Focus On Organisational Memory As An Enabler And Constrainer Of Innovation In Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT:

Knowledge Management and Innovation have a co-dependent relationship which when understood can lead to the enhancement of organisational sustainability, effectiveness and competitive advantage. Organisational memory is the critical premise on which both knowledge management and innovation rely. However, this premise can both be enabling and constraining in making advances in knowledge management and in its innovation thereof.

The purpose of this article is to explore the extent to which organisational memory enables and constrains innovation in knowledge management. This article uses a real life case study to illustrate the manner in which organisational memory can both be constructive and destructive in making advances in innovating knowledge management. The interplay between innovation and knowledge management is covered but the focus resides in exploring the impact of organisational memory on this interplay.

Keywords: *Knowledge management, Innovation, Organisational memory, Enabler, Constrainer.*

1.   Introduction

The most important single source of competitive advantage is the ability to continually rethink.

Arie de Geus (cited in Russell-Walling, 2007:116)

According to Daft and Weick (1984), approaches taken to organisational studies make assumptions that are specific about the nature, design and function of organisations. This chapter is underpinned by the assumptions that organisations in the home industry in South Africa have a highly competitive nature, are designed to be innovative and function primarily to survive.

In order to compete effectively, Porter (2008) identifies the need to be able to manage and strategize around five forces; the threat of new entrants, the threat of substitute products or services, the bargaining power of buyers, the bargaining power of suppliers and rivalry among existing competitors. It is fair to say that one cannot manage what they do not know. Suffice to propose then that in order for organisations to compete

effectively, they must be in a position of always knowing what they need to know- a position achievable through knowledge management. In lieu of the fact that the currency of knowledge is sensitivity and adaptability to change, it is not surprising that what organisations need to know constantly changes and these changes call for adaptation in the ways of knowing- what is hereon after referred to as innovation in knowledge management. Building a strategy around Porter's forces requires an intimate knowledge of the forces as relevant to the industry. Intimate knowledge is based on building on basic knowledge. This basic knowledge must have been stored as part of the organisation's memory if is to become intimate knowledge. The existence of organisational memory is therefore shown to be fundamental in building knowledge and in managing that knowledge. Adaptations in this memory result in innovation in knowledge management. However, once a phenomenon is embedded in memory we must be cognisant of the effect it can have in either enabling us to manage knowledge better or hinder us in adapting our ways of managing knowledge. This adaptation is innovation and requires flexible use of what is stored in our memory.

Innovation is the substance that provides an organisation its lifeblood and a means to sustainable competitive advantage (Reavis, 2009). Reavis (2009) proposes that for innovation to lend its strategic role to management, there is a need for what is called innovation to be new, superior to existing products, feasible economically and with pervasive appeal. Innovation therefore offers more than something new; it enables businesses to continually satisfy the infinite wants of consumers. The South African home industry exemplifies what it means to be innovative in the products and services it offers. Despite this, the same cannot be said to be characteristic of how knowledge in the industry is managed. To a larger extent, experiences perceived as being negative tend to be barriers to change in any sphere of the home industry business once they are embedded in the organisation's memory. In other words, 'good' experiences encourage innovation while 'bad' experiences hinder it. This is a phenomenon that this article seeks to explore by considering a case study.

When asked what the core business of one of South Africa's home industry businesses was, the response was simply- survival. Survival appears synonymous with 'getting by' and 'retaining your customers'. How one survives in an era of constant change is by changing themselves. Changing yourself starts with changing how you know what you know, in a sense learning to unlearn while simultaneously unlearning what you learned- a simplistic but fair representation of what innovation in knowledge management is about and why memory is a fundamental part of enabling or hindering it.

 In tying the perspectives of this article introduced here this paper has three main objectives. In the first instance the paper seeks to give a clear background embedded in existing literature on the links between the key concepts of organisational memory, knowledge management and innovation in knowledge management. The second objective is to illustrate these linkages through the presentation of a case study. The third objective is to draw propositions on how what works can be sustained and how challenges can be overcome. The overarching objective, encompassing the three main objectives, is to provide a justifiable cause for the presentation of the contents of this paper as relevant to the theories and practice of innovation in knowledge management.

