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KM Governance – a research project in progress

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Abstract

The research in progress on which this paper reports seeks to address the issues of KM governance. The paper outlines a PhD project which aims at identifying and analysing forms of KM governance adopted by a range of organisations. The aim of this paper is to identify and contrast different KM governance configurations and to discuss the impact of KM governance configurations on the way knowledge management is approached in the organisations.

Keywords

KM Governance, Knowledge Management, IT Governance

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge Management (KM) is an evolving discipline which is increasingly gaining acceptance in organisations as well as among academics. KM borrows from a wide range of organisational disciplines such as IS, HR and QM in order to support the various knowledge related activities in the organisation (Raub & Ruling, 2001). While some perspectives of KM only have a single focus (such as certain IT applications), its interdisciplinary character is increasingly accepted and valued in the business community (Pemberton, 1998).

However, this interdisciplinary and emerging character not only makes it difficult to ground KM into any of the established disciplines, but also poses practical challenges for the participating organisations. Among the main concerns are questions such as, how should KM be implemented in the organisational structure and how should it be governed to create the expected benefits for the organisation? Should already established governance models of the contributing disciplines be adopted or do the unique characteristics and the unique challenges of KM require a specific KM governance configuration?

The research in progress on which this paper reports seeks to address these issues of KM governance. The aim of the research is to identify the rationale for the adoption of a particular KM governance configuration and the impact the KM governance configuration has on the way knowledge management is approached in the focus organisations. In order to achieve these aims, six organisations have been investigated based on data obtained from qualitative interviews of major stakeholders who are involved in the KM governance situation of their organisation. This paper reports on the KM governance configurations which were encountered during the data collection, based on preliminary data analysis.

THE GOVERNANCE OF KM

The concept of KM governance is relatively new, with little research focusing particularly on this aspect of the KM phenomenon (Smith & McKeen, 2003; Zyngier, Burstein, & McKay, 2004). As such the terminology combines the KM concept as well as the concept of organisational governance.

Knowledge Management

The emerging KM discipline has experienced a colourful journey since its origin in the early 1990's. After the attention towards knowledge was brought into the business world (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), software developers and technology consultancies have provided KM solutions and spearheaded the conceptualisation of knowledge management (Wilson, 2002). The resulting technology focused approach has strongly influenced the development of knowledge management in the business community and at the same time generated a lot of critique, focusing on the inherent difficulty of sharing and storing knowledge appropriately through the means of technology (Butler, 2003). In a number of instances KM was found to be too complex to be sufficiently addressed by the use of technology alone (McDermott, 1999).

Moving on from this technology-based approach, knowledge management today has increasingly been conceptualized from a comprehensive point of view: in order to facilitate the sharing and retention of knowledge

it is equally important to focus on the social interaction of people (such as through the support of communities of practice), and the provision of information technology (such as document management systems and expert finders). From this comprehensive point of view, KM encompasses a whole range of tools and initiatives from a number of different disciplines which are employed to actively support the management of knowledge in the organisation. Wiig (2000) defined KM quite openly as “the systematic, explicit, and deliberate building, renewal, and application of knowledge to maximize an enterprise’s knowledge-related effectiveness and returns from its knowledge assets” (p.6). This definition emphasises the concerted and pro-active aspects of knowledge management focusing on dedicated, goal-oriented organisational processes and specific technological as well as social initiatives.

Based on the widely publicised benefits of KM activities a number of organisations have started to actively engage in them. Recent data shows that 24% of Fortune 500 companies have created the role of Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO) and 80% have formalised their KM activities through the development of a KM strategy (Holden, 2004). Hence, the adoption of KM constitutes an actual organisational phenomenon which can be analysed in its development patterns and in the characteristics through which it emerges in the organisation.

