

# **Inhibitors And Enhancers To Knowledge Sharing: Lessons From The Voluntary Sector**

Gillian Ragsdell, Loughborough University, United Kingdom

---

## **ABSTRACT:**

This study investigated the enhancers and inhibitors to knowledge sharing processes within Charnwood Citizens Advice Bureau (CAB), a very successful CAB and one of the oldest CABs in the UK. This bureau handles around 18000 enquiries per year with a workforce of around 40 volunteers and 15 paid staff (10 full-time and 5 part-time). Although the literature focuses attention on technological and cultural barriers to knowledge sharing, the findings from this project tell a different story. The empirical work indicated that improving organisational processes for knowledge sharing are higher on stakeholders' agendas than implementing new technological systems or changing culture.

Keywords: *Knowledge sharing, voluntary sector, enhancers, inhibitors.*

---

## **1. Introduction**

This paper is based on a British Academy funded pilot study in a voluntary sector organisation based in the UK. The concept of knowledge management (KM) embraced the project with a particular focus on knowledge sharing. Previous studies on knowledge management and knowledge sharing have tended to be more prevalent in the 'for profit' sector rather than the voluntary sector, and lessons for best practice have generally been generated from commercial organisations. This project went some way towards redressing the balance.

The paper begins by introducing the background to the project. It then goes on to present a summary of recent literature centred on knowledge sharing in organisations. The literature raised awareness of factors – derived primarily from cultural and technological features of the organisation - that can influence the effectiveness of the knowledge sharing process. These factors informed the design of the data collection tools that were used with a range of stakeholders of the Charnwood Citizens Advice Bureau. Analysis of the collected data surfaced a range of enhancers and inhibitors to knowledge sharing that this organisation was experiencing; similarities and differences with the literature were evident.

## **2. Background To The Project**

Despite the lack of KM research in the not-for-profit sector, it is recognised that sharing expertise and knowledge is at the heart of voluntary sector organisations such

as Citizens Advice Bureaux (CABs). In fact one of the key aims of CABs is ‘to ensure that people do not suffer through lack of knowledge of their rights and responsibilities or of the services available to them or through an inability to express their needs effectively’. Knowledge sharing between advisers and clients is core to the service that CABs seek to provide. It is important that CABs are able to understand their users’ knowledge requirements and to share such knowledge in an appropriate way. However, sharing knowledge within CABs i.e. between management, workers and volunteers is also important to ensure provision of an effective service. Indeed, the possible transient nature of the workforce and volunteers in CABs makes it crucial for knowledge to be shared rapidly and effectively to ensuring a stable (yet increasing) knowledge base for the organisation.

This pilot study aimed to identify the inhibitors and enhancers to knowledge sharing in Charnwood CAB, one of the oldest CAB in the UK having been established in 1949. It handles around 18 000 enquiries per year with a workforce of around 40 volunteers and 15 paid staff (5 full-time and 10 part-time). During recent times, it took on a new status as a limited company. Its recent annual report showed the success of Charnwood CAB; however, it was keen to further improve the efficiency and effectiveness of the service that it offered. This pilot study afforded the potential of gathering information to guide its process of further improvement.

### **3. Summary Of The Literature**

The summary of recent literature on knowledge sharing is divided into two main sections. The first section is derived from the commercial sector and the second from the voluntary sector. Within each of these main sections, there is emphasis on enhancers and inhibitors to knowledge sharing that arise from organisational culture and from the implementation of technology.

#### **3.1. Commercial Sector**

Much of the recent KM literature stresses the importance of developing an organisational culture that is rooted in a sense of community and that encourages social interaction in order to enable knowledge sharing between individuals, as “knowledge creation and transfer are achieved by interaction among individuals” (Kermally, 2002, p58). Therefore, an important inclusion in a KM strategy will promote an organisational understanding that people will gather together for meetings and brainstorming sessions.

Another understanding is that people will be brought into project teams who have worked on similar projects before. This is particularly important in order to access the tacit knowledge of experienced individuals, and “may facilitate the efficient exploitation of knowledge, and reduce the amount of re-invention that occurs” (Swan, Robertson and Newell, 2002, p192). Utilising individuals’ previous experience and judgement can prevent costly mistakes.