2.   Background

The processes of managing knowledge and managing innovation are interlinked (Ohme, 2002). This article proposes that the interlinking thread is that of organisational memory (OM). OM is the information and knowledge from the past of the organisation that is accessible for present and future organisational activities. Scalzo (2006) says that OM is normally embedded in the staff of the organisation and their retention (as well as the retention of their memory) is essential. The argument is further extended by purporting that OM is what is useful in converting implicit knowledge to explicit knowledge, duplicating information among staff, social networking, using information and communication technology (ICT) and creating knowledge centres (Scalzo, 2006). OM's usefulness can be seen to represent both knowledge management (KM) and innovation in knowledge management (iKM). However, OM can also be an obstacle to change and in turn to innovation and iKM (Starbuck & Hedberg, 1977).

It is necessary to explore the concept of OM further. Several authors agree that OM is multifaceted in that it comprises both mental and structural artefacts that consequentially have an effect on organisational performance (be it in overall performance or in specific organisational tasks such as iKM) (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). OM has been broadly defined as information that is stored (in procedures and standards) from the history of an organisation (carried by individual recollections and shared interpretations of implemented decisions and their consequences) that can be brought to inform present decisions (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). Hanvanich et al. (2006) concur with this definition by stating that OM is the amount of familiarity firms have with particular phenomena. Criticisms of OM as merely being metaphoric and not a 'real' organisational concept (Argyris & Schon, 1978) have not held and so this chapter reiterates the necessity of studying and managing OM in order to sustain and develop organisations.

According to Walsh and Ungson (1991), OM may be retained and stored differently in different parts of an organisation. Following this proposition, it therefore becomes important to identify which parts of OM need to flow to other parts of the organisation and how this can be achieved as well as which parts need to be safeguarded in certain sections of the organisation. It is apparent that when this is done effectively the organisation's KM system benefits and iKM is enabled. On the other hand, a failure to deliberately enable flow or impose restrictions could compromise KM and constrain iKM.

KM is broadly defined as being an organised process that facilitates knowledge acquisition, ordering, sustenance, application, sharing and renewal for the purposes of increasing adaptability, increasing the value of products already in existence and creating new products (Davenport et al., 1998). In support of this definition, Willard (2004) adds that KM is about developing knowledge and incorporating it in the organisational capital for as far as it is possible. Critics of KM neither refute its existence nor importance, rather their dissention lies in the lack of clarity in the field with regard to what proposed systems can achieve, particularly the confusion between capturing, organising and disseminating information and then calling it knowledge

(Gerami, 2010). KM ensures that useful information becomes a sustainable resource that the organisation utilises in attaining its goals. Converting information to knowledge is a matter of innovation.

iKM has been defined for the purposes of this article as being the strategies employed by organisations to improve the way they learn and in turn convert information to knowledge so that information becomes a resource for the organisation. iKM achieves this by fostering an environment that favours organisational learning which in turn leads to the creation of learning organisations. Although easily confused, organisational learning is not necessarily synonymous with learning organisations. Organisational learning is a process that emerges from the abilities of individual organisational members to perceive and communicate their motivations and interactions with one another (Kunz, 2004). A learning organisation on the other hand is an institution that is able to assimilate the learning of its members and carry on that knowledge despite the members. Senge (1994) described learning organisations as those in which individuals attain personal mastery and develop mental models, teams have a shared vision and learn together and the organisation adopts systems thinking. The relationship can be seen to be emanating from the important role of individual members and their learning process which depends on their memory.

It is hereby put forward that OM is the most important facet for consideration in enabling iKM as it facilitates KM, organisational learning and the development of a learning organisation. It is further proposed that OM can both be a facilitator of and a menace to iKM and this article seeks to illustrate how.