KM Governance

In order to engage in knowledge management, companies create structures and processes to organise a range of different KM activities. The term KM governance describes these structures and processes. More specifically, research into KM governance refers to the distribution of KM decision making rights and responsibilities among enterprise stakeholders and the structures and processes for making as well as monitoring strategic decisions regarding KM. This view of KM governance definition is based on Peterson et al’s (2004) definition of IT governance, an area of research which has received a lot of attention and which may help to conceptualize the KM governance research at hand.

Although the importance of individual aspects of KM governance have been mentioned in the literature, little research has been carried out which specifically focuses on governance in a knowledge management context. The literature mentions the importance of strong leadership for the success of KM initiatives (Chourides, Longbottom, & Murphy, 2003; KPMG, 2000; Pan & Scarborough, 1999; Storey & Barnett, 2000), and in particular the role of senior managers (Davenport, Long, & Beers, 1998; Skyrme, 1997; Soliman & Spooner, 2000) by serving as role models (Pan & Scarborough, 1999) as well as architects and catalysts (Inkpen, 1996). However, few studies seek to specifically identify the structures and processes through which the governance of KM is actually provided and how they impact on the development of KM in the organisation.

Research conducted in other organisational areas show that the governance configuration has a strong impact on the development of these functions and initiatives. Especially the extensive research which has been carried out in the area of IT governance reveals the influence specific governance configuration have on particular aspects of IT, such as individual benefits for the IT function created by different types of steering committees (Karimi, Bhattacharjee, Gupta, & Somers, 2000), or the impact of certain governance processes on IT success in the organisation (Ribbers, Peterson, & Parker, 2002). On the other hand, it has been shown that the organisational environment impacts on the development of IT governance, such as the impact of environmental heterogeneity on the development of a governance structure (Peterson, O’Callaghan, & Ribbers, 2000).

Research in the IT domain as well as in other organisational functions reveals the importance of the governance configuration as being critical for the development of the organisational initiative. Since these disciplines can be considered as reference disciplines to the KM domain, it can be expected that KM governance, too, constitutes an influential aspect which is critical for the development of organisational KM.

RESEARCH METHODS

The present research seeks to explore the role of KM governance, as well as the structures and processes which direct and control the organisational knowledge management approach. It aims to determine the factors which contribute to the development of a particular KM governance configuration, and the impact this configuration has on the development of the organisational knowledge management approach. These general objectives lead to the following research questions which guide the research¹:

- How is knowledge management governed in the participating organisations?
- Which factors lead to the development of a KM governance configuration?

¹ Since this paper describes a research in progress, only the first of these three research questions will be discussed in greater detail.

- What is the effect of the KM governance configuration on the organisational knowledge management approach?

Hence, it is the goal of this research to demonstrate the importance of KM governance and to develop a theory which explains precursors of KM governance and their impact on the way knowledge management is conceptualized and implemented in an organisation. Since KM governance presents a topic of considerable complexity with little prior research, this study is of an exploratory nature. To satisfy the exploratory characteristics of the study a multiple case research methodology has been adopted as suggested by Yin (1994). By using this methodology, several organisations with their respective KM governance configuration and knowledge management approach are considered as individual cases, which provide the data for the research.

At the current stage of the research, data has been obtained from six different organisations. The data is based on semi-structured interviews with two to six participants in each organisation, including staff involved in the KM initiatives and business stakeholders. The organisations were selected strategically to represent a diversity in size as well as industry type. The interviews were recorded and subsequently transcribed. They vary in length from one to two hours. The interview questions focused on the KM governance configuration of the respective organisation, its KM approach as well as the organisational and structural issues associated with the KM governance. Contact summary sheets and initial coding have been carried out as selected steps of the early data analysis as suggested by Miles & Hubermann (1994). Approximately five more organisations will be considered for the collection of further data for this research before engaging into a comprehensive case and cross case analysis.