Mistakes and failure by individuals are sometimes problematic for management to see as anything but a cause for concern in the ability and, perhaps, even suitability of an

individual to undertake a particular task in the future. However, the tacit knowledge gained from making a mistake is important to be shared with others undertaking similar roles or tasks so that potential problems and pitfalls can be identified and not repeated. Therefore “employees must know that experimentation and well-intentioned failure are acceptable” (Call, 2005, p25).

Successful KM has been seen to flourish in a culture that supports the forging of good working relationships and communication both within and between organisations, as “building communities in business has become a priority in knowledge-sharing organizations” (Rao, 2005, p.17). It also flourishes in organisations where an individual’s value is based on performance which benefits the whole organisation, where individuals are trusted to share their knowledge comprehensively and where the organisation is trusted to value this behaviour rather than see it as an opportunity to cut costs by ridding themselves of costly specialists once their knowledge has been shared. However management should be aware that “KM requires proactive entrepreneurial support and leadership in that KM is 90 per cent dependent on building a supportive culture” (Liebowitz, 1999, p39) which often requires a change in the dominant organisational culture.

The use of appropriate and user-friendly information technology is a fundamental part of most KM systems and it is therefore important to ensure that new technology is utilised effectively. After all, technology and knowledge management “does not provide you with the answer to your problem rather it facilitates the learning of the answer” (Call, 2005, p20). Whilst IT is important, restraint in the speed and intensity of the use of new technology and working practices may prevent users abandoning the systems in favour of old ways of working. Therefore, systems designed to complement existing ways of working may be more effective when “effective knowledge-leveraging activities can be effectively embedded in existing practices” (Oltra, 2005, p79).

Training, education and human resource management (Wong and Aspinwall, 2005. p.66 and p.75) are essential to ensure that systems that are in place can be used to their greatest effect. Without sufficient training, any newly implemented system is bound to fail or, at least, take much longer to become integral to the organisational ways of working.

The enhancers and inhibitors identified above are not exhaustive, but provide an overview of what issues a KM strategy might address in commercial organisations in respect of knowledge sharing.

### **3.2. Voluntary Sector**

Knowledge management in the voluntary sector has been stated to be concerned with “connecting people together through the sharing of knowledge and experience” (Gilmour and Stancliffe, 2004, p124). Within the voluntary sector, many of the same strategic factors important to the commercial sector apply. However, Gilmour and Stancliffe (2004) indicate that additional organisational success factors for KM in the voluntary sector include:

- ◆ Acknowledgement of the inaccessibility of technology in some voluntary sector organisations which may be due to the high cost of purchasing and installing equipment or lack of infrastructure or lack of need, whereby to use information technology could possibly make the provision of services more difficult or knowledge sharing cumbersome.
- ◆ Fund raising/public relations, which has a different emphasis in the voluntary sector, but a similar purpose to sales and marketing in the commercial sector.

Further work involving four case studies (examined in Lettieri, Borga & Savoldelli, 2005) of Italian non-profit organisations revealed a mirror of strategic enhancers and inhibitors to that of the commercial sector including:

- ◆ Top management support
- ◆ Top management commitment
- ◆ A culture that enables knowledge sharing and trust
- ◆ Appropriate technology to facilitate sharing
- ◆ A drive towards continuous improvement and change
- ◆ Internal knowledge sharing
- ◆ External knowledge adoption.

The reasons why people decide to volunteer are diverse and difficult to identify as “there is no standard practice in volunteering” (Bussell and Forbes, 2002, p245) and “volunteers cannot be considered to be one large, homogenous group” (Wymer, 1998, p245). Volunteers’ perceptions of their role within an organisation may have an impact on the ability of the organisation to tap into these resources. This variety simply adds to the complexity of the voluntary sector organisation.

#### **4. Research Methods**

Much of the early KM literature concentrated on the use of technology with a strong emphasis on systems and collection, dissemination and access to information. Not surprisingly, positivistic approaches to KM research and practice tended to be in favour. Acknowledgement of tacit knowledge as well as explicit knowledge (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995, Polanyi, 1966) led to KM research embracing a more qualitative approach. In keeping with that approach, coupled with an acceptance that the population and sample sizes used in the data collection processes would not bring forth meaningful statistics, this project adopted an interpretivist stance in its empirical work. Thus there was an explicit understanding that participants would appreciate the Charnwood CAB in different ways and that logical causal relationships between factors affecting knowledge sharing were unlikely to be found.

