Knowledge Management in the Palestinian National Authority Institutions

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Abstract

Over the last decades, knowledge management (KM) has experienced significant improvement. The key-role it plays in management and its impacts on the performance have captured the attention of both organizations and countries. This paper reviews KM in the Palestinian National Authority (PNA) institutions focusing on certain criteria. The first criterion is the awareness and commitment of knowledge management, which is crucial to the development of KM culture. Moreover, the ability of high leadership and for directors to plan for KM facilitates the implementation processes of KM. The second criterion is the knowledge process, which includes knowledge storage, retrieval, share, and circulation of knowledge. While the third criterion illustrates how we can measure the benefits and impacts of knowledge management application through an employee or citizen satisfaction. The study used questionnaire and interviews, which was distributed to the target groups and then it was analyzed by using SPSS statistical program. The findings of the study show a partial improvement in the level of awareness. There was variation in the progress of KM where there was more dependence on documentation and archives more than the other processes. The impacts of KM on either the internal environment or the surrounding are still unsatisfactory, because of the weakness of communication channels and tools. These weakness include: Poor awareness of the importance of KM, Shortage of capacity, Shortage of adequate capacities and materials, unavailability of human cadre specialized in KM, and Unsupportive organizational culture. Finally, Knowledge leakage is the main obstacle of KM in Palestine.

Keywords: Knowledge management, PNA, organizational culture, Institutions, performance.

Introduction

Human being interest in knowledge is not a new one; in fact, it starts some centuries ago. Recently, the role of knowledge to ensure optimal use of resources, institutional innovation, and effective decision-making has become one of the most important pillars of the institution's success.

Although knowledge management has become one of the four core issues that the UNDP utilizes to measure capacity development, it represents capacity constraints that are most commonly encountered across a variety of situations (UNDP, 2010: 18). Sharing knowledge among organization or with others is a normal practice, but it may not be the case in most Arabic and Palestinian culture, where knowledge is considered as a personal property. Although Palestinian government considers turn over as an opportunity to get rid of the old employees and replace them with younger and more active ones who have fresh minds and ideas, the impacts of this process are likely to affect theperformance of the Palestinian institutions. Actually, Palestinian ministries and institutions lack adequate mechanisms to maintain, share, and transfer knowledge among employees. Pensioners usually leave with their experience and, however, there are no channels of communication with them.

Additionally, there is also a clear weakness of knowledge dissemination. Meanwhile, Knowledge assets are not systematically reviewed. Addressing the challenge on how to maintain and retrieve knowledge and experiences and transfer it to the new employees is considered to be the responsibility of the leaders. However, it is possible to reduce the harmful effect of turnover by introducing effective strategies to transfer knowledge among organizations.

Aims and Scope

The purpose of this article is to provide an assessment of knowledge management in PNA institutions by examining the result of a study carried out by the capacity building teams of some Palestinian ministries in 2012. It was conducted three years after the implementation of the new capacity-building program in PNA.Consequently, this study aims to measure the improvement in the performance of these institutions in the field of KM. it uses three main criteria to extract results: knowledge awareness, knowledge processes, and knowledge impacts. Therefore, the study seeks to answer the following questions: what is the level of awareness of KM in PNAinstitutions? What is the status of KM processes in PNA institutions? What are the impacts of KM implementation on the development of organizational performance after 2 years of the onset of the project? What are the obstacles that restrict the implementation of KM in PNA institutions?

Theoretical Framework

Knowledge is considered as one of the key resources of organizations. Correct and accurate knowledge improve the effectiveness and impacts of decisions. "It powers the ability of professionals to be their best and to deliver value service to customers" (Chou, 2005). Generally, there is a direct relationship between the ability of the organization to generate, maintain, retrieve and share knowledge, and its performance. No doubt that KM enhances the predictability of organization.

KM is a term that has been used to describe the processes of creating, organizing, leveraging, disseminating, and retaining expertise of an organization. KM enhances the organization's ability to keep the momentum of institutional performance by focusing on experience and knowledge processes. The overwhelming role of KM in institutional success led to decrease in the cost of production and have also increased the assets of organizations, which enhances their competitive advantages (Obaid, 2016).

The contemporary organizations commenced to pay more attention to KM. Indeed, there is growing realization about KM as the key driver of national wealth, the driver of innovation and learning, as well as that of the country's GDP (Malharta, 2000). The relationship between KM and organizational learning is well obvious. Nevertheless, KM considers the main source of organizational learning to conceptualize the relationship between knowledge management and organizational learning. King (2009) argues that "Organizational learning is one of the important ways in which the organization can sustainably improve its utilization of knowledge". Moreover, Knowledge still remains a difficult thing to manage. It does not do well in captivity and it does not survive for long outside its native habitat and, in addition, the lifespan of knowledge ranges from mere seconds to eons (Ruggles, 1998).