RESULTS

At this stage of the research data material from 6 different organisations has been collected. Results indicate a wide range of different characteristics (see overview table 1):

Table 1: Characteristics of the research sites

Organisation	Characteristics	Research participants
Organisation 1	Social research organisation 300 staff, national scope	6 interviews: CIO/CKO, manager knowledge center, manager data unit, Head of HR, two KM staff
Organisation 2	Industrial service provider 5000 staff, regional market	3 interviews: manager communications, manager E-commerce, manager marketing (all members of KM task force)
Organisation 3	Technology and management consultancy 3000 staff, international offices and markets	2 interviews: Head of KM, Senior KM staff
Organisation 4	Technology services company >100.000 staff, Europe-wide subsidiaries and market	4 interviews: Head of corporate KM, senior staff corporate KM, 2 Head of KM of separate business groups
Organisation 5	High-tech manufacturer 50.000 staff, international production sites and markets	4 interviews: Head of KM, senior KM staff, KM staff, Head of Learning
Organisation 6	Technology and policy consultancy 7.000 staff, world-wide offices and markets	3 interviews: Head of KM, 2 KM staff

Organisation 1 is a dedicated research organisation focusing on very knowledge intensive social research for mostly national and institutional customers. The organisation has been significantly downsized over the last seven years to one third of its size leaving a very streamlined organisation with a world-wide reputation for its wide scope of activities and efficiency in operations. Currently 300 staff form 3 major business units which are operating quite independently from each other. They are all located within a single building.

For this organisation knowledge management is considered as an overarching umbrella which comprises a collection of organisational support functions. four years ago a formal Knowledge Service Group (KSG) has been established which subsumes a number of established business support functions, such as the organisational library, the data processing unit, the web development area, as well as the organisational IT. With its 50 staff the KSG is lead by a CKO/CIO who represents the unit on the management board of the organisation. Line managers head each of the different functional areas. Together with the formation of KSG a KM strategy has been developed which serves as road map for individual KM projects such as the introduction of document management tools and collaboration tools which are launched in addition to the operational support activities of KSG.

Organisation 2 operates as an industrial service provider offering technical support and infrastructure to corporate customers on a regional level. The organisation is focusing on a small number of major customers for whom it provides a wide range of services ranging from industrial cleaning services to consultancy for industrial processes. In order to organise its wide range of services, the organisation is organised in six major business divisions which operate quite independently from each other.

Knowledge management has been initiated by the head of one of the smaller divisions of the organisation as a result of a personal interest in the field. He established an organisation-wide task force composed of around six representatives from different business and support areas. The task force has no formal leadership and is not officially recognized in the organisation. The group conceptualizes small KM projects such as expert finders which are funded by the individual budgets drawn from the business areas represented in the task force.

Organisation 3 describes a consulting company which focuses on technology and management consulting services. With its 3000 staff the organisation conducts world-wide projects with a number of permanent international offices. This consultancy is structured in form of a professional service organisation with 12 partners heading different areas of the consulting portfolio as well as different support functions of the organisation.

Knowledge Management in this organisation is carried out by an established group of eight staff. This group is headed by a manager who also has the responsibility for the areas of process and quality management. The manager reports to one of the partners who represents KM on the board level. The KM group focuses its activities on the provision of research services and the operation of a knowledge management software tool. This tool comprises a knowledge repository, discussion boards and an expert finder, and is also the gateway for the provision of research services to the rest of the organisation.

Organisation 4 represents a high-tech service provider holding a number of international subsidiaries. The more than 100.000 staff are grouped into five major business areas which act as independent companies with a loose steering from head-quarter. Due to this constellation little collaboration exists between the different business groups which are each represented in a number of different countries. Due to the economic downturn of recent years, the corporation is under considerable financial stress and is continuously downsizing its staff.

Knowledge management in this organisation is carried out at two levels: at the headquarters level and at the level of the business areas. The headquarter has created a knowledge management group of 4 staff which form part of the in-house consulting unit. This KM group is in charge of the KM of the in-house consulting unit of 80 staff and also aims at supporting the business groups in the development of their individual KM projects. Three of the five business groups have created their own KM units which contain between three to five staff located at either HR or business development functions. Budget constraints prevent the KM units from engaging in the development of larger KM projects so they reduced activities to small projects (such as the formulation of debriefing processes and the development of local knowledge repositories).

