

Meeting the challenges of knowledge management at the Housing and Development Board

Thompson S.H. Teo*

Department of Decision Sciences, School of Business, National University of Singapore, 1 Business Link, Singapore 117592, Singapore

Received 30 November 2002; accepted 31 May 2004

Available online 5 August 2004

Abstract

In recent years, there has been increased emphasis on the importance of knowledge management (KM) in facilitating knowledge sharing, enhancing productivity, and increasing business competitiveness. This paper examines the development of a knowledge portal (called KnowIT) at the Housing and Development Board in Singapore. The issues and insights gained from HDB's experience are examined. These issues and insights serve as important lessons to firms intending to embark on a KM project.

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Keywords: Knowledge management; HDB; Singapore; Issues; Lessons; Challenges

1. Introduction

Knowledge, in the form of insights and practical experiences, that we possess is the fundamental resource that allows humans to function intelligently. Over time, considerable knowledge from insights and practical experiences is transformed to other forms such as books, practices, and traditions. These transformations result in accumulated expertise and best practices, which, when used appropriately, increase individual and organizational efficiency and effectiveness.

In general, firms hold substantial documented knowledge or explicit knowledge in the form of patents, technical specifications, and procedures. In addition, information on finance, marketing, production, and service is usually codified and distributed as management information. This makes up the majority of explicit knowledge. On the other hand, tacit knowledge (based on individual experiences and skills) tends to reside within individuals of the organization. Unless shared, this knowledge is lost when the individual leaves the organization.

There are various definitions of knowledge management (KM). In general, KM is the systemic and organizationally specified process for acquiring, organizing, and communicating both tacit and explicit knowledge of employees so that others may make use

* Tel.: +65 68743036; fax: +65 67792621.

E-mail address: bizteosh@nus.edu.sg.

of it to be more effective and productive [2]. In a similar vein, Tiwana [31] conceptualized KM as the process of managing organizational knowledge for creating business values and sustaining competitive advantage. KM is also the process of making creative, effective, and efficient use of all the knowledge and information available to an organization for the benefit of its customers and thus the organization as a whole. O'Dell et al. [23] emphasized that the focus of KM should be on getting the right information to the right people at the right time, while Holsapple and Singh [15] suggested a knowledge chain model that identifies and characterizes KM activities for competitiveness.

There are several reasons as to why KM is important. First, organizations have come to recognize that acquisition and speedy distribution of information, coupled with business experiences, form the basis of knowledge capital assets with which to build great businesses. Thus, KM leverages each business' core competencies to provide better, faster, and cheaper quality products or services.

Second, marketplaces are increasingly competitive and the rate of innovation is increasing; hence, knowledge must evolve and be assimilated at an ever faster rate. Further, competitive pressures reduce the size of the work force that holds valuable business knowledge. These reductions in staffing create a need to replace informal KM with formal methods to mitigate knowledge loss. In a similar vein, early retirements and increasing mobility of the work force lead to loss of organizational knowledge.

Third, there is a need to manage increasing complexity due to increased globalization and technological change. Products and services are becoming increasingly complex and often have a significant information component. KM helps firms deal with increased complexity and represents a key opportunity to leverage knowledge assets for achieving substantial savings, significant improvements in human performance, and competitive advantage.

Research on KM has increased steadily over the past few years. Researchers have debated on whether KM is a new or recycled concept [29]; examined issues, challenges, and benefits [2]; and proposed directions for future research [1,28]. Other researchers examined various aspects of KM, including knowledge barriers [21], strategies for KM [8,11], integrating KM with information services (IS) strategy [16]

and business strategy [7], factors influencing KM [13], best practices [24], leveraging knowledge capabilities [3,9,26], and technology support for KM [6,22,31,32].

In addition, businesses that have successfully implemented KM are often described. Examples include IBM [19]; Nortel Networks [20]; Buckham Laboratories [34]; Dell and Hewlett-Packard [11]; Shell, McKinsey, and Company; World Bank; and DaimlerChrysler [33]. In a similar vein, cases on KM by the US Federal Government across a host of agencies have also been investigated. Examples include the US Social Security Administration [27], US Naval Surface Warfare Center [17], and US Department of Navy [4].

Although there is research on KM in both the public and private sectors, there are relatively less cases on KM implementation in Asia. Hence, this paper examines the development and implementation of a knowledge portal at the Housing and Development Board (HDB), a statutory board in Singapore. Data were gathered through interviews with the relevant persons in HDB as well as through in-house materials about the KM project. We examine the impacts of KM and insights gained from HDB's experience, which would be useful for other organizations that intend to implement a KM system.

Although this paper focuses on the experiences of HDB in KM, it is important to note that the lessons learned are likely to be applicable to both public and private sector organizations. The insights gained from this study are useful to both researchers and practitioners in better understanding the various issues that need to be managed, as well as the potential impact of KM. Such issues suggest avenues for future research in terms of determining appropriate strategies for dealing with them. For practitioners, knowledge of such issues would enable them to better allocate resources and better focus their attention on key factors that affect KM success.

2. Background of HDB

The HDB of Singapore was set up as a statutory board on February 1, 1960. Within 45 years, it has

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