The Use of the Internet for Knowledge Sharing among Personnel at Ramkhamhaeng University, Thailand

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Abstract—Ramkhamhaeng University is now the largest public university in Thailand regarding the number of students. The university has offered both classroom-based and distance learning in order to provide services to a large number of students from registration to the graduation processes. Currently, the university is successful in delivering education to students around the world through the university website and satellite broadcasted RUTV (Ramkhamhaeng University Television). Students can opt for several modes, for example, e-learning, course on demand, e-books, webboards or satellite programs. Tests and exams are organized in 23 campuses throughout Thailand and 38 testing centers abroad. Various methods have been used to ensure that personnel can and are willing to offer appropriate services to students. The university implements training and development through its existing long distance infrastructure. Semi-structure interviews were conducted with administrators and personnel to investigate problems, obstructions and the implementation of the knowledge sharing process among personnel, particularly through the internet. Results reveal that most personnel shared knowledge through the internet at a certain extent. However, problems existed regarding personal attitudes against sharing, Information Technology, territorial behavior, ego, nepotism, the organization of website and interpersonal relationship.

Index Terms—Higher Education, Knowledge Management, Knowledge Sharing, Thailand.

I. INTRODUCTION

Organizations are open systems which need to respond to the environment. Operating without taking the changes in the environment into consideration would result in the organization lagging behind others. Higher education has to reflect and respond to various stakeholders in the environment. Capabilities must be developed in order to compete for survival. In this regards, Knowledge Management (KM) is an important tool for the development of such capabilities. Ramkhamhaeng University is a large university that has established many campuses around Thailand to offer teaching and learning as well as education service centers abroad to support long distance learning. The university is implementing the KM to develop its competitive advantages whereas an important element of KM is knowledge sharing. This research project aimed at investigating the problems and obstructions in the sharing of knowledge through the internet among personnel in campuses and education centers.

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

A. Sustained Competitive Advantage

The dynamic environment demands that organizations shape up, be competitive, adapt and change to respond to stakeholders’ needs and wants as well as competitors’ moves. Competitive advantages should be created \cite{1} in order to place organizations in an advantageous position. Unfortunately, in the current world of information, capabilities can be imitated easily especially those built from tangible resources \cite{2}. Once an organization’s advantage is replicated, it is not unique to that organization anymore. Furthermore, the changes in the environment can turn a once competitive advantage into a meaningless capability quickly if customers lose their interests in such capability or change their patterns of consumption. Hence, organizations have to continuously develop new capabilities in the right directions in order to sustain desirable positions in the market.

According to the resource-based perspective, human capital was suggested as one of the most important resources that can create competitive advantages to organizations \cite{3}. Human resource capabilities are predictors of sustainable competitive advantages \cite{4} and eventually lead to an organization’s performance. Reference \cite{5} contended that personnel’s knowledge can help organizations to attain their goals. Without knowledge, human resources cannot function properly. Knowledge leads to new ideas and creativities in the same manner as software that operates within the hardware, i.e., the physique. Individual’s knowledge combined together creates organizational knowledge and build competitive advantages which are difficult to replicate. Personnel’s knowledge is one of the most important tools that help to create sustainable competitive advantages. Reference \cite{6} suggested that competitive advantages that resulted from organizational knowledge were sustainable. In other
words, organizational knowledge was an important capability that organizations should possess.

B. Knowledge

Knowledge is created from data and information [7]. People accumulate data and information so they know and can make judgments in their courses of lives and work. Organizations set up systems and procedures for operations. Personnel need to learn and know those systems and procedures, i.e. gain knowledge as ref. [8] maintained that knowledge in organization is created through the gathering of information regarding work practices and procedures. Moreover, knowledge is created from the integration of experience, values, understanding of context and wisdom [9]. Eventually, personnel who possess appropriate information can perform better than those who do not [10].

Reference [11] categorized knowledge into tacit and explicit. Tacit knowledge refers to personal insights, experience, and intuitions [12]. In an organizational context, employees gain experience from their jobs and know how to perform those jobs effectively. Tacit knowledge is neither clearly organized nor spelled out. Each person’s tacit knowledge is derived from personal experience, values, perceptions, and other factors. Hence, it is very likely that each individual employee’s tacit knowledge would differ from others. Employees who possess tacit knowledge can create better individual results than those who have less, or who are not in possession of such knowledge. This kind of knowledge benefits organizations at the individual level. However, problem might occur in the organizations if employees’ knowledge does not align with each other or if those who possess knowledge quit.