Organisation 5 represents a company of around 50,000 staff focusing on the production of high-technology electronic parts. The organisation has seven production and research sites around the world and a world-wide customer base. The organisation operates in a very dynamic and competitive market with a very short knowledge life cycle and a high ratio of subject specialists among its staff. The organisation is currently in a difficult financial situation which has led to widespread budget cuts.

In this organisation knowledge management has simultaneously been approached by two different organisational departments: the intellectual capital department and the HR department. While the KM aspect in the intellectual capital group focused on the coordination and support of local KM initiatives, the HR related initiative focused on the provision of training and the development of expert networks. Even though both areas have their own focus, a considerable overlap and also rivalry between the groups has emerged. Both groups lacked the financial resources to engage in larger KM projects and in the recent organisational restructuring process both KM groups got merged and are now operating as part of the HR unit.

Organisation 6 represents a technology and policy consultancy carrying out projects in an international environment. The organisation of 7.000 staff has a number of permanent international offices, and establishes temporary offices where necessary. The organisation frequently carries out projects for developing countries which requires a high degree of political and cultural knowledge in addition to the knowledge intensive consulting tasks.

Knowledge management in this organisation constitutes the focus of a dedicated KM team comprising 2 full-time staff members. This team operates as a coordination point and a centre of leadership for the various KM activities in the organisation. This group forms a part of the organisational support functions, but is also decentrally supported by staff in the different organisational units who represent and support KM with a defined fraction of their working time. The key challenge for the KM team is to involve the staff in the remote offices due to communication difficulties as well as cultural barriers between the headquarter and the staff in the field.

PRELIMINARY FINDINGS

The data collection and preliminary analysis which has been carried out so far has revealed different aspects of KM Governance that seem to be critical to the research questions of this study. These aspects emerged as key differentiators among the organisations investigated. In addition to explicit KM governance characteristics, aspects of the KM function as well as the organisations' KM approach are outlined as they describe the organisational entity as well as the activity which is to be governed.

KM Governance

Position of the KM unit in the organisational structure

Among the different organisations considered for this research, knowledge management was located in diverse positions of the organisational structure (see table 2). While some organisations have formed explicit and independent KM units, other organisations have allocated KM to established support areas such as HR or even business functions. In one case, although no formal KM team was officially defined, such a group was formed informally on a grass-roots level representing a selection of functional as well as supporting areas of the organisation.

Conceptualisation of the KM initiative

The organisations which were investigated in this study have developed a number of different approaches to the conceptualisation and prioritisation of their KM projects. In some cases the KM approach is based on concepts which have been developed inside the KM unit, while in other cases the KM units have involved the business side of the organisation in order to decide over the prioritisation and conceptualisation of KM tools and initiatives.

Reporting structure of the KM unit

Moreover, the various organisations have developed different reporting structures for their KM unit. In a number of cases, the KM unit reports to individual supervisors who have different levels of authority in the organisation. Another configuration which was encountered is the formation of a steering committee which is composed of senior management representatives of a variety of organisational areas. In these cases the steering committee takes on the task of prioritizing and reviewing the different KM activities.

Table 2: Overview KM governance configuration

Organisation	Position of KM in org. structure	Conceptualisation of KM	Reporting structure of KM
Organisation 1	Extra function with representation on the board level	Input from inside and outside of the KM unit	Direct reporting point for operational activities and steering committees for projects
Organisation 2	Informal group comprised of employees from Communications, e-business, HR, Marketing	Input from inside the KM group	No reporting
Organisation 3	Separate function in a business unit	Input from inside and outside of the KM unit	Reporting to individual management partner
Organisation 4	The central unit is allocated to in-house consulting, the decentral units are allocated to HR	Input from inside the KM unit	Reporting to individual supervisors
Organisation 5	Allocated to HR	Input from inside the KM unit	Reporting to individual supervisor
Organisation 6	Allocated to a functional area	Input from inside and outside of the KM unit	Direct reporting and defined steering committee for direction and prioritisation