At the heart of the discussion of OM are people. The reason why OM possesses dual attributes as an enabler and constraint is because OM takes on the characteristics of the people that remember and how they remember. What is proposed is that once memory ceases to be individual and becomes a part of the organisation, the meaning attached to it must be influenced by all aspects that influence the organisation both internally and externally. This allows the experiences of the organisation serve not just as reminders of what the history of the organisation is and rigid representations of success or failure but as useful pockets of collective knowledge that can be used to inform the practices of the organisation. Members of the organisation that played a role in the creation of these experiences are important but tend to provide a biased view of what has been learned, what should have been learned and what becomes committed to memory. Using organisational experiences to draw on external perspectives is critical in determining whether OM becomes an enabler or constrainer of iKM.

3. Case Study On Koljander

This article presents forms in which OM may enable or constrain iKM through the different forms in which it is retained, namely, individuals, culture, transformations, structures, ecology and external archives (Walsh & Ungson, 1991). OM tends to influence the consequent behaviour of individuals and in turn the organisation (Anderson, 1980). The issues, controversies and problems at hand then are: What must constitute OM? How should knowledge be remembered? To what extent must the past influence the present and future? In what ways does OM enable and constrain iKM?

The issues, controversies and problems are presented to the reader in an explanatory case study.

This case study looks at the retention structure of OM in an organisation, the processes by which knowledge can be acquired, stored and retrieved from the retention structure and the precise ways in which the use of OM is consequential to iKM. This case is built on a home industry business based in South Africa called Koljander.

3.1.   About Koljander

Koljander is a co-operative business that was set up in 1980 to provide unique home industry goods in baking, cooking and hand crafted goods with the objective of offering proudly South African products. In addition to the products offered, Koljander provides services in catering and delivery of ordered products.

The business has successfully operated evidenced by their winning of numerous awards.

Koljander was started by 20 women united by their creativity, financial needs and lack of specific business skills. Starting out in a humble pet shop, Koljander now boasts beautiful premises along the popular Melville Main Road in the heart of Johannesburg.

Here are some of the responses to a pre-interview questionnaire addressed to the managers of Koljander:

1.   If you could describe your business in 5 words what would they be?

   Innovative; co-operative; people-based; unique; colourful

2.   If you could describe the industry in which your business operates in 5 words what would they be?

   Co-operative; entrepreneurial; home-baking; handcrafts; service

3.   If you could describe your approach to ensuring your business survives in the industry in 5 words what would they be?

   Quality focus; renewal; uniqueness; price-sensitivity; service-orientation

4.   What does innovation mean to you in the context of your business?

   Innovation lies at the core of this type of business. A home industry is in fact an entrepreneurial collective and the level of innovation puts it apart from the generic type of businesses which are supplied by mass production from factories. Our products originate from the innovative thinking of individual people.

5.   What does managing innovation mean to you in the context of your business?

Managing innovation means that the management core of the business must always be appreciative for new ideas and strengthen innovative thinking amongst its members.

6. What does leading innovation mean to you in the context of your business?

Leading innovation means stimulating, motivating and supporting members to be resourceful and brave in experimenting with new ideas.

7. What challenges are you facing in managing innovation?

Members get caught up in their large production cycle and lose perspective of the importance of innovation and renewal of products. This leads to stagnation in many product lines. They also do not think enough about the changing nature of the market and just go on producing 'the same' year in and year out. Innovation necessitates 'disruption' of their well-organised production routine.

8. What opportunities do you envisage may enable you overcome your challenges in managing innovation?

In my opinion, managing innovation is more about inspiring and stimulating new ideas in the business and making members aware of the importance of renewal. From management side, we have to keep the shop looking 'fresh' so that customers are always surprised with new ideas. It also means an awareness of what is going on in the macro environment and responding to 'issues of the day' within the context of the business.

9. What challenges are you facing in leading innovation?

Members become machine-like operations at home, working with staff who they train to assist them in their production. It is troublesome to have to 're-train' staff in changing products or adding new product lines. This leads to stagnation in the shop. The introduction of new members is regarded as threatening to their own income and they often do not have the vision to see that the shop needs the new ideas and new products – and by building the business it is also in their own interest.

10. What opportunities do you envisage may enable you overcome your challenges in leading innovation?

Opportunities to lead innovation lies primarily with the leaders in the business to motivate members in thinking about the 'bigger picture'. This will only happen if they develop a sense of pride in the business, and if the importance of renewal and regeneration of the business is understood and supported by all.