The two data collection tools that were used with the various stakeholders of Charnwood CAB – paid staff, volunteers and Trustees - are now described.

#### **4.1. Questionnaires**

Questionnaires were used to collect individuals' views on four aspects - the culture, structure, processes and technology - of Charnwood CAB in relation to their roles and their knowledge sharing activities. This form of data collection allowed for a large number of people to be involved in the study and enabled participants to contribute to the project at a time that was convenient to them. The latter consideration was particularly important given the varied hours of work that the stakeholders operate. Responding to questionnaires also enabled participants to retain anonymity if they so wished.

Three subtly different and targeted questionnaires were formulated for each group whilst maintaining the same general structure. Questions deliberately did not conform to a standard pattern with the intention of challenging the respondent to think more deeply about their answers. The questionnaire was also designed so that there were a variety of styles in both the questions themselves and the way that the answers were to be indicated. A demographic section that enquired about facts such as the respondent's age, length of time with Charnwood CAB and their willingness to be interviewed in the second phase of the empirical research, was placed discretely at the end of the questionnaire.

Of the 67 questionnaires sent, 45 were returned, providing an overall response rate of 67.16%. This was a pleasing response rate given the distribution and collection dates were only 2 weeks apart.

#### **4.2. Interviews**

The selection of interviewees and the questions to be asked were based on the responses to the questionnaire. Semi-structured interviews were utilised to enable a free flowing and open dialogue to be achieved. Given that the questionnaire responses had given such positive views on knowledge sharing in Charnwood CAB, a host of enhancers to the process had quickly been surfaced. So, the interviews were seen as an opportunity to learn more about the enhancers but also to surface examples of inhibitors, should they exist, to the knowledge sharing process. Therefore, the selection of interviewees did not serve to reinforce the norm that had been illustrated via the questionnaires, but aimed to surface extreme views and differences.

Interviews were conducted with 2 paid staff, 2 Trustees and 4 volunteers over several days and lasted for between 30 and 50 minutes. Written notes were made with the permission of the interviewees, who were also assured of their right to withdraw at any time and that their anonymity would be retained.

### **5. Questionnaire Results**

For each group of respondents, the dominant view on cultural, structural, procedural and technological aspects of Charnwood CAB is presented.

## **5.1. Responses From Paid Staff**

Nearly 85% of paid staff (11/13) responded to the questionnaire and the overriding view was that the Charnwood CAB culture facilitated knowledge sharing. Most respondents felt that the organisational culture was open, friendly and team based. In terms of encouraging paid workers to make suggestions for improvement, again, most of the respondents considered that they were indeed 'encouraged to make suggestions for improvement and that their suggestions were seriously considered'. With respect to cooperating and helping each other, the paid staff gave a positive outlook with 8 respondents replying that they cooperated and helped each other 'very well'.

Paid staff, without exception, stated that they shared information and knowledge with each other and most of them said that they shared information, in particular, with the Manager and with volunteers. Apart from a couple of answers to the contrary, paid staff considered that the current structure enabled communication between themselves and the range of other parties that were mentioned. When considering the sharing of knowledge and information between paid staff and volunteers, responses were positive with most saying that it was shared frequently. Similarly, most respondents (8) knew who to refer to for specific information.

In relation to the use of information technology at Charnwood CAB, most of the respondents (7) found the system 'quick and easy to use' with another 2 respondents stating it was 'quick to find but complex to use'. Of those who felt able to make a comparison, all said that CASE software had speeded up the system of client information handling. For those for whom it was applicable, the implementation of Advisernet received a mixed reaction but 4 respondents said it was 'excellent', and 2 said it was 'good' for accessing information for clients.

When asked how knowledge is shared, respondents gave between 3 and 11 options. The options that respondents most frequently offered were processes such as staff meetings, newsletters and memos, informal interaction, briefing sessions, and the use of the notice board.

## **5.2. Volunteers' Responses**

Nearly 58% i.e. 23, of volunteers responded and the leading view is now given.

