

KM PARADOX ON CITY MANAGEMENT

Abstract

This paper presents some thoughts about a relative paradox of knowledge management: both a well established area of science and one of the managerial science domains still under scrutiny for several important inconsistencies and misunderstandings.

Keywords: management, knowledge management, city management, turmoil.

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PARADOXURILE MANAGEMENTULUI BAZAT PE CUNOȘȚINȚE IN MANAGEMENTUL URBAN

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Rezumat

Această lucrare prezintă câteva idei despre paradoxurile managementului bazat pe cunoștințe, atât ca zonă bine delimitată a științei managementului și ca unul dintre domeniile aflate încă în etapa de cristalizare și marcată de importante neconcordanțe și neînțelegeri.

Cuvinte cheie: management, managementul bazat pe cunoștințe, managementul orașului, administrație publică, criză.



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1. INTRODUCTION

In the contemporary economy, learning and knowledge have become key success factors for organizations. Knowledge becomes one of the basic organizational resources (Ceptureanu and Ceptureanu, 2010). Generation, acquisition and use of knowledge - to name just a few of the transformations of knowledge - are extremely important for sustainable economic, social and cultural development. This trend applies equally to individuals, organizations, institutions, companies, regions or states. In the current economic environment - characterized by volatility, rapid changes in political or international status quo or an increase demand for solid knowledge - modern organizations cannot compete without skilled managers and employees.

According to Robert D. Stueart (2009), no managerial or economic activity has attracted much attention in the last decade as knowledge management.

American Center for Quality and Productivity (<http://www.apqc.org/>) made the first benchmark on knowledge management in 1996. This study found that this term is recognized and visible, it became an area of strength for a number of consulting firms and companies from different industries that were already a variety of activities related to knowledge management.

A more recent study (Bontis, 2002) conducted on a sample of 200 executives found that:

- 80 percent of them claimed to have ongoing knowledge management actions;
- 25 percent of companies had at least one knowledge manager (knowledge management chief officer) or learning manager (chief learning officer) - although only half of them have a separate budget;
- 21 percent of surveyed organizations had a knowledge management strategy;
- Only 6 percent of the analyzed organizations are using a holistic approach of KM.

2. CRITICISM OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

KM is one of the best researched topics in managerial literature nowadays. Its utility and contribution to managerial effectiveness no longer need to be argued. However, there are still some critics of it, ranging from the very negation of the concept to emphasizing inconsistencies, ambiguities, etc. in the existing content.

In my opinion, these critics merely reinforce, instead of weaken, Knowledge Management, consecrating it as a dynamic branch of organizational management, able to generate passion and controversy.

According to Kenneth A. Grant and Candace T. Grant (Grant and Grant, 2008), the main weaknesses of KM are:

Criticism 1. Knowledge management is just another fashion in management

Some specialists argue that knowledge management is, as were other concepts in the past, only a trend in management, leading to a transient amplification of related papers and experts' interest. For example, Wilson (2002) says that it is "mostly a managerial fashion, promoted mainly by certain consultancy companies, and is likely to disappear, like other temporary fashion". Koenig and Ponzi (2002) examine the possibility of knowledge management to be a fashion or a trend in management, analyzing the bibliographic citations of the concept during a decade with the terms of reference like quality circles, total quality management and business process reengineering (all three reaching the maximum attention in the five years before they entered obscurity) and conclude that it "exceeded the period of 5 years and is likely to become a field of practice in management".

Criticism 2. Knowledge management focuses primarily on IT

In a review of the literature from 1990-2000, Swan and Scarborough (2002) found that more than 40% of it was written for or by computer specialists, thus considering the IT community as its main promoter. The same experts say that although it is normal for any scientific field, and hence to knowledge management, to benefit from a variety of management practices, its "patronage" by IT community is adversely narrowing the reference field and decreased its effectiveness.

Gartner Research Institute (Harris, 2006) considers that, although knowledge management "does not necessarily require the use of software, IT technologies are absolutely necessary to develop an effective action based on knowledge management".

Criticism 3. The validity of models based on knowledge management practice is questionable

Many models and classifications found in the relevant literature devoted to knowledge management are using as a starting point Nonaka's famous SECI cycle of knowledge conversion from tacit to explicit. Some critics consider this approach too simplified and general. For example, Styhre (2003) believes that "in the literature, it passes too lightly over the fact that a resource can not only reduced the number of categories and skills" and criticize encoding-decoding mechanism of the Nonaka-Takeuchi knowledge approach.

Others go even further and argue that management and knowledge are opposed concepts (Schultze and Stabell, 2004), being especially critical about handling tacit knowledge and the need to be converted into explicit in order to deal with it.

Marren (2003) criticize the whole concept of knowledge management, considering actual organizational knowledge and focus on knowledge as an end in itself, unconnected with competitive advantage, as a mistake. Wilson, studying many works in the area, deny the existence of knowledge management, considering that "in most cases, knowledge management is used as a synonym for information management". Moreover, the same author criticizes Nonaka-Takeuchi model, considering that they have misunderstood the concept of Polanyi' tacit knowledge.