Opportunities to lead innovation are often difficult because members feel threatened when they are challenged by the introduction of new products which can be in competition with their established product lines.

What is intriguing in the responses given is the continuous mention of the importance of innovating how members think about the business and about the products they supply to the business. This can be interpreted to mean the importance of innovating how members know what they know and so a reference to iKM. It is apparent from the questionnaire responses that the home-based industry inherits its innovative description from the innovativeness of industry players in how they think about price, focus service and ideas. At the core of these thoughts are effective management and leadership capable of stimulating, motivating and supporting new patterns of thought. It is these very patterns that form the OM.

In this kind of business, people want to secure their monopoly in their product lines, and if this is allowed without certain qualifications, stagnation results. More importantly, valuable potential among the other members is not given an opportunity to be discovered. To unleash this hidden potential, the 'security' and monopoly must from time to time be questioned. This poses many challenges, because one takes away the 'safety' or exclusivity of a product line and the reaction is normally negative. Good persuasive skills of the leaders are needed to convince members of the 'greater good' – which these measures will in the long term bear fruit for the business, and everyone involved.

3.2. OM In Koljander Members

By retaining members for as long as possible and encouraging the sharing of ideas, a lot of information pertinent to innovation has been retained in the Koljander's organisational memory. Leadership has had an important role to play here because member retention is directly related to member satisfaction - something over which management has a degree of influence. By ensuring that members feel valued in the business and share in its success, Koljander has earned the loyalty of many of its members.

Embedded in the experience of members in trying out new products is the memory of failure. Such is the case with Koljander's experience in trying to include a coffee shop on its premises. The effort proved to be a time consuming and resource draining exercise that was not profitable. In response, the business closed the shop and looks on the experience as a mistake that should not be repeated. This is a constraint to iKM because it appears the members now operate with a fear of failure rather than embracing the lessons of the past and reassessing the concept to determine whether changes in time would now make the coffee shop a money spinner. This fear is reproduced among members further strengthening the constraining effect of how members remember.

> It's not the shop who embarks on a new product, it's its members. It's you know shareholders. They are all part of the shop. And members come and go so you get new members with new products. We want new members with new products.

> 'I think innovation lies really at the core of this kind of business...it's not factory made products. It comes from people's ideas and people have to go and search

> *for ideas, and they have to take existing ideas and give an individualistic and innovative new twist.'*

The 'open-door' policy exhibited by Koljander in not being rigid on who can join the cooperative has been fundamental in ensuring that OM is current and that iKM is possible. However, entry of new members while welcome by management is not necessarily so by existing members. The threat of increased competition among members is enough for them to scream for exclusivity of their lines. This has a constraining effect on iKM as calls for exclusivity are synonymous with stagnation and not innovation.

Tied to the challenge of having new members is the need for retraining of members and the staff working with them. Rather than view retraining as an opportunity to extend the knowledge base and improve OM, some members may view it as hindering the further success of an already retained part of OM. The role of leadership is critical in having members share a vision of what OM ought to be. In the words of one Koljander member, 'Encourage the people because a lot of the members only want to come in and supply their stuff and leave.' Members need to feel a part of the organisation and that what is retained in their memory is as important to the organisation as it is to them.

> *Innovation is actually sharing with people. It is sharing with people to build [them] up and to extend [the shop]. To extend and to build up and just to be there for everybody- that's innovation, as far as I'm concerned.*

> *You've got to not only think of your own product but you've got to think of all the products in the shop.*

In the preceding quotes, information exchange among members is viewed as being a way of innovating. Ideas and opinions are exchanged and expanded resulting in activities that have been influenced by multiple sources. This has a profound effect of actively creating OM and so having a greater influence on what impact this has on the nature of iKM.

3.3. OM In Koljander Culture

Unlike its competitors, Koljander has not specialised in any one area of the home industry business. This is because the organisation remembers that the reason it is so successful is its ability to tailor their product offering to meet unique customer needs- an ability unachievable in a highly specialist organisation.