Almost all of the respondents said that the culture supported knowledge sharing in the organisation. In terms of cooperation between volunteers, over 75% of respondents said that they cooperated and helped each other 'very well'. A majority of respondents said that volunteers were encouraged to make suggestions for improvement within Charnwood CAB and that their suggestions were seriously considered. Just over half of the respondents believe that knowledge is exchanged freely throughout the CAB. Hence, as for the paid staff, there was a majority view that the current culture of Charnwood CAB was an enhancer for knowledge sharing.

All the volunteer respondents stated that they shared information and knowledge with paid workers and with other volunteers. The majority shared information with the

Manager while a very small number shared it with Trustees and funding bodies. This view was reflected in the similar numbers who agreed that the organisational structure enabled knowledge and information sharing between volunteers, between paid staff and volunteers, and between volunteers and the Manager.

When using the information technology systems, most of the participants found the information and knowledge 'easy to find'. With regard to the implementation of CASE software, just over half the respondents claimed it had speeded up the system of client handling while 9 of them said that it had made the process more time consuming. It was a similar story with the implementation of Advisernet where half the respondents agreed it was an 'excellent, efficient tool'.

The vast majority of volunteers highlighted informal interaction, use of a notice board, staff training sessions and staff meetings are where knowledge is exchanged within the bureau. Electronic means such as e-mail and websites/on-line resources were processes that were least acknowledged in this respect.

### **5.3. Trustees' Responses**

This group of participants gave the highest rate of response with 11 out of 13 responding to the questionnaire. The prevailing Trustee view is now described.

There was an equal split in Trustees' views between the organisational culture being 'open and friendly', and 'good but with room for improvement', and a resounding affirmation that the culture facilitated knowledge sharing. Overall Trustees thought that sharing of information and knowledge was 'most effective'. 7 Trustees felt that they cooperated and helped each other 'quite well' with 4 thinking that they cooperated and helped 'very well'.

All Trustees said that they gave information and knowledge to one another, with the majority of them also giving information to the Manager. Smaller numbers (5) gave information and knowledge to paid staff while 3 gave it to volunteers and to funding bodies. All of them agreed that the structure enabled communication between Trustees and the majority felt that it enabled communication between Trustees and the Manager. Similar numbers of responses were given when asked how well knowledge and information are shared between Trustees and paid staff. 5 said that it was 'shared frequently' while 6 said that it was 'usually shared'.

There was a spread of answers related to how quick and easy to find, information and knowledge is for Trustees. However, half of the respondents to this question found it 'quick to find and easy to use'.

## **6. Interview Results**

When reading the interview results, one should remain mindful of the rationale for selecting interviewees. The selection comprised willing participants who had made additional comments to open ended questions in the questionnaire. These tended to be participants who had not answered some questions in line with the majority view. The majority view of knowledge sharing in Charnwood CAB expressed in the

questionnaires was very positive and, as a result, respondents had brought a wide range of knowledge sharing enhancers to the researchers' attention. Minority and extreme views were, therefore, expected from the interviews. In uncovering such views it was anticipated that examples of knowledge sharing inhibitors would be discussed. This was in keeping with the overall project aims.

There appear to be two cultures expressed by interviewees and these are now shared. The first view of the organisation's culture is one that acknowledges that there is a friendly and open atmosphere within the bureau whereby individuals (particularly those with the greatest level of experience and expertise) make themselves freely available to share information and knowledge, so that people find it easy to ask questions and contribute ideas. There is perceived to be scope for lively debate and discussion and openness to new knowledge and information.

In particular, the informal interaction between volunteers and supervisors is considered to be highly effective, with advice and knowledge given willingly. Much of the knowledge shared in this way is ad-hoc and tacit in nature in that people share their experience and knowledge that is not written down or explicitly available. Knowledge sharing, therefore, appears to be largely dependant on individuals knowing who to ask, and which questions to ask.

Despite some physical barriers to communication due to the current layout of the office, the paid staff, who are located in the upstairs office of their premises, were seen as willing to come down to the bureau office and help generalist advisers with specific issues when required. However, there was some reluctance on the part of volunteers to go to the upstairs office. In addition, while volunteers seemed to interact well with each other, it was suggested that the fact that they often spend very brief time periods in the bureau could be an inhibitor since many volunteers do not have the opportunity to meet, interact with each other and share knowledge. This would also seem to be an issue for the Trustees, who do not often interact between meetings.

