

THE ACQUISITION OF KNOWLEDGE IN PUBLIC ORGANIZATIONS: THE PERSPECTIVE OF EMPLOYEES

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Abstract

Background. The importance of learning in and by organizations has since long been recognized by academic and practitioner scientists for both business and public sector organizations. In particular in the last decades interest in organizational learning has been growing. There are important reasons for considering the acquisition of knowledge in public service organizations.

Research aims. The paper reviews the state of research evidence in the field. The main question of this study is how important it is for employees in public sector to acquire the knowledge and use their full potential in the workplace and whether these organizations create an environment for acquiring knowledge and using employees' potential.

Methods. The main source of empirical data is carried out by the authors of the study in public sector organizations.

Key findings. The study was conducted using a questionnaire survey. The research shows high expectations related to knowledge acquisition opportunities in the workplace and partial fulfilment of these expectations by the subject organizations.

Keywords: Learning organization, Knowledge, Individual learning, Training, Public sector

INTRODUCTION

The field of learning organizations (LO) has received attention in the academic and practitioner literature since the 1990s (Senge, 1990; Watkins & Marsick, 1993). Senge defined the LO as one “where people continuously expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together” (1990, p. 241). One of the most concise definition describes a LO as one “that learns continuously and transforms itself” (Watkins & Marsick, 1993). The main reason is the growth in the contribution of knowledge workers in the growth of the knowledge economy (Drucker, 1993; Jain & Moreno, 2015, p.15). Most of the recent studies demonstrate the relevance of knowledge management practices and show the impact that organizational learning has on some fields of organizational performance, job satisfaction, employee com-

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mitment and customers' satisfaction (Bontis et al., 2002; Chang & Lee, 2007; Rai, 2011). The researches show the usefulness of the concept of learning organization, especially in the public sector. There are some characteristics that indicate differences between the public and private sectors (Euske, 2003). First of all, public sector organizations focus on enactment of public policies whereas profit, revenues and growth are the organizing principles of the private sector. Second, the degree of executive control among the employees of these two sectors is different. Third, the economic efficiency of their operations is not a top priority for public organizations, the main aim public organizations is to provide services to the people. For these reasons, the goals in public organization are more difficult to measure (Amayah, 2013, p. 456). Therefore, knowledge management in a public organization is more challenging than in a private organization and has the potential to influence greatly and improve the processes in this sector (Edge, 2005, p. 45). However, the specific context of the public sector does not allow the implementation of tools and models from private companies without adaptation to the specific needs and requirements of this sector. Public sector practitioners must recognize that their work environment has a unique context in which their stakeholders and accountability differ from those of the private sector (Massaro et al., 2015).

This paper presents a literature-based survey which focuses on possibility of the acquisition of knowledge by employees. This study investigates the role of some factors to gain knowledge by employees in the public sector. The main question of the research was:

1. How important is to acquire the knowledge and use full potential in the workplace for employees in public sector, and
2. Whether these organizations create an environment for acquiring knowledge and using their employees' potential.

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND

Learning is a phenomenon that can be investigated at various levels and from different dimensions. Most researchers study the learning in organization as taking place at three levels – at the individual, team, and organization level. Peter Senge, who popularized the concept of the 'learning organization', provides a clear distinction between these three levels (1997). Individual learning is defined as a continuous cycle that involves a change in an individual's behaviour that is brought about by the on-going (Sessa & London, 2006). People learn in a cyclical fashion, passing between action and reflection, activity and response and organizations learn only through individuals who learn (Senge, 1990, p. 182-183). Knowledge is closely tied to the person who created it.

You cannot separate the knowledge from the knower. Consequently, firms should be able to manage the process of organizational learning effectively and to encourage employees to create, share and exploit knowledge. People management play a critical role in learning organization practices and among other factors, leaders have an important impact in developing human capital in organisations (Mayo, 2001).