Broadly speaking, the formation of knowledge management in organizations is a continuous and ongoing process. Researchers underscore that Knowledge becomes useless unless it operates by KM processes. For example, King (2009) stated that "The processes of KM involve knowledge acquisition, creation, refinement, storage, transfer, sharing, and utilization. The KM function in the organization operates these processes, develop methodologies and systems to support them, and motivates people to participate in them". Heising and Vorbeck (2000) used the model of Fraunhofer IPK (2000) organization, which consists of five KM processes: Knowledge diagnosis, knowledge creation, knowledge

storage, knowledge dissemination, knowledge application. The optimum use of these process have a significant positive effects on the organizational performance and also leads to evidence-based decisions and better use of resources.

Background and Methodology

Established in 1994, the PNA has regular responsibilities that are distributed among various ministries such as education, healthcare, internal security, social welfare, civil registry, and so on. The PNA faced some challenges such as an increase in staff, high citizen's expectations, shortage of resources, matching donor criteria. Although the change in the management arrangement and organizational operation is not an easy task to achieve, PNA has adopted in 2009 centers of excellence project. However, this project is a four-year capacity enhancement project that includes five main ministries (ministry of finance, ministry of interior, ministry of transport, ministry of public works, and ministry of communications). It aims to:

1. Provides a common framework for examining current operations, systems and culture, using a hypothesis-based approach.
2. Leads teams through a diagnostic process to identify organizational issues, and provides tools for self-guided reform efforts (through planning and implementation).
3. Develop and implement process guides and standard operating procedures for core services including training.

Furthermore, the objective of the excellence project was to improve the performance of the Palestinian ministries in five key areas: leadership, operations, financial procedures, human development, and knowledge management. The project consists of five phases:

1. Institution commitment and team building: In this phase, the team are initiated and trained.
2. Self-assessment phase, which includes data collection and analysis by using SPSS package.
3. Develop a plan for institutional transformation; the plan included solutions for the identified problems.
4. The implementation of the plan in order to solve the problems and overcome challenges.
5. The last phase is Cooperation and learning, which implied lessons learned, sustainability and continuous review, as indicated in Figure 1).

Figure 1. The continuous phases of excellence program
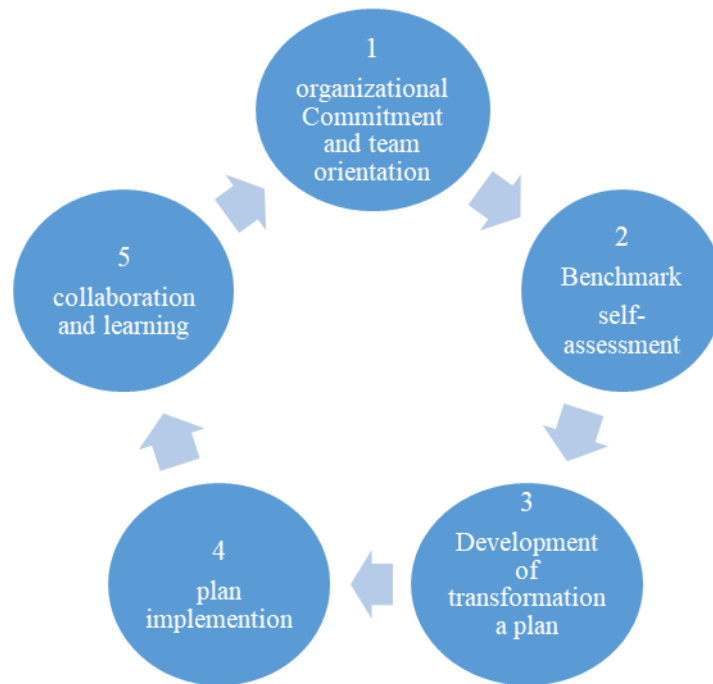
Source: Palestinian ministry of interior, Institutional transformation through centers of excellence report, May 2011.

This study will focus on the fifth criterion (knowledge management). The main source of data of the study is the final report of excellence team, which was issued in August 2012.