Continuous innovation in Koljander is essential and for that reason, it is an organisational objective to create a culture supportive of innovation. Organisational culture is one of the retention facilities of OM. It is a phenomenon that can be seen and experienced. When this culture is not only in the individual members but embodied by the organisation, it becomes a useful resource in KM and an enabler of the values that the culture seeks to develop. When this culture is centred on innovation, the achievement of iKM becomes inevitable.

We have a little house...we call it a 'house of comments'. And we've got our comment forms next to that and we ask for comments. Good or bad or new ideas or whatever. And the staff is also trained to listen if somebody asks for a product we don't have at that stage to pass it on to us. You get some of your best ideas sometimes from customers needing something that you haven't thought of.

Feedback on the organisation's knowledge is something that Koljander values. Members present their new products, new products are tested, suggestions are made for improvement on new products by management, new products are presented to the clients on a test basis, feedback from clients is incorporated in product improvement and finally the product is launched as a unique product from Koljander to market. Products that are launched but do not perform as well as desired are reviewed and innovations in the product and marketing of the product are employed to give the product a boost. In the event that the product remains unsuccessful, it is pulled out of the product line and room is created for something new. Existing products that begin to reach stagnation are given the same treatment. This is the embodiment of iKM in practice.

With Koljander not being specialised in a narrow range of products, the business has found it necessary to engage in portfolio management. What this has implied for Koljander is that all its products are classified in broad portfolios which each fall under a designated manager. This has kept managers close enough to the products to monitor their success and recommend directions for innovation without any product lines being neglected by Koljander as a whole. So while this is important for the development of OM in each portfolio, the knowledge is managed in a segmented way. This has a negative impact in iKM because it limits the transfer of lessons and receipt of various perspectives from one organisational unit to the other.

3.4.   OM In Koljander Structure

Being a co-operative business, much of the success that Koljander has enjoyed can be attributed to collaborative efforts among its members. Consequently, the retention of members for as long as is possible and encouraging the sharing of ideas is essential for OM. This is an enabler because previous knowledge can be tapped into 'directly from the source'. However, it becomes tempting to maintain the same members and not freely open up to new ones in the light of success. This becomes a constraint to iKM because no innovation takes place in OM.

Co-operatives tend to lapse into a routine and repetitiveness. This has a powerful effect on building strong OM but is the greatest handicap of iKM. This is so because it primarily jeopardises innovation.

3.5.   OM In Koljander Archives

Koljander is governed by a statute outlining its mode of operation and the core values of the co-operative. This is an enabler of iKM in as far as it encourages continuous innovation. However, it can be a constraint as there is a tendency of members to 'go by

the book' and in so doing not allow for any innovative practices. The co-operative is interested in ensuring that the activities of members and management are aligned with the external objectives. While this makes success and failure measurable, it creates rigidity where the objectives are unchanging and do not reflect change occurring in the external environment.

3.6.   Lessons From Koljander For iKM Solutions And Recommendations

In keeping up with what is main stream, it is important to remain aware of trends in the market by keeping abreast of the activities of competitors and non-competitors alike. The best innovative ideas tend to emanate from unlikely sources and therefore 'keeping their eyes peeled' comes as part of the survival description for management and members in Koljander. Nonetheless, organisations must not follow trends without due consideration. Granted that KM requires an openness and awareness to the environment and socio-cultural trends, being able to remember what the competitive edge of a business is and how trends align or not with the competitive structure of the business. True iKM lies in being able to keep the business current without compromising the competitive edge that got the business success in the first instance.

The culture of the organisation is a useful resource that can be of a more permanent nature in retaining OM as it can survive well beyond the organisation's individual members. Tapping into this resource and ensuring it is supportive of innovation is useful in enabling iKM. The type of culture necessary to develop iKM is the one that encourages the bringing together of the members' ideas- in such an environment, innovation in all activities of the business, including KM is inevitable.

A balance needs to be maintained between exploiting and exploring iKM. Whereas exploiting iKM is reaping the maximum benefit out of current knowledge, exploring iKM is seeking avenues for improvement. The flexibility of OM is important in achieving this balance. In turn, this calls for flexibility of the members of Koljander to be able to adapt to change as necessary- an attribute that can be gained where management actively leads on the need for flexibility.