Criticism 4. The application of knowledge is reduced

As a corollary of the above statements, KM critics raise the following question - is created, captured, shared, archived, etc. knowledge really useful and relevant? This question is particularly important for explicit knowledge.

KM critics consider, for example, that among the issues that have not yet found an answer are included: a) captured knowledge is not necessary qualitative since capturing techniques and instruments cannot distinguish between different levels of quality for information and knowledge b) involvement of individuals in creating knowledge base is very ambiguous c) some knowledge management tools are inadequate - for example, expert systems d) use of best practices in KM, contrary to other domains, is questionable since it does not distinguish between "best practice" and "any practice."

Thus, consider all these critics, the relevant knowledge issue can undermine effective knowledge management so far as to make it inoperable.

3. KM SCHOOLS

Theoretically, it is always useful to identify the main currents of thought in a specific area of science. Even though Knowledge Management is an emerging one, we can say that it have crystallized a number of approaches and schools in the area, which we present below.

O. Nicolescu (Nicolescu and Nicolescu, 2011) after analyzing a number of theories in the field divided KM into three broad categories:

- A. IT based approaches;
- B. management consultants based approaches;

C. managers based approach.

G. Turner and C. Minone (2010) consider that knowledge management has three main layers:

- A) focused on organizational learning;
- B) focused on knowledge operational management to;
- C) focused on intellectual capital management.

Russ (Russ, 2002) observes three types of knowledge management approaches - cognitive, corrective and self poetic.

Karl-Erik Sveiby (2001) considers on the Knowledge Management Forum that there are two guidelines (approach) of it:

- Knowledge Management as part of Information Management. For researchers of this approach, knowledge is made of objects that can be identified and handled within information systems;
- Knowledge Management as People Management. For researchers and practitioners of this approach, knowledge is made of processes, complex sets of employees' dynamic skills, know-how, etc., constantly changing.

In my opinion there are three schools of KM, defined by the nature of concepts and methods used and the philosophy of knowledge management approach: (1) mechanistic school (2) cultural / behavioral school and (3) systemic school.

a) Mechanistic School

Crystallized in the last two decades of previous century, KM mechanistic approach is characterized by focusing on the use of information technologies and resources in order to "to do more and better".

Key assumptions of the mechanistic school are:

- Faster access to information is essential, including and especially by using improved methods of access and reuse of documents (hypertext, databases, full-text search, etc.);
- Networks (especially intranets) and groupware in particular will be key solutions to organizational problems;
- Generally, technology and sheer volume of information will make the system (organization) work.

As the main advantage of this school we point out that its theories are relatively easily understandable and applied by practitioners as IT technology and tools - although sometimes very advanced in some areas - are familiar and easily understood by managers and employees.

In terms of knowledge cycle, it is considered that increased access to the organization's intellectual assets is vital. As a drawback we can mention that it is unclear whether access to knowledge itself has a significant impact on business performance, especially considering the huge volume of information available online. Unless knowledge management includes mechanisms of experience and organizational knowledge accumulation, the net result is likely to be unfavorable.

b) Cultural / behavioral School

Specific to the first decade of the 21st century, behavioral approach, with substantial roots in managerial reengineering and change management, tends to see "knowledge problem" as a management problem. Technology - although essential in the management of explicit knowledge resources - is no longer seen as a solution in itself, as previous school address. This approach tends to focus more on innovation and creativity ("learning organization") than on mobilizing existing explicit or tacit knowledge from explicit transformation.

The assumptions of this school include:

- Behaviors and organizational culture have changed dramatically. In the current environment, saturated of information, organizations are relatively dysfunctional in relation to targets.
- Behaviors and organizational culture can be changed, but traditional technologies and methods to try to solve the "problem of knowledge" have reached the limits of effectiveness. So, a "holistic" approach is necessary.
- Processes and people matter, not technology.
- Nothing happens or changes if a manager does not intervene.

As advantage of this school we can mention extending the scope of knowledge management by taking into account human factors (or cultural), usually underestimated in previous approaches. The main drawback derives from the fact that it is very difficult to assess the causal relationship between behavioral factors and profit, both due to "Hawthorne effect" and because it is still very difficult to make realistic predictions, translated into strategies, on complex system like knowledge-based organizations.

c) Systemic School

Crystallized in first decade of this century, this school is based, as the others, on rational analysis of the "knowledge problem": the problem can be solved, but new ways of thinking and solving are necessary. Unlike the previous schools, however, this one address the issue of knowledge management more broadly, managerial, technological, etc.

The premises of this school are:

- Long-term results matter, not processes or technologies used;
- Resources can be managed if not modeled, and most of the knowledge organization can be modeled as an explicit resource;
- Solutions can be found in a variety of disciplines and using various technologies, is no longer the privilege of a single domain;
- Cultural issues are important, but they must be systematically evaluated. Employees may or may not "change", but policies and working practices must be changed periodically;
- Knowledge management is an important management component, but is not an activity or discipline that belongs exclusively to managers.

The main advantage of this school comes from further widening the scope and analysis of knowledge management field. As a disadvantage, in my opinion diminishing the importance of management is not constructive. In other words, it is useful and I would say even necessary to look for solutions in various areas, but the approach must be primarily managerial.

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