Knowledge creation is a critical factor in an organization's success and should be managed (Dodgson, 2000, p. 37). Learning in organization should develop knowledge resources and capabilities to achieve sustainable competitive advantage (Njuguna, 2009). The crucial element of acquisition of knowledge at an individual level is the intention to use the knowledge. Employees have to comprehend the knowledge and decide to use it to make effective use of this source (Dixon, 2002). Knowledge is created by individual employees, but it is also created through social interaction and is embedded in the social structure of organisational members (Narasimha, 2000). Employees are motivated to learn in an organization for various reasons. Motivation to learn can be intrinsic or extrinsic. While, extrinsic motivation comes from our engaging in activities so as to attain a challenging target or goal, and intrinsic motivation comes from our engaging in activities because of job satisfaction (Porter et al., 2003). However, the distinction between intrinsic and extrinsic motivations to learn is not so simple. An organization has a great impact on the intrinsic motivations their employees. Many research studies have shown that an organization's culture did influence learning behaviors of individuals in the organization (Schein, 1996; Chang & Lee, 2007; Balthazard et al., 2006; Lai & Lee, 2007) and a positive learning climate reduces job stress, had a direct impact on job satisfaction and employee commitment (Mikkelsen et al., 2000).

However, the learning process of employees in an organization is quite complicated and can be done in many ways. One way organizations might effectively manage to their employees' learning and development is training. Trainings are perceived as an integral part of investments carried out by the organizations that see competent employees as the source of company goals' achievement. The aim of trainings is to provide an organization with employees who hold such skills and qualifications that are needed for its efficient functioning and effective performance of tasks and achievement of good results. Trainings cover a wide variety of activities and forms of skill improvement, raising knowledge and qualifications in diverse fields related to a work performed. Training employees is a prerequisite of further development, the need to keep pace with dynamic advance of technology and knowledge development, as well as the need to modify already held professional qualifications. Trainings are an essential element of edu-

cation; they enable individual employees to grow their potential and meet the needs changing at a workplace. They help to increase flexibility of employees, foster their integration with a company, improve communication and develop positive attitudes to work, company and customers, which results in creating value for a company. The growing importance of trainings at contemporary organizations is mainly related to the increased importance of qualifications and the need to acquire or raise them on a regular basis. Employee trainings may be conducted by a wide range of methods, which, in addition to building an employee's capital, are an alternative to recruitment of new employees, they prepare employees for job promotion and they are a motivational tool and support for professional development programmes. Nonetheless, employers hold different views on trainings, which is underlined by the fact that they are not convinced of their measurable impact on the improvement of work effects. The knowledge, skills and attitudes acquired during a training do not add any value to an organization until they are implemented at a workstation. It is estimated that only between 10 and 20 per cent of the information that is learned during training is applied in the workplace (Kirwan & Birchall, 2006). For an employer, the value of training should be primarily expressed in a positive change of employees' attitudes – greater efficiency, better work quality, better customer service, greater satisfaction, which will deliver specific benefits to a company as a consequence. The subject literature studies show that a company has a greater impact on implementing trainings' effects to an organization's environment than the skills of employees themselves (Yamnill & McLean, 2005). The activities taken by companies may give a workplace either a highly supportive character or the one that impedes using trainings' effects.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Sample

The survey was conducted in six large public organizations in Poland from Podlasie district over a period of three months, from November 2014 to January 2015. A senior executive from each organization helped to identify and distribute the survey to respondents. The final sample consisted of 74 employees. In total, 67 per cent of those completing the questionnaire and answering this question were female and 33 per cent were male. Two thirds of respondents have higher education and the other respondents have secondary education. Majority of the respondents (66%) includes middle aged people between 30-45 years; 16% are the people aged between 20-30 years, and 18% - aged over 45 years. People with many years of professional experience, i.e.

over 20 years, account for a significant number of the respondents (64%). The other respondents have shorter professional experience. All the respondents are employed under employment contracts for indefinite period of time.