Reference [13] and [14] suggested that tacit knowledge should be made explicit. Explicit knowledge is the knowledge that is systematically organized into proper language and wordings [15]. It may or may not be documented but it is in the form that can be transferred to other people. Hence, knowledge can be shared among employees and maintained within organizations. Employees could learn from the experience of others and know the appropriate ways in which to perform tasks faster than learning only from their own experience or start from zero all the time. Explicit knowledge helps to develop necessary skills and hence creates competitive edges for organizations. Moreover, it is an instrument that helps to sustain competitive advantages of the organizations. Once knowledge is in the ready-to-transfer form, it can be shared through several media such as the internet, memorandar, among others, while tacit knowledge can be shared only through face-to-face communication [16]. Reference [17] further contended that tacit knowledge can be made explicit and explicit can create tacit knowledge. Both types of knowledge complement each other and the exchange of both tacit and explicit knowledge among personnel help to create further knowledge for organizations. As [18] contended that organizations that can turn tacit into explicit knowledge would be able to create competitive advantages that are sustainable.

Individuals learn from experimenting, through their own as well as others’ experiences [19]. Knowledge can start as a piece of explicit knowledge as in the case of rules and regulations set by the management. The understanding of practices and procedures is classified as tacit knowledge. Those who perform the job would learn and understand the rules and then perform their duties accordingly, hence, tacit knowledge is created. Public or large organizations usually establish rules and regulations as tools for feed forward control [20]. These rules and regulations are explicit knowledge. However, employees might interpret rules and regulations differently due to their experiences and other factors. They might respond to customers, more or less, differently even when the same rule applies because of the differences in the interpretations of rules and regulations especially when they are written in legal or complex language. Veterans can interpret rules differently from each other while rookies may not understand the rules at all. Discussions with colleagues or supervisors are needed so people can understand rules and regulations and perform appropriately. Despite inflexible rules and regulations, the sharing of knowledge can improve actual work methods [21], [22].

C. Knowledge sharing

The KM process includes four related steps namely knowledge creation, storing and retrieval, distribution, and application [23]. Knowledge sharing plays an important role in facilitating the KM process. Knowledge can be created by obtaining and exchanging tacit and explicit knowledge among personnel. Knowledge sharing results in innovations and creative approaches to solving problems [24]. Sharing of information enables the transforming of tacit into explicit knowledge and vice versa [25], [26]. Moreover, sharing in the form of discussions and dialogues regarding the tasks leads to better understanding of the tasks. In this regard, the internet and social network are popular tools that can be used to create knowledge [27] because of their easy-to-use and user-friendly designs. Hence, personnel can attain better results. Furthermore, organizations should organize all types of knowledge into explicit form and store for further retrieval. Storing and retrieving of knowledge is not limited only to the application of information technology, other methods can be used as well. The ultimate purpose of storing and retrieval of knowledge is to share knowledge. In addition, the stored knowledge should be distributed to personnel who need to use it when they need it. Knowledge distribution, by its nature, is one part of the sharing of
knowledge. The promotion of information or knowledge sharing helps to circulate knowledge among individuals and teams. Eventually, the organization would be better off because of the widespread distribution of knowledge among personnel. Lastly, knowledge obtained should be applied to their jobs. Sharing of knowledge can help personnel to understand information and to apply knowledge obtained in their jobs appropriately.

Knowledge sharing occurs when personnel are willing to provide knowledge to others and more importantly, personnel are willing to ask or receive knowledge from colleagues [28]. People can gather into a virtual community to share knowledge, skills and insights even across organizations or geographical areas.

