the complexity inherent in the field. Specifically, effective knowledge management would benefit from a complex interplay of organisational culture, structure, technology, people and knowledge resources (*Bhatt, 2001; Becerra-Fernandez and Sabherwal, 2001; Gold et al 2001; du Plessis, 2007*). Moreover, successful knowledge management implementation is likely to involve carefully navigating through various strategic, cultural, human and political issues posing as potential hindrances and enablers in the organisation's context (*Dufour and Steine, 2007*). This suggests that knowledge audits, as a critical first step towards knowledge management implementation, should also be conducted as an integrated and holistic process. Such an approach should include a study of the wider critical success factors, in addition to highlighting the knowledge management needs and gaps in the organisation's knowledge capability. Subsequently, the audit would then extend to include the design of integrated knowledge management efforts and suitable provisions for their implementation.

A specific knowledge management audit methodology is proposed to address these gaps in the theoretical and practical study of knowledge audits (Figure 1). Some key principles of the methodology include:

- Emphasis on the researcher's embeddedness in the context, working in collaboration with the knowledge manager over a sustained period, as opposed to the snapshot evaluation evident in most KA case studies, to enable a holistic exploration of multiple factors in the context.
- Emphasis on an iterative approach to data collection and analysis to progressively develop an understanding of the context as well as improve the practice of knowledge management. Specifically, phases of data collection, reflection and action were conducted in a cyclical manner in collaboration with the knowledge manager to facilitate improvements in learning and practice of knowledge management.
- Emphasis on the holistic inquiry of multiple factors in the organisation's context to facilitate the integration of knowledge management efforts in the organisation's core operations and enhance their success and sustainability.
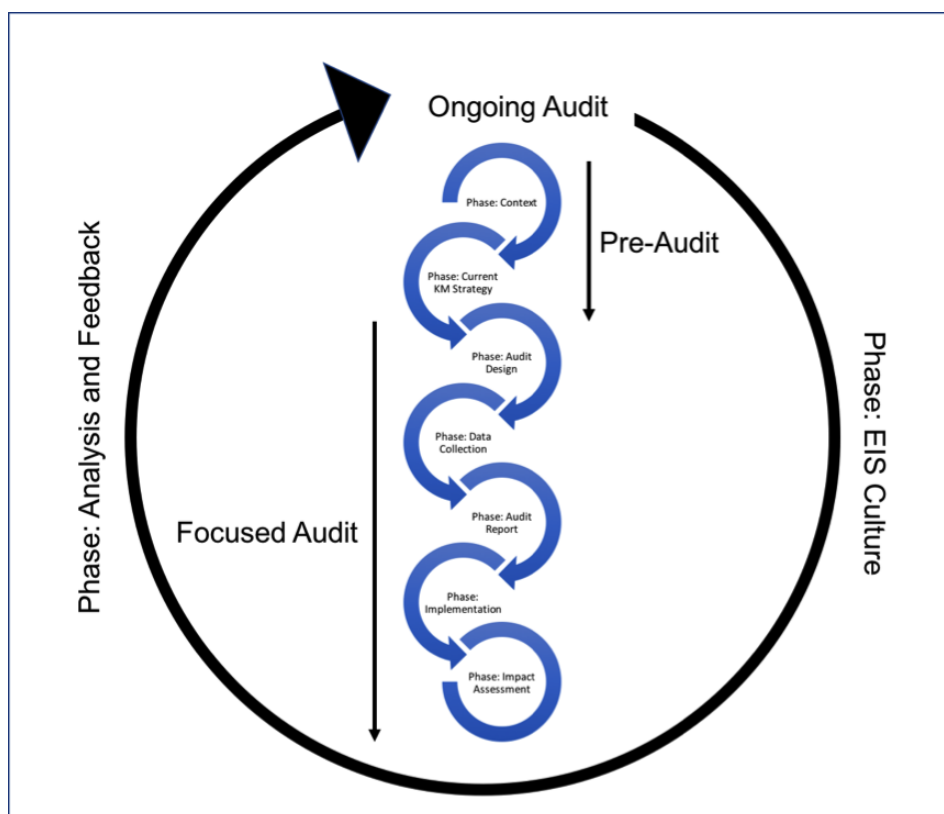

Figure 1: Knowledge management audit methodology

Figure 1 illustrates the various phases in the methodology that embodied these key principles. The model depicts the iterative cycles of data collection, analysis and the following actions to progressively develop a holistic understanding of the context and improve the practice of knowledge management in the organisation. The methodology allowed for sufficient flexibility to evolve in response to the dynamic organisational context and the researcher's critical reflections. As a result, it will be further modified in light of the lessons learnt from the experiences gained in the case study organisation.

The methodology was implemented at a UK high-performance sport institute, with the aim of understanding the organisation's needs and informing the practice of knowledge management. The embeddedness of the researcher as well as the iterative approach were instrumental in highlighting the structural complexity of the organisation, and various strategic and political issues in the wider high-performance system that proved to be the most significant barriers to effective knowledge management. The collaborative relationship with the knowledge manager was crucial in informing the strategic focus of knowledge management for the institute, as well as the design of various knowledge management solutions to address specific organisational needs. Finally, application of knowledge management concepts, specific to the sport context, were identified, which could have implications for developing the practice of knowledge management in sport.

It is evident in the knowledge management literature that there is no one recipe for success, and no single way to manage an organisation's knowledge. What is needed is a careful study of the specific organisational context to inform knowledge management efforts rooted in the organisational needs and aligned to their wider business strategy. Such a needs analysis is expected to enhance the success and sustainability of the knowledge management efforts.

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