Questionnaire Design

The research was conducted in the form of a questionnaire. Survey questionnaires consisted of 21 items about the factors of employees' satisfaction according to the existing literature. Some of items were related to the acquisition of knowledge and these ones are presented below. Therefore they do not cover all aspects of the problem of acquiring knowledge by employees, yet they only highlight some of its aspects. All items were rated on a five-point Likert scale ranging from 1 ("strongly disagree") to 5 ("strongly agree"). Respondents were asked about perception of support from the company in acquiring the knowledge and use of their potential.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

At the beginning of the research, the respondents were asked how important the sense of using their full potential (knowledge, skills and experience) is for them at a workplace. An employee who can pursue his/her goals at work and who is able to prove himself/herself might be more involved. Today, a workplace is not only a place for performing tasks and earning, but it is, first and foremost, the place of fulfilment and satisfaction. It affects favourably integration and identification of employees with their workplaces. Figure 1 reports the results of research.

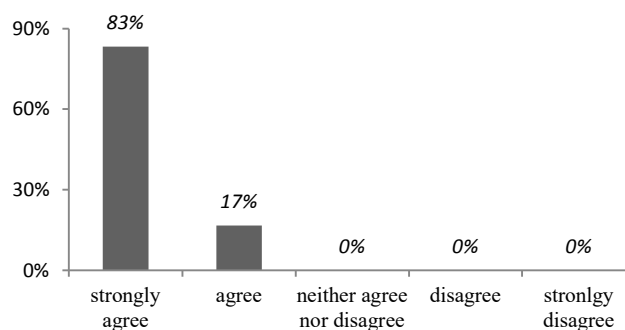


Figure 1. The Importance of Using Full Potential by Employees at a Workplace in Public Sector

Source: own study.

The results of the research show that the possibility to use their competencies at a workplace is very important for employees. It enables creation of work conditions and a work atmosphere that should provide the opportunity to prove oneself and enhance involvement. It is not easy, though, since employees become more aware of the role they play in an organization, and they also become more demanding. Nonetheless, instead of compulsion, organizations should care about making full use of employee potential by means of persuasion, agreement and increasing employees' interest in satisfying customers' needs (Penc, 2002, p.38), as it is a foundation of public organizations' activity. A number of recent researches shows a positive correlation between employee involvement and a company's success (Bakker at al., 2011; Crawford at al., 2010). Involved employees "go beyond" customers and superiors' expectations and they take actions that invoke positive surprise (Cook, 2008, p.13). An involved employee is "immersed" in his/her work, he/she experiences the state described as "flow" (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003) – the state of deep concentration on what he/she is doing. Experiencing this state should bring intrinsic satisfaction (Robertson at al., 2012, p.225). Therefore, some respondents were asked to assess how much potential they use at their workplaces. The Table 1 shows this factor's relevance as assessed by the respondents ("significance") and the degree of relevance at the analysed companies ("degree"). The presented results show substantially lower use of employee potential at their organizations, which reaches the average of 4.00. Other statistical parameters confirm underuse of employees' competencies at public organizations.

Table 1. Importance of Using Full Potential of Employees in Public Sector: Comparisons Between Perception Of Significance and Degree

Statistical measures	Significance	Degree
mean	4,83	4,00
median	5	4
dominant	5	4
max value	5	5
min value	4	3

Source: own study.

Subsequently, the respondents were asked about the possibilities and ways of acquiring knowledge at their organizations. The Figure 2 below compiles the respondents' expectations ("importance") and the level of their fulfilment at the analysed company ("degree").

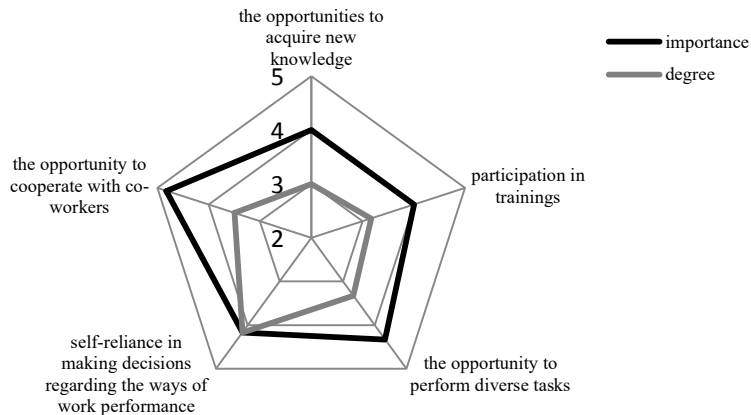


Figure 2. The Respondents' Expectations ("Importance") and the Level of Their Fulfilment at the Analysed Company ("Degree")

Source: own study.