The second view of the culture of the organisation focuses on the prevailing management style rather than the physical layout. The Manager of Charnwood CAB was deemed to be very effective and to be an approachable communicator by staff. However, some interviewees felt that senior management (i.e. the Manager and Trustees) was somewhat distant. The role and nature of the work of the Manager and Trustees is that they often spend much of their time dealing with issues that are strategic or administrative; such issues can take them away from the hub of the bureau and, as a result, their work may be largely unseen and go unnoticed by staff and volunteers. Despite an acknowledgement that delegation to supervisors is necessary to ensure the smooth running of the organisation, some interviewees seemed to call for the Manager to be more involved with the core work of the bureau of helping clients. The recent relocation of her office to an upstairs room had created a physical distance that has led some interviewees to feel that there is an 'upstairs-downstairs' culture operating within the bureau. However, in contrast, some interviewees stressed that the Manager is seen as approachable and having an 'open door' policy.



The computer is the main source of information for advisers and other staff. There had been some criticism of the system being difficult to navigate or slow, whereby moving from section to section within the database is not a simple process. However, in general, ADVISERNET was seen as the key tool for gaining information and knowledge to enable people to help clients, and is much better and more easily accessible than the old paper system. A 'What's New?' section was now available and this was considered to be an important source of updated information on changes in legislation and social policy issues.

CASE is an important and comprehensive tool for the volunteer generalist advisers and provides quick access to client files and information whilst also providing comprehensive statistics. However, an interviewee expressed that there were a few problems with a lack of training for volunteers, in particular, and their lack of opportunity to practice on the computer.

There are several procedures and opportunities for staff to interact and provide input to the organisation. The newsletter, produced by one of the volunteers, was seen to an opportunity for anyone to bring important information to the notice of all staff members. However, a number of interviewees considered that it was not being fully utilised. They also mentioned that it can take a long time to be produced and it is not as comprehensive or up-to-date as is perceived to be necessary by some interviewees.

Some interviewees saw staff meetings as a good opportunity for people to express themselves, discuss issues, get together and interact with management. However, there was some criticism that certain personalities dominated or created issues, that were either 'picky' or unimportant but which tend to be time consuming.

Staff and volunteer representatives are another formal way for knowledge to be shared, in particular to and from the Trustee Board, and between management and staff. However, it was stated that it could be difficult for volunteers to see their representative since they are in the office on different days.

There are other ways that knowledge is shared in the bureau, but the impression from interviewees was that they were not used to their full potential. Apparently there is a hanging file in the upstairs office for leaflets and other information, that is available to staff but better use of it could be encouraged. There is also a notice board in the downstairs main office, where important information is intended to be placed. However, some interviewees criticised this as being used too much for trivial things rather than important information. They said that some people had stopped bothering to look at it, therefore limiting its effectiveness as a knowledge sharing tool.

## **7. Key Findings**

This section summarises the inhibitors and enhancers to knowledge sharing that were identified in Charnwood CAB. As can be seen, some of them reflect those introduced in the literature. Others have emerged from the empirical studies. It is appreciated that they are not isolated elements but, rather, that they are interconnected i.e. a change in one element could create a change in another. Although it is recognised that each

organisation is unique, it is possible that the identification of such inhibitors and enhancers to knowledge sharing could trigger lessons for other organisations both in the voluntary and profit making sectors.

Two aspects in relation to structure – physical and reporting aspects of structure - were seen to impact on the effectiveness of knowledge sharing. The physical layout of the offices and advice centres influenced the level of contact between paid workers and volunteers. With staff located on different levels, the stairs became a boundary to volunteers, in particular. In addition, the physical distance between the Manager and volunteers also became a conceptual distance for some volunteers. With respect to the reporting structure, it appeared that communication channels were present and effective between various parties and, as a result, the majority of participants were able to benefit from a fairly free flow of knowledge and information, and nearly all participants knew exactly who to refer to for important information.