The methodology of data collection began through the formation of the capacity building teams in the mentioned five ministries. Each team consisted of 10 members from various departments, taking into consideration representation of all administrative levels and geographical areas. The main task of these teams was to assess the performance of these ministries and to collect data about knowledge management from administrations and directorates. In order to accomplish their tasks, the members of the teams were undergoing training courses in communication skills, teamwork, and organizational change. To collect data, the teams made use of questionnaire where data were collected from employees randomly. Interviews were also conducted where data were collected from specified high-level staff. The questionnaire consisted of 15 questions. Of these 15 questions, five of the

questions required information about knowledge awareness; six questions are related to knowledge process; and the last four questions were focused on communications and knowledge impacts. The number of employees surveyed was 2000. At the same time, the interviews consisted of altogether of 30 questions which was distributed as follows: seven was about knowledge awareness; eleven was related to knowledge process; while the remaining twelve questions were about knowledge impacts.

To facilitate the process of data collection and for research purposes, the knowledge criterion was divided into three sub-criteria: knowledge awareness, knowledge process, and knowledge impacts. In addition, these sub-criteria were elaborated into sub-elements as shown in Figure 2.

Figure 2. The relationship between sub-criteria of knowledge management
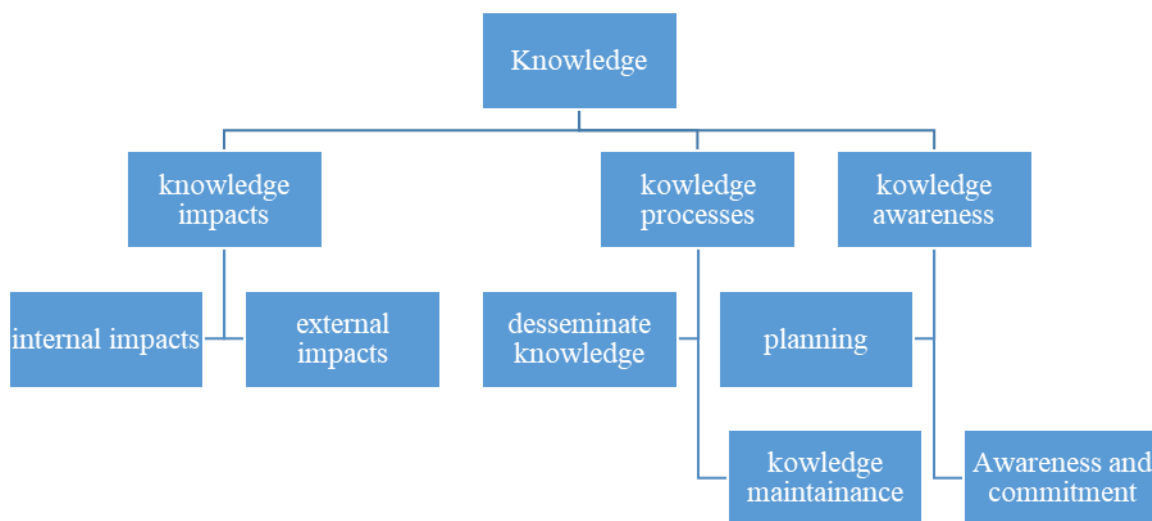
Source: Palestinian ministry of interior, Institutional transformation through Centers of Excellence report, May 2011.

Findings and Discussion

KM system in the targeted Palestinian ministries (TPMs) has seen some improvements after the implementation of the Excellence centers program. However, the following section presents an analysis of the key question of the study.

The First Question: What is the level of awareness of KM in PNA?

Organizational culture and awareness is an important element of the process of institutional change. At the same time, all administrative levels should be aware and involve in the transformation process, otherwise its success becomes under doubt. Therefore, this key question examines organizational culture and the level of awareness of KM in the TPMs on the different administrative level. According to the result of the questionnaire, most of the surveyed employees confirmed that the organizational culture has experienced some improvement in some basic values like cooperation, teamwork and sharing knowledge but, unfortunately, it has been partially implemented.

In addition, the general survey results pointed out that about 59% of the responding employees from different directorates and administrations stated that TPMs do not have Knowledge strategic plan. Also, the knowledge activities mainly depend on personal initiatives more than planned programs. This result contradicted the interviews results, which indicated that the KM strategy is active and flexible. Moreover, this confirms the existence of a difference in the evaluation of KM case among the different administrative levels.

With regard to the KM awareness, the general survey results showed that there was a moderate level in the awareness of the KM, but its outputs are often intangible. Moreover, there was a clear weakness in including it in the priorities of the strategic plan of the ministry. Meanwhile, the result of interviews showed that about 80% of the responding directors and high-rank leaders were satisfied with the current level of knowledge awareness. Thus, this reveals a kind of variation in the understanding of KM between the different administration levels, and it is high in the upper level compared to the middle and low administrative levels.

