

FORMULATION OF A KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER FRAMEWORK FOR UNIVERSITY STUDENT ORGANIZATIONS

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ABSTRACT. This paper discusses the challenges faced by the new office bearers of university student organizations. A qualitative research approach was adopted, where the data was collected using semi-structured interviews with participants representing several student organizations. A formal structured knowledge transfer mechanism to equip the new office bearers of the student organizations was observed to be lacking. This paper presents a knowledge transfer framework that can be adopted by the relevant entities in preparing the newly elected office bearers of student organizations in executing their roles and responsibilities.

Keywords: knowledge, knowledge transfer, university

INTRODUCTION

Collaboration and cooperation among business partners and allies to share, utilize and exploit knowledge are fundamental in the current business environment as it will determine the creation of sustainable competitive advantage and economic wealth (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Hicks, Dattero & Galup, 2007; Singh, 2007). Effective knowledge transfer among these parties will help to serve their customers in a more innovative and efficient way. According to Goh (2002), “the existence of a strong co-operative and collaborative culture is an important prerequisite for knowledge transfer between individuals and groups”. As such, a mechanism that build the trust and needs for knowledge to be shared and transferred must be present in an organization to stimulate the knowledge transfer process.

Knowledge transfer is “the process through which one unit (e.g., group, department, or division) is affected by the experience of another” (Argote & Ingram, 2000). For an example, in a software development firm, a knowledge transfer occurs when a novice IT staff learns from an experienced staff on how to use some software modeling tool. The process of knowledge being transferred transpires here as the experienced staff assist the less-experienced staff in certain area by sharing his or her skills and knowledge that helps the new staff to execute certain tasks.

This paper focuses on the knowledge transfer that occurs in university student organizations. In each academic year, new office bearers will be elected to replace the existing members in planning and managing the activities of the organizations. However, based on the review of the literature, it can be observed that there are lack of frameworks for knowledge transfer that acclimatizes to the needs of university students. This paper attempts to discuss on the suitable knowledge transfer framework for university students in handling the organizations that they are entrusted with.

KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER PROCESS

Paulin and Suneson (2012) assert that there are some ambiguity in the distinction between knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer, as these terms are sometimes used interchangeably and sometimes are used differently based on the context or domain, by researchers. This paper adopted the notion of knowledge transfer in The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management by Schwartz (2006) (in Paulin & Suneson, 2012) where knowledge transfer is “the focused, unidirectional communication of knowledge between individuals, groups, or organizations such that the recipient of knowledge (a) has a cognitive understanding, (b) has the ability to apply the knowledge, or (c) applies the knowledge”.

Goh (2002) identified five (5) factors that affect the development of an effective knowledge transfer, which are leadership style of the organization, problem-solving/seeking behaviors of the knowledge recipient, support structure that facilitates knowledge transfer, absorptive and retentive capacity of the knowledge recipient, and types of knowledge being transferred. Islam et al (2014) in their study investigated the relationship of organizational culture such as trust among knowledge provider and recipient, communication between employees, rewards for sharing knowledge and learning, with knowledge transfer process.

Szulanski (1996) identified four (4) phases in transferring knowledge in an organization, which are initiation, implementation, ramp-up, and integration. The initiation phase starts when the requisite of certain knowledge and existence of the required knowledge in the organization coincide, which results in “a search that leads to the discovery of superior knowledge” (Szulanski, 1996). This is where the element of problem-solving/seeking behaviors of the knowledge recipient as indicated by Goh (2002) plays its role. The actual knowledge transfer happens in the second phase, which is the implementation phase. In this phase, the knowledge “flows” or transfers between the seeker and provider. According to Szulanski (1996), for a successful knowledge transfer, some kind of social connections must exist between the knowledge source (provider) and knowledge recipient (seeker) and “is often adapted to suit the anticipated needs of the recipient, to preempt problems experienced in a previous transfer of the same practice, or to help make the introduction of new knowledge less threatening to the recipient”. The element of trust as investigated in study by Islam et al (2014) is crucial in this phase as it “determines the extent to which an individual is willing to associate and interact with others” (Kumar, Rose and Muijen, 2009) (in Islam et al, 2014). In the third phase of knowledge transfer, or known as the ramp-up phase, is where the actual utilization of knowledge by the knowledge recipient (seeker), whereby the recipients may be not be effectively utilizing the knowledge, but able to “..ramping up toward a satisfactory level” over the time (Szulanski, 1996). The final phase, which is the integration phase, occurs when the knowledge recipient has achieved satisfactory results in utilizing the transferred knowledge and the utilization has become routinized. The third and the final phase of Szulanski (1996) knowledge transfer process incorporate the element of absorptive and retentive capacity of the knowledge recipient by Goh (2002) that influence the effective of the knowledge transfer process.