KM function

Centralisation of the KM function

The KM functions encountered in the organisations in this research have also been diverse with regard to their level of centralisation (see table 3). The structures of the KM functions range from being a centralised organisational unit to those being composed of a decentralised network structure. In the centralized structure of organisation 3, all KM staff and activities are allocated within a single organisational unit. On the other hand in the decentralized structures of organisation 6, a central KM unit guides and coordinates the activities while decentral KM representatives operate in the different functional business units.

Formalisation of the KM function

In the different organisations investigated the status of the KM unit has been quite diverse. On the one hand, the KM groups have been formally established in the organisation with clear responsibilities and an approved budget. On the other hand there are organisations (such as organisation 2) in which KM is subject of an informal get-together in which interested employees from different areas of the organisation coordinate and initiate KM initiatives.

Background of the KM leader

The leaders of the KM units encountered in the organisations are also quite diverse with regard to their professional and organisational background. Some KM leaders have a technical IT focused background while others have their background in organisational sciences or even pedagogy. With regard to the organisational background, some organisations have nominated internal staff from particular business units to form a KM group, while other organisations have employed external KM professionals to implement KM in the organisation.

Table 3: Overview KM function

Organisation	Centralisation of the KM function	Formalisation of the KM function	Background of the KM leader
Organisation 1	Central unit	Formal structure	External IT and internal library assistant
Organisation 2	Central group	Informal structure	No leader established
Organisation 3	Central unit	Formal structure	Internal IT
Organisation 4	Central unit with decentral support roles	Formal structure	Central part internal QM, distributed part comprised of external KM specialists
Organisation 5	Central unit	Formal structure	External KM specialists
Organisation 6	Central unit with decentral support roles	Formal & informal structure	Internal business representative

KM approach

Portfolio of activities

Knowledge management in some organisations has subsumed established organisational support functions while other organisations have created entirely new entities (see table 4). The KM function of organisation 1, for example, contains a range of established support functions such as the organisational library, the data processing unit, the intranet team and IT. In other organisations, such as organisation 4, the KM function has been newly created with no established business function to be formally integrated.

Activities of the KM unit

The KM units in the different organisations have created an array of different activities. Of particular importance is the orientation of some KM units in providing ongoing organisational support as well as engaging in individual projects. An example of the ongoing support activities of the KM unit is the operation of a knowledge repository as exercised by organisation 3. The KM unit of organisation 4, on the other hand, does not engage in ongoing support activities but carries out individual projects such as the development of debriefing tools which are provided to the various business units.

Interaction with the business unit

The KM units have also been found to be very different in the way and frequency in which they interact with the business. In some organisations the KM unit has established a frequent interaction with the business on the level of the employees as well as on the management level. Whereas in other organisations the interaction between the KM unit and the business side is limited to sporadic interactions through individual projects.

Table 4: Overview KM approach

Organisation	Integration of business functions	Activities of the KM unit	Interaction with the business unit
Organisation 1	Library, web, databases, document management, IT, help desk	Ongoing support of the business together with the execution of KM projects	Frequent interaction with the business. Business is represented on steering board
Organisation 2	None	KM projects	Informal and little interaction due to representation of business areas in the KM group
Organisation 3	Library, quality management, document management	Ongoing support of the business	Frequent interaction with the business
Organisation 4	None	KM projects	Little interaction with the business
Organisation 5	Training	Ongoing support and isolated projects	Little interaction with the business
Organisation 6	Document management	KM projects	Frequent interaction with the business

DISCUSSION

The different KM governance configurations as well as the arrangement of the KM function and the KM approach create a range of constellations with different effects on the development of knowledge management in the organisation. Based on a preliminary data analysis, four key areas of KM Governance emerge as the most critical aspects in the development of KM in the focus organisations: the reporting point of the KM unit, the interaction with the business, the background of the KM champion and the portfolio of activities of the KM functions emerged as critical aspects in the development of knowledge management in the organisation.