Culture is taking centre stage in the KM literature so it is not surprising that cultural aspects received attention in the questionnaires and interviews. The dominant view of the Charnwood CAB's culture as being open and friendly with colleagues cooperating and helping each other most of the time coincided with the agreement that the organisational culture facilitated knowledge sharing. The perception of the Manager having an open door policy supported this view.

Characteristics of information were themes that surfaced in the interviews. The currency of information, speed of dissemination of information and the amount of information were discussed in relation to some of the processes (newsletter, decision making and use of hanging files) that were seen to be enhancers of knowledge sharing. Other processes and the improvement of some of their characteristics e.g. effectiveness of meetings and encouraging more social interaction, were also mentioned and provided more depth to the consideration of organisational processes for knowledge sharing.

Unlike in the literature, the spotlight was not on technology for Charnwood CAB. The focus of the primary data was more on cultural, procedural and structural aspects of the organisation for triggering and supporting knowledge sharing than on information and communication technologies. The very nature and intention of research means that we should not be surprised by something 'new' being realised about the topic of study. The most surprising aspect of this project was the bias that the empirical findings brought. The main thrust of the KM literature has been on technology and, more recently, on the cultural aspects of KM. It was therefore with genuine surprise that the themes of procedures and structure were so dominant in Charnwood CAB. While these themes are not ignored in the literature they tend not to draw great attention. Perhaps the next wave of literature will focus more heavily on them; perhaps procedures and structure are mechanisms for implicitly changing culture.

## **8. Acknowledgements**

Thanks are extended to the British Academy for funding the project, to Dr S.H. Wilford who worked as Research Associate and to Charnwood CAB for collaborating

on this project.

## 9. References

Bussell, H. and Forbes, D. (2002) "Understand the volunteer market: The what, where, who and why of volunteering", *International Journal of Nonprofit And Voluntary Sector Marketing*, Vol. 7, No. 3, pp 244-257.

Call, D. (2005) "Knowledge Management – Not Rocket Science", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 9, No. 2, pp19-30.

Gilmour, J. and Stancliffe, M. (2004) "Managing knowledge in an international organisation: the work of Voluntary Services Overseas (VSO)", *Records Management Journal*, Vol. 14, No. 3, pp 124-128.

Lettieri, E. Borga, F. and Savoldelli, A. (2004) "Knowledge Management in Non-Profit Organisations", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 8, No. 6, pp 16-30.

Liebowitz, J. (1999) "Key ingredients to the success of an organization's Knowledge Management strategy", *Knowledge and Process Management*, Vol. 6, No. 1, pp 37-40.

Nonaka, I. and Takeuchi, H. (1995) *The Knowledge Creating Company*, Oxford University Press.

Polanyi, M. (1966) *The Tacit Dimension*, Routledge & Kegan Paul, London.

Swan, J., Robertson, M. and Newell, S. (2002) "Knowledge Management: the human factor", In Barnes, S. (ed) *Knowledge Management Systems: Theory and Practice*. Thomson Learning: London.

Wong, K.Y. and Aspinwall, E. (2005) "An empirical study of the important factors for Knowledge Management adoption in the SME sector", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 9, No. 3, pp 64-82.

Wymer, W. W. (1998) "Youth development volunteers: Their motives, how they differ from other volunteers and correlates of involvement intensity", *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*, Vol. 3, No. 4, pp. 321-336, in Bussell, H. and Forbes, D. (2002) "Understand the volunteer market: The what, where, who and why of volunteering", *International Journal of Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Marketing*: Vol, 7, No, 3, pp 244-257.

---

### About the Author:

Dr. Gillian Ragsdell combines her industrial experience with her academic interests to build on the relationship between the theory and practice of knowledge management. Her origins in systems thinking and creative problem solving have proved particularly effective in studying the generation and sharing of knowledge. Action research projects

have taken her into various organisations; recent examples include organisations from the voluntary sector, the water industry and the military.

Dr Gillian Ragsdell, Lecturer in Knowledge Management and PhD Student  
Coordinator, Department of Information Science, Loughborough University,  
Loughborough, Leicestershire, LE11 3TU, UK; Email: [g.ragsdell@lboro.ac.uk](mailto:g.ragsdell@lboro.ac.uk)

---