Talking about the possibility to access the knowledge to build the awareness and improve the performance, most of the surveyed employees (75%) stated that their performance is going to be better and more efficient if they are allowed to get access to the information. This indicates that weakness of exchange and shared knowledge is an obstacle for a large number of employees so far.

Furthermore, despite the variation among different administrative level, one can say there is a relative advancement in the level of awareness of KM in TPMs in comparison with previous years. This is evident through the implementation of the KM risk strategy. Meanwhile, the

result of both the questionnaire and interviews showed that the ministries seek to promote knowledge management and exchange it in a continuous manner.

The Second Question: What is the status of KM processes in PNA?

The results of the study showed that KM processes have experienced various and modest progress over the past few years. With regard to knowledge creation, the majority of respondents stated that it often depends on external sources. The TPMs do not pay enough attention to the interaction among public servants to create ideas and find solutions to the problems.

As for the knowledge storage, the TPMs depend mainly on paper archiving to save their documents. Thus, there has been a significant improvement in archiving and retrieving the documents. The results revealed that 67% of the respondent employees confirmed that this process is carried out through clear rules and specific procedures. On the other hand, processes of dissemination and sharing knowledge still suffer from some shortcomings especially that related to tacit knowledge, which often get lost in cases of retirement or leaving work. Majority of the respondents (51%) pointed out that their ministries do not share or exchange knowledge effectively. According to them, Knowledge dissemination is mostly based on instructions and circulars and, to a less extent, seminars and workshops.

The results showed that 60% of the respondents are not familiar with the main documents such as the strategic plan, the training plan, and the risk management strategy. The directors of the administrative units confirmed this result and added that these documents were formulated without the participation of the employees. Moreover, feedback has not been taken from them. Although it is one of the most efficient means in contemporary organizations, the results revealed a weakness in the use of TPMs website and internal networks in the dissemination of knowledge. Only 43% of the respondents agreed that the ministries used their website to provide or disseminate knowledge to either employees or citizens. Moreover, the results revealed inadequate efforts to establish an encouraging environment for creating, learning, and sharing knowledge for the benefit of the ministries.

In conclusion, the results of this part indicate that the levels of improvement in KM processes are fairly improved. There is a remarkable variation in the level of progress among the various processes. While there is a significant improvement in the level of saving and

archiving of knowledge, creation and sharing knowledge among different departments and levels still suffer from a clear weakness. At the same time, knowledge is not regularly reviewed to fill gaps. All in all, TPMs still concentrates on documentation and archiving more than the other processes. As the loss of explicit knowledge could cause a painful consequence, therefore, this can be avoided by documentation, saving, and retrieval of knowledge upon need.

The integration of KM processes is a vital issue to its success. Wherefore, any fault in one can negatively affect the others. This finding is consistent with the result of the study of Alavi and Leidner (2001: 123) who opined that "Knowledge management consists of a dynamic and continuous set of processes and practices embedded in individuals, as well as in groups and physical structures. Thus, knowledge management is not a discrete, independent, and monolithic organizational phenomenon".

The Third Question: What are the impacts of KM implementation on the development of organizational performance after three years of the onset of the project?

The efficient implementation of KM has positively affected the Organization performance and its ability to address and solve problems. In addition, it increases the efficiency of operations through constant and continuous coordination between different departments. The easiness of communication improves the ability of the organization to interact and respond to changes either in the internal environment or an external one. The results revealed that 63% of the respondents stated that the TPMs do not have an internal communication strategy. However, the results confirmed that the dissemination and sharing of knowledge would contribute to enhancing the employee's abilities and improve the quality of service provided. Moreover, the majority of respondents also stressed that their participation in the workshops and training courses enhances their abilities and creates incentives that positively affected their behavior and performance. At the same time, the results of the interviews confirmed this fact.

Concerning the dynamics of internal communication strategy and its ability to utilize opportunities and manage the crisis, only 39% of the respondents agree that it is adequate to deal with the unpredicted events, while 61% said that KM in TPM slacks the dynamics to react with unexpected crises.

With regard to the external communication strategy, the TPMs adopted new approach during the last few years to strengthen the relationship with its surrounding as mentioned by a number of administrative leaders. However, this has not been translated into specific strategies or plans. The surveyed respondents confirmed this result. Here, 62% of the respondents pointed out that the ministry does not have this external strategy. Moreover, they asserted that external relations with institutions and citizens are dominated by the diligence and reactions rather than planned process, which decrease its effectiveness and impacts.