METHODOLOGY AND ANALYSIS

This research was conducted as an undergraduate research project, which span over two (2) academic semesters. The research adopted the qualitative approach, where the data collection was performed using semi-structured interview. Three (3) research questions, which aimed at answering the main research problem were raised in this research. Figure 1 illustrates the mapping of the problem statement and the research questions. These research questions were later expanded into a number of interview questions.

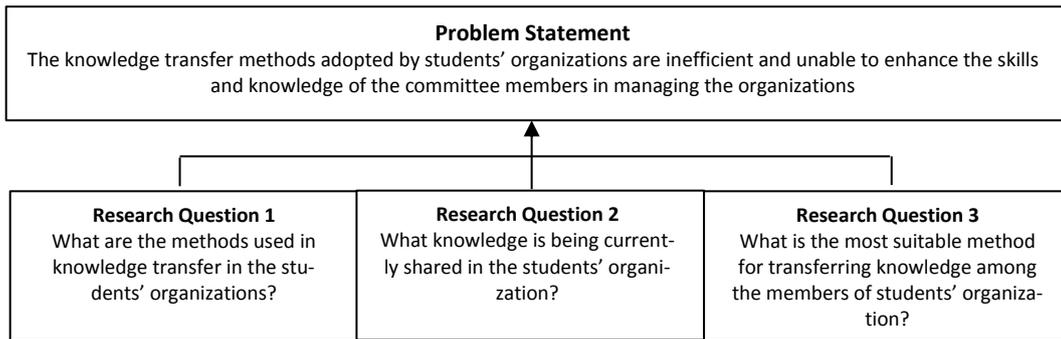


Figure 1. Mapping of research problem with research questions and interview questions

The empirical data was collected using semi-structured interviews with 20 participants, representing four (4) student organizations of a private university in Malaysia. Although the researcher had attempted to include more participants in this research, nevertheless some of the potential participants approached were not able to partake in this research due to time constraints and unwillingness of participation. Due to this, only 20 participants were successfully interviewed, as depicted in Table 1. The empirical data was analyzed using a thematic analysis approach.

Table 1. Details of Interview Participants

Students' Organization/ Club description	Role in the Students' Organizations/ Club
On-Campus Accommodation Committee	Participant 1 – President Participant 2 – Vice President Participant 3 – Secretary Participant 4 – Committee Member Participant 5 – Committee Member
Religious Club	Participant 6 – President Participant 7 – Vice President Participant 8 – Secretary Participant 9 – Committee Member Participant 10 – Committee Member
Language and Cultural Club	Participant 11 – President Participant 12 – Secretary Participant 13 – Committee Member Participant 14 – Committee Member Participant 15 – Committee Member
Technical Club	Participant 16 – President Participant 17 – Vice President Participant 18 – Committee Member Participant 19 – Committee Member Participant 20 – Committee Member

The interview participants indicated that no formal training were provided to the new office bearers of the student organizations upon their initial appointments. This response corroborates with the notion that the new office bearers are given “on-the-job training”, whereby they learn the tasks assigned to them by actually doing the tasks. Most of the participants

highlighted that this kind of training may not be effective to new elected office bearers, especially for executing tasks that they have no prior skills and knowledge. They suggested that some of the experienced office bearers act as the advisors to the newly elected office bearers during the “on-the-job training”, and thus would be able to teach or impart some of their skills and knowledge to the new office.