The experiences of organisations may be similar when they are in the same industry. What exists in one organisation's memory that establishes those experiences as a competitive advantage depends on how the KM process manifests itself in the organisation and how iKM takes shape. An individualistic and innovative twist to knowledge is necessary to produce positive OM.

There is a need for the components of OM to develop into wonderful ideas that are meaningful to the organisation and can be developed to either products and services or, otherwise and, organisation practices. One of the biggest resources for the development of these ideas can be in collaborating with organisation members. In agreeing with Konrath (2004), being competitive is no longer the effective way to compete, rather, collaboration is. This is an important finding in the light of the observation by Kristiansen et al. (2005) that for the home industry in African countries, business partners (like the members in Koljander) are among the most important sources of business information in enabling innovation.

Prior to 2005, the legislative definition of co-operative in South Africa was limited to agricultural businesses. Despite advances in the legislation to now encompass home industry businesses, the same cannot be said for progress in creating a formal framework within which home industry businesses are to operate. This causes challenges in terms of the manner of innovation that is open to individuals in this business. This may be attributed to the continued classification of home-based industries as a sector of the informal economy and not the formal economy (Evans, 2005; Hein, 2005; Samal, 2008).

4.   Future Research Directions

Future focus on the topic of organisational memory departs from emphasis on the organisation towards being able to identify the major features of employee experience that are relevant for developing the appropriate OM (Alvarado et al., 2005). More likely than not, this will contribute to the development of frameworks capable of informing the 'how tos' of iKM through OM. The case study presented in this article enables the understanding of a relatively novel perspective of OM. Future studies of the role of OM in advancing or, otherwise and, inhibiting iKM need to be considered in a broader-based context to produce even more fruitful insights.

Caution must be taking in applying the information outcomes of the case study because, as is the prevalent trade with studies of knowledge management and organisational memory, reliance is heavily on the case's self-reporting. Consequently the results of this article may be more relevant to contexts similar to that presented.

5.   Conclusion

In quoting Weick (1979), "If an organisation is to learn anything, then the distribution of its memory, the accuracy of that memory and the conditions under which that memory is treated as a constraint become crucial characteristics of organising." How we remember is arguably more important than what we remember. Documenting experiences and consequent lessons from the experiences in either written or artefact form can be a deterrent in innovation where rigidity in the classification of experiences as being 'good' or 'bad' exists. As discussed earlier, using organisational experiences to draw on external perspectives is critical in determining whether OM becomes an enabler or constrainer of iKM. External perspectives can be drawn from future employees by presenting organisational experiences as scenarios without any judgemental consequences on the feedback provided but mainly as tools for learning. This manner of using knowledge encourages the diversity of learning experiences necessary for innovation in knowledge management.

> *I think the only real challenge is time. But I think the most important thing is to enjoy your work, .you have to enjoy what you are doing you know, as challenging as it can be.*

iKM is a long term project of continuity. It requires those seeking it to be involved not only in the iKM processes but also to have a personal involvement in the organisation and with what it stands for. It is apparent that the need for continuity calls for the

development of a society and the implications of this on OM are important. Social memory studies allude to the differences between collected and collective memory (Rowlinson et al., 2010). Active management of these memories is fundamental is allowing OM serve the organisation's needs.

> *Of course, organizations will continue to 'make histories', or else others will make their histories for them, recalling their past through mnemonic practices, naming buildings after prominent organization members, choosing names to give an aura of age, regularly recording the year of their establishment in annual reports and entries in trade directories, commissioning monumental corporate histories by conservative academics to commemorate their centenaries.* (Delahaye et al., 2009).

Delahaye et al. (2009) could not have put it any better. It is imperative that we know what we know based on how we remember and not solely on how others apart from us do. We must be responsible for our knowledge, how we manage it and so how we can innovate our ways of knowing.

This paper has been developed from the consideration of the consequences of OM as called for by Tsang and Zahra (2008). Future studies may therefore develop this study further by considering how the evolution of OM impacts iKM. Another consideration for future studies is the designing of longitudinal studies to facilitate in-case analysis and yield a more holistic understanding of the phenomenon of OM as it impacts iKM.

6.   References

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