D. Barriers to knowledge sharing

Getting people to share insights and experience is an important criterion for KM [29]. Unfortunately, people do not automatically share information even though the system is in place [30]. Barriers to knowledge sharing were classified into 3 categories: individual, organizational and technology barriers [31]. Reference [32] argued that trust, culture and time are important impediments to knowledge sharing among employees. People might spend too much time on works and do not have time to share knowledge [33]. Reference [34] emphasized the importance of culture in enabling knowledge sharing. Reference [35] mentioned that attitude towards knowledge sharing would enhance sharing behaviors. Furthermore, the organization’s structure and system might obstruct the flow of information sharing [36]. IT system, as well as IT training, is an important tool for the process.

III. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

A. Ramkhamhaeng University’s long distance learning

Founded in 1971, Ramkhamhaeng University is now the largest public university in Thailand in term of enrollments. As of 2008, the university has produced 636,933 bachelor degree graduates [37]. In 2009, 402,845 students registered in 14 faculties and institutes [38]. The main campus is in Bangkok and there are 23 campuses around Thailand. In addition, Ramkhamhaeng is one of the few higher education institutions in Thailand that operates abroad. Thirty eight overseas academic service centers are coordinated in major cities around the world to provide accessibility to education for Thais who reside abroad or in remote locations as well as frequent travelers. Bachelor and graduate programs are offered through long distance learning. Students can take only some courses in the pre-degree track of study and later transfer into a degree program.

The registration is performed through several modes, i.e., at the university, post, registration website, automated telephone system and short message service (SMS). The university offers classroom-based and distance learning from the very beginning in order to accommodate large number of students. Long distance education, in the early years, was offered via radio and television broadcasts. Texts and cd/dvd were mailed to registered students. At the present time, students can learn from teaching videos broadcasted life on RUTV (Ramkhamhaeng University Television) through satellite broadcast and from the university’s website. These courses are scheduled to re-run regularly on both RUTV and website. Moreover, materials are uploaded on the website to offer cyber classrooms, courses on demand, e-learning, electronic database, audio-book, video-conference and e-books. Several webboards are also created for students’ discussions and virtual gathering [39].

B. Knowledge sharing at Ramkhamhaeng University

At the present time, the university is successful in delivering education to students around the world. With many centers scattered in various geographic locations, standard procedures are established for teaching and learning, examination and other operations. Furthermore, sharing of information among personnel regarding the procedures is encouraged in order to maintain equity and fair treatments to all. The Office of Knowledge Management has been established to promote knowledge among personnel. Throughout the years, various methods have been devised to ensure that personnel can and are willing to offer appropriate services to students. KM website and webboards have been created to induce sharing of information and knowledge among personnel. Apart from face-to-face training programs, the university also utilizes the existing long distance infrastructure for personnel training and development purposes. Personnel can either write an article and post on the university website or post their comments on one of several webboards available. Various departments and units have created Facebook accounts for personnel and students to share their insights. Webboard or Facebook discussions can help polish ideas and opinions. It also holds information for future retrieval.

IV. METHODOLOGY

This research project was designed as a qualitative research aimed to create an understanding regarding the problems and obstructions personnel responsible for long distance learning at Ramkhamhang University encounter in the knowledge sharing process. Semi-structure interviews were performed with one of the Vice Presidents (VP) responsible for provincial campuses and another VP responsible for overseas academic service centers. In addition, interviews were conducted with the director of the e-learning program,
2 staffs working in e-learning center office, 10 staffs working in selected provincial campuses and 5 in overseas centers. Face-to-face interviews were performed with interviewees both at the main campus and at the provincial campuses. Email and long distance phone interviews were performed with some interviewees in provincial campuses and overseas centers during the time of the data collection periods. Interviews with each administrator took about 30-40 minutes. Interviews with staffs took about 25-40 minutes. Information regarding the procedures that personnel employ for sharing information and knowledge as well as problems and obstructions were gathered. Data obtained were content analyzed and themes were elicited.

V. RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

The university’s knowledge sharing attempts were implemented in order to stimulate knowledge. This process had several problems and obstructions. Basically, regulations and procedures were established to guide all operations. These procedures were intended to be as clearly as possible. Personnel in campuses and educational centers came to the main campus for training regarding these standard operating procedures. Periodically, officers or administrators from the main campus would visit personnel in those campuses and centers to provide opportunities for staff to discuss and ask questions relating to the work procedures. However, personnel occasionally encountered various types of problems ranging from incomplete registration, unclear instructions on exam papers, to students arriving very late for exams. Personnel faced with such problems might email or make a phone call to the office to ask personnel in the main campus for direction. Sometimes, they had to make personal judgment. After solving the problems, such decision would be collected as personal inventory, i.e. tacit knowledge.