The electronic websites of the ministries did not provide services to the public, either due to technical and technological reasons or because of the prevailing organizational and community cultures that limits the ability of the ministries to use these sites to provide service to citizens.

In general, there is still a weakness in the ability to utilize and share knowledge through internal and external communication in using them to solve problems, make the right decisions, face the latest developments, as well as enhance the relationship with the surrounding environment. One of the reasons for that is the nature of the organizational structures, which often limits the level of cooperation between the departments as it depends mostly on slow and bureaucratic communication patterns. This indicates a low level of impact of knowledge processes on internal as well as the external environment, because of the weakness of communication channels and tools.

The Fourth Question: What are the obstacles that restrict the implementation of KM in PNA?

The results of the study showed that TPMs are still suffering from some obstacles that limit their abilities to implement knowledge management effectively and efficiently. It can be summarized as follows:

1. Generally, there is poor awareness of the importance of KM in the Palestinian institutions. Leadership support plays a key role in the success of organizational change. The study of ESCWA (2003: 11) confirmed that "Commitment at the highest managerial levels is essential to the success of knowledge management. Efforts to manage knowledge must permeate the entire organization and it is, therefore, essential that managers should promote appropriate behaviors among employee".

2. Shortage of adequate capacity and materials for the application of KM, which was confirmed by the high-rank directors and leaders. According to them, the limited financial and technological resources decrease the opportunities to implement KM in PNA institutions. This is consistent with the study of Andrew et al. (2001: 208) which states that "Knowledge-based capabilities are keys to organizational success. In the absence of these capabilities, a program of transformation through knowledge management may be doomed before it begins".

3. Obstacles related to the unavailability of human cadre specialized in KM. Most KM staffs are not specialized in this field, and this was supported by the results of interviews that indicated the need to train these staff and enhance their abilities and skills in this field. This result is consistent with the study of Roman (2004) as cited in Abu Fara (2008: 26). However, he stated that "The successes of KM cannot be achieved only by new technology, but also the awareness and participation of human resources".

4. Unsupportive organizational culture, in addition to weak laws and instructions, are required to disseminate and exchange knowledge at the internal and external levels. This result is consistent with the study of Chou (2005: 38) which states that "Organizational culture can inhibit or enhance organizational change efforts and Knowledge management initiatives".

5. Knowledge leakage is the main challenge facing public institution in Palestine. Here, Knowledge is lost because of staff turnover, retirement, or work termination. This kind of knowledge loss is a global phenomenon. For example, "70 percent of the employees in the sales department of your Fortune 100 Company has left. More alarmingly, you discover that they have taken their knowledge with them, leaving a knowledge vacuum of stunning proportions that their successors are struggling to fill" (Beazley et al., 2002).

Conclusion

This article has raised a number of questions about knowledge management in PNA. These questions are related to the level of awareness of KM based on the status of KM processes, the impacts of KM implementation on the development of organizational performance, and the obstacles that restrict the implementation of KM in PNA.

Although the findings revealed that the current level of awareness of KM in Palestine has partially improved, it is still suffering from significant shortcomings that include: KM does

not represent a priority for the administrative leadership; there is a clear variation in the level of awareness among different administrative levels.

Knowledge management is a set of interconnecting processes that affect the overall performance of the organization, including decision-making, problem-solving and countering challenges and so on. TPMs have made significant progress in knowledge storage and documentation, and there is still a clear shortcoming in terms of knowledge dissemination and knowledge application. In the absence of other forms of knowledge dissemination, the instructions and Circulars are prevailing.

Consequently, the improvement of knowledge management utilization in PNA institutions would have significant impacts in various areas: Provide accurate, clear and accessible information to the people; improve decision-making process by providing the necessary information that upgrade the level and quality of the decision; increase the level of transparency; and improve the abilities of ministries to communicate with donors and formulate evidence-based policies. However, the achievements are still humble and indecisive. The result pointed out that the training and workshop provide employees with knowledge and help them to improve their performance. Meanwhile, the TPMs are still unable to provide electronic-services, which have deprived them of an important tool for communication and interaction with the public.

The findings of the study showed that the main challenges of knowledge management in MOI and also in Palestine are Lack of appropriate understanding of the concept and role of knowledge management; lack of knowledge management training; Lack of adequate resources to implement knowledge management system; Lack of leadership supports, unavailability of human cadre specialized in KM, and Unsupportive organizational culture.

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