As the research results show, according to public organizations' employees, the opportunities to acquire new knowledge are important (mean 4,00). As regards the ways of knowledge acquisition, the opportunity to cooperate with co-workers ranked high (mean 4,83). The opportunity to perform diverse tasks (mean 4,33), self-reliance in making decisions regarding the ways of work performance (mean 4,17) and participation in trainings reached a subsequent position (mean 4,00). Nevertheless, the research results show essential differences existing between employees' expectations with regard to the means of knowledge acquisition and the possibilities of their fulfilment at a workplace. Except for self-reliance in making decisions about the way of work performance, almost all factors were ranked lower in the respondents' opinions. The greatest discrepancies concern learning through cooperation within an organization, which may also signify a weak knowledge flow and no possibilities to share knowledge, which is the foundation of the concept of learning organizations.

CONCLUSIONS

The concept of learning organizations has gained a unique importance in the public sector organizations and its nature has changed significantly. The growing complexity of public affairs and the related need to search for more effective ways of managing them are the reasons. Therefore, it is important to become acquainted with sources and the ways of learning and determine how the acquired knowledge may improve quality of decision-making processes and contribute to more

effective resolution of public issues. The practices of a learning organization are used to eliminate its inefficiency, on one hand, and raise the administration capacity to fulfil its function in relation to social and market areas, on the other hand.

The major purpose of this study was to examine the possibilities and ways of acquiring knowledge at a workplace in public organizations. The research conducted among public institutions' employees shows high expectations related to knowledge acquisition opportunities at a workplace and partial fulfilment of these expectations by the subject organizations. It means that public organizations should undertake measures that aim to fulfil their employees' needs in the scope of learning in a better way, which will also contribute to more effective functioning of these organizations.

This study was conducted in a public sector organisation in an Polish work context; therefore, the ability to generalise the results is limited to other similar contexts. Future research could be conducted in other, dissimilar contexts in order to compare these results.

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NABYCIE WIEDZY W ORGANIZACJACH PUBLICZNYCH: PERSPEKTYWA PRACOWNIKÓW

Abstrakt

Tło badań. Znaczenie uczenia się w organizacji i przez organizację jest od dawna uznawane przez naukowców akademickich i praktyków biznesu i organizacji sektora publicznego. W szczególności w ciągu ostatnich dziesięcioleci zainteresowanie organizacyjnym uczeniem się rośnie. Istnieją ważne powody istotności zdobywania wiedzy w organizacji usług publicznych.

Cel badań. W artykule dokonano przeglądu stanu badań w tej dziedzinie. Głównymi pytaniami tego badania było: jak ważne jest dla pracowników w sektorze publicznym jest zdobywanie i wykorzystywanie wiedzy do tego, aby wykorzystać swój potencjał w miejscu pracy oraz czy te organizacje tworzą warunki do zdobywania wiedzy i wykorzystywania potencjału pracowników.

Metodyka. Głównym źródłem danych empirycznych były prowadzone przez autorów badania w organizacji sektora publicznego. Badanie przeprowadzono za pomocą badań ankietowych.

Kluczowe wnioski. Z badań wynika, że występują wysokie oczekiwania dotyczące możliwości pozyskiwania wiedzy w miejscu pracy i częściowe spełnienie tych oczekiwań przez badane organizacje.

Słowa kluczowe: organizacje uczące się, wiedza, indywidualne uczenie się, szkolenia, sektor publiczny