The differences in the reporting point seem to constitute one of the important aspects of the individual KM Governance configurations. The use of steering committees was found to provide a number of benefits to the development of knowledge management in the organisation. The organisations, which have created steering committees to govern KM, have reported less pressure to legitimize the KM activities, and have mentioned an increased interest of the various business functions in the KM activities. Among the focus organisations, a number of KM units do not have access to a dedicated steering committee but only have an individual reporting point to prioritise the tasks and projects. These organisations seem to lack some of the top-level support and the appreciation of the business units. They have more difficulties in communicating the concept of KM in the organisation, and their activities seem to be more focused on small and local projects instead of providing an integrated support for the entire organisation. In these cases the steering committee raises the profile of knowledge management in the organisation.

The use of a steering committee also appears to relate to the way in which the KM unit interacts with the business. Some of the KM units encountered in the research lack interaction with the business units and create numerous KM tools and initiatives without involving the business to a larger extent. Instead of having a good understanding of the business needs, they seem to develop solutions and subsequently look for appropriate problems in the organisation where they could be. The tendency to integrate with the business on a strategic level and not only responding to operational business needs might also be related to the use of steering committees.

Of particular interest in the KM governance context is the selection of the KM leader. In some cases external staff has been hired to develop knowledge management in the organisation. Even though the external people selected had strong expertise in KM related subject fields, they did not have the insights into the organisations' business. It seems that business knowledge is of particular importance for the conceptualisation of appropriate KM solutions as well as for the communication with employees. Furthermore, the availability of informal contacts and networks in the organisation seems to be critical for the acceptance of the KM concept. Apparently,

the development of knowledge management requires a lot of political manoeuvring, and the use of informal contacts seems to facilitate this process.

The differentiation on the basis of the KM activities also provides some interesting effects for the development of the KM concept in the organisation. Those organisations, which approach KM as an ongoing support function seem to have fewer difficulties in establishing the KM concept than those which approach KM as a series of individual projects. The organisations which focus on individual projects have less opportunity to establish a good reputation in the organisations since their projects create only local benefits. The organisations that integrate established business functions under the KM umbrella benefit from the reputation of these business functions and find it easier to engage in further project based developments which build on these ongoing operations.

CONCLUSION

The data collection and early analysis up to this point have revealed a large diversity of KM governance configurations. All of the focus organisations have developed idiosyncratic ways to govern KM. However, in spite of this diversity comparable approaches based on individual aspects could be identified, which indicate KM governance aspects supporting the establishment of KM in the organisation. Additional data will be collected and a complete analysis of the data will be conducted in order to establish further insights into these configuration and relationships.

What has been quite obvious in the research so far are the difficulties of establishing the KM initiatives in the organisations. Only few organisations have managed to develop KM into an integrated business operation which is considered valuable throughout the organisation. The majority of KM units encountered are still under pressure to legitimize their activities. Unfortunately, the economic downturn in some industry sectors led some organisations to cut the budgets of their KM units, which resulted in a lack of resources to engage in larger projects, which in turn might have helped to raise their profile of the KM concept in the organisation.

However, these observations are based on preliminary findings, and more data needs to be collected to be able to better ground the initial findings. A complete analysis needs to be conducted in order to support these preliminary observations reported here. Nevertheless, the findings so far indicate that KM governance constitutes a multifaceted concept and will be of interest to identify its impact on the establishment and success of knowledge management in the organisation. This will be carried out in the next step of this research.

Interestingly, a number of research participants have indicated that they usually would not participate in any external research projects due to the fact that they receive a large number of interview requests regarding KM in the organisation. However, it was the topic of KM governance which encouraged them to take part in this project since they saw the immediate relevance to their work. They strongly encouraged the focus of this study and hoped to obtain some directions for their own KM governance situation.

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