Knowledge Portals and Virtual Communities of Practice

Masterarbeit

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1. Introduction

Many things have evolved in the past 100 years: The transformation of an industrial society into a service society, from manual work into automatization, from landline telephones into smartphones, from "Yellow Pages" into "Google" – this list could go on and on. Each further development, whether it may be social or technological, needed people adapting to the change. Technologies that people are used to nowadays, e.g. electronic mail, were once heavily discussed. It took years for people to rearrange their habits and get used to change. Today, a more global and digitalized work accelerates the rate in which technological and social advancements conquer the world. Therefore, people need to adapt to more and more innovations in a shorter time frame. Otherwise, they risk lagging behind. This problem does not only exist on the individual level. If an organization misses out on adapting to change, it risks falling behind its competitors. It is one thing to convince someone to use an application on a smartphone to find the best route for a journey. However, it is another to persuade the whole workforce of an organization to adapt to a new routine. The bigger the change, the more complex is the solution.

This problem manifested itself in the introduction of knowledge management to organizations which has been introduced e.g. by Brown & Duguid in 1991. Technical solutions have been deployed; employees and their management have been informed about the importance of breaking up knowledge silos and collaborating. Still, 26 years later, researchers such as Loebbecke and Myers (2017) and Helms (2017: p. 39) report of the limited success of the deployment of knowledge management systems (also: Li & Jhan-Li, 2010: p. 1052). Knowledge silos still exist in organizations and holding back crucial information is considered as advantageous by some (Du Plessis, 2008: p. 62; IT-2). Research and business literature is filled with analyzes about the barriers and possible solutions to introducing a knowledge management strategy to a firm. Not least because there has not been developed a standard way of calculating the return on investment of knowledge management programs yet, many corporations lack a holistic approach to enable knowledge management. Research needs to analyze the relationship between the enabling context and identified knowledge management processes (Helms, 2017: p. 33). Organizations need to understand the value of knowledge management and use knowledge about barriers to overcome them and deploy a holistic strategy (Loebbecke & Myers, 2017: p. 496). The holistic approach needs to address organizational and workforce requirements to bring maximal value.

That is why the present thesis approaches this subject with two research questions (RQ):

RQ 1: How and why is knowledge management valuable to organizations?

RQ 2: How and why is knowledge management valuable to employees?

The answer to these questions could fill books. That is why the present thesis concentrates on two parts of a knowledge management strategy that are part of recent research (Loebbecke & Myers, 2017; Helms, 2017; Chuang, Jackson & Jiang, 2016), yet rarely combined: "Knowledge

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Portals" and "Virtual Communities of Practice". Both are possible solutions to stimulate knowledge transfer in an organization.

The present thesis analyzes them in a case study, which was carried out in collaboration with a global player of the automotive industry. Ten employees and six managers have been interviewed to give an insight on their opinions and experiences regarding knowledge management, knowledge portals and virtual communities of practice. The results are discussed and used to derive twenty recommendations of practice. It thereby contributes to research and practice by showing how to combine both subjects and giving insight into the barriers concerning their deployment. It serves as an example for the top management of global organizations on why committing to a holistic KM strategy is necessary.

The structure of the study is as follows: the second chapter will serve as the theoretical foundation. First, the term knowledge is introduced. After that, the management, different models and systems are explained. Last but not least, virtual communities of practice are defined. Moving on, the research design will be illustrated in the third chapter. Following that, chapter four contains the case study, including a literature review of barriers to knowledge transfer and the deployment of knowledge portals as well as the results of the interviews and a critical reflection. The results and implications for research will be discussed in chapter five. Recommendations for practice will be analyzed in chapter six. The thesis ends with a conclusion and an outlook.

7. Conclusion and Outlook

The present thesis aimed to give an insight into the barriers of knowledge transfer and the deployment of knowledge portals. A case study interviewing 10 employees and 6 managers of a globally acting organization was carried out. The results were discussed and used to develop recommendations of practice that find their foundations in both literature and expressed employee's demands. Altogether, this thesis serves as a precedent demonstrating how and why knowledge management brings value to organizations and employees.

The results show that most employees and managers see value in the transfer of knowledge. Furthermore, they state to be open to sharing knowledge with other persons. However, not many showed specific strategies or processes to integrate knowledge management into their daily work. The author observed a finger pointing of responsibilities. That is why it is about time for the top management of the organization to implement a corporate-wide KM strategy.

Responding to the needs determined in the case study, this thesis discussed the value of knowledge portals, virtual communities of practice and that knowledge management is not an end in itself. A holistic approach to a KM strategy can bring value to organizations and also to employees. In total, twenty recommendations for practice have been introduced, including technical & organizational solutions as well as methods to stimulate the intrinsic motivation of an employee.

This ensemble can be used by teams to make first adaptions to improve their knowledge management strategy. The main recommendation for small teams is to regard problems theme-based instead of department-based. Also, they must understand that knowledge management is not an end in itself. Therefore, they should stop thinking about which knowledge should best be stored. They need to start using KM methods to align KM with their actual objectives.

In the near future, the discussion of this thesis should be carried on in the top management level to determine the need of a holistic KM strategy for the whole corporation, including all brands and locations. Each employee has to be enabled to bring in all or their knowledge to push the organization to new heights. The recommendations for practice can be used as a first approach to what can be done to guide the organization into a new era of digitized and global collaboration. The risk of failing to reveal potentials for synergy is too high for the corporation if this task is not approached immediately.

It is only with a combined effort that an organization has a chance to survive in a highly networked global market. Empowering employees is not a duty, it is a gift.

"Knowledge cannot be managed, only enabled." Georg von Krogh, 2012