The interview participants also indicated that the Student Affairs Centre of the university provide some basic trainings such as leadership skills and communication skills. However, the participants felt that the trainings provided are too basic as they were not able to apply the knowledge from these trainings into executing their tasks and roles as the office bearers of the organizations. The respondents also suggested to have a documented manual or guideline which can help them to adjust to their new appointments as well as help them to improve themselves in executing their roles.

The participants also indicated that a structured process in transferring knowledge is necessary as they are not able to learn “on-the-job” due to time constraints, as they are also have commitments towards their academic activities as students. One of the participants indicated that a structured knowledge transfer process helps to eliminate “stressful experience for student and benefit from what they have learn”. As such, it can be concluded that the current trainings provided for the new appointed office bearers of the students’ organizations are not effective, and such the need for a structured knowledge transfer mechanism is pertinent to ensure that the newly elected office bearers are able to execute their roles and tasks in an effective and efficient manner.

RECOMMENDATION

This research adapted Szulanski (1996) four (4) stages knowledge transfer framework, and extends the original framework to suit the environment of university students. The proposed framework has been validated with an office bearer from each of the four (4) selected student organizations. Figure 2 illustrates the proposed framework, which have taken into consideration the comments and feedbacks during the validation sessions.

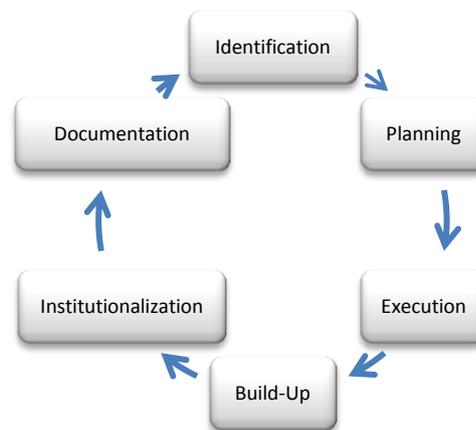


Figure 2. The Proposed Knowledge Transfer Framework for University Student Organizations

The first phase in the proposed knowledge transfer framework is the identification of the required knowledge for executions of tasks by the newly elected office bearers. Upon identification of the required knowledge, then the source or provider of the required knowledge needs to be ascertained. This phase has incorporated the problem-solving/seeking behaviors of the knowledge recipient factor by Goh (2002).

After the identification phase, they need to plan on how the knowledge is to be delivered, determining whether do they have the right amount of resource to do it and lastly, engage with the knowledge provider to confirm their willingness to share their knowledge. Trust among knowledge provider and recipient (Islam et al, 2014) and support structure that facilitates knowledge transfer (Goh, 2002) play important influence in this phase.

In execution phase, they will conduct the training based on what they have planned. During the training, they have to observe the progress of the training and the recipient is required to document the knowledge that they have gained in that particular training. The absorptive and retentive capacity of the knowledge recipients as highlighted by Goh (2002) is critical in this phase, in determining whether the newly transferred knowledge is understood and absorbed by the recipients.

During the build-up phase, the knowledge recipient will start use their newly acquired knowledge (from the previous stage) in executing their roles and tasks. In this phase, they may experience some problems in utilizing the newly acquired knowledge. However, depends on the types of knowledge and frequency of utilizing the knowledge, they will eventually elevate their understanding in the newly acquired knowledge and able to execute their roles and tasks in a more satisfactory level. This will help them to evaluate and approve the knowledge transferred during the training is useful and document the training procedure for future use.

In institutionalization phase, the knowledge recipient must have the willingness to share the knowledge among other members in the organization as part of social interaction. In this phase, the knowledge recipient has now become the knowledge provider, and the communication among employees and trust between the provider and recipient need to be factored in. Finally, the learning process has been completed and it must be documented for reference and future use of the students' organization.

CONCLUSION

This research attempted to understand the challenges currently faced by university students in managing their organizations, and proposed a framework that assists them in transferring knowledge among themselves in a more structured manner. Szulanski (1996) knowledge transfer framework has been used as the reference model for this research. However, the research may be expanded to include participants from other universities in Malaysia. This will help to generalize the framework to other tertiary education environments.

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