One of the major problems that most interviewers mentioned was that some personnel lacked computer literacy. Some senior personnel did not possess the skill to use the internet and did not want to learn. Three senior personnel admitted that their eyesight was bad and reading from computer monitors irritated their eyes. A few personnel had negative attitude towards technology and found it difficult to understand. Hence they did not like to use the computer and did not bother to learn. For these personnel, when they came across problems that they could not solve, they preferred other options, i.e. long distance call, to ask those in the main campus’ office. They might as well depend on their subordinates or colleagues to email. Most recognized the webboard’s capability and usefulness but thought it was too difficult and did not want to learn. For those who did not use the computer or the internet, their tacit knowledge was unlikely to be shared in the broad arena. They might exchange or transfer some of their tacit knowledge only with those working close to them on the individual basis. There is a low probability that those who learned from them would convert such knowledge into explicit type to be shared on the webboard or posted on the webpages.

Some personnel claimed they did not have sufficient time to “play” the internet or post on the university’s webboards. Although they were computer literate, some viewed the sharing of knowledge as extra tasks not specified in their job descriptions. For example one personnel said “it (knowledge sharing) is not my duty, why should I bother to do it especially without getting any rewards?” In addition, some think they did not have enough time to follow the discussion threads on the webboard. They thought webboard was just for enjoyment and not work-related. Those who surf the internet would drop into the university website and webboard once in a while to look for information but some did not post many task-related contents.

Another interesting problem found was that some personnel who were experienced and knowledgeable did not want to ask or listen to others. This conform to reference [40]’s findings that Thais are egoistic. Some personnel who were territorial and refused the KM process by knowing more than others. This is a serious obstacle against knowledge sharing. This blocked the sharing process and limited further knowledge expansion. One senior staff mentioned that “I don’t want to argue with other people on the internet” and “I don’t want to lose face in the public.”

Some personnel did not want to share because they were territorial and wanted to keep some information from others. Their subordinates claimed that “she said I was not authorized and did not have to know about several matters.” This reflected a traditional managerial perspective to segregate and keep employees’ knowledge restricted to the jobs directly related to them [42]. Moreover, some interviewees suggested that some bosses were afraid that they would lose their significance and wanted to appear important by knowing more than others. This is a serious obstacle against knowledge sharing. This finding was consistent with reference [43] who found that some personnel were territorial and refused the KM process at Ramkhamhaeng main campus.

Some personnel intentionally withheld information and shared only among their inner-circle due to Thais’ collectivistnic nature [44] and brotherhood value orientation [45]. Knowing that information provided edges in performing tasks, they wanted those who they deemed their friends to perform better than others so they selectively share information with certain
personnel. Sharing on the webboard or the internet makes the knowledge public but they were reluctant to be on the public domain. Moreover, some said they did not care whether others or strangers they did not know would learn from their experience. This attitude is very detrimental to knowledge sharing process. Some did not intend to keep information from others but felt that their knowledge should be delivered only to those who asked for it. So they would share knowledge only among their colleagues who faced problems and asked on a face-to-face basis.

There was a lot of information on the university’s website and they were scattered all over the website. Some information sat under several layers of pages. Moreover, the university has many webboards and Facebook accounts, personnel might post in different webboard and could never find each other. Reference [46] reported that the organization of webboard would help to motivate the use of webboard. Personnel found it difficult to search for information they need and hence thought that their knowledge on the web would be inaccessible and not of much help to others. Nobody would care about their information. One personnel posited that “it would be a waste of their time to put my insights on the web, no one would see it.”

Personnel in campuses rarely knew people in other campuses. Even though some knew others, they did not have much personal relationship. This made them reluctant to discuss with each other. In Thai culture, striking a conversation with those you do not know is considered strange. People felt uncomfortable to post on the web and had little information on who would read and use their information. Sharing task information with a stranger is deemed insecure behavior.

Lastly, those who did not like to write or share opinion were not interested in posting on the website. They might read the posts but did not want to post themselves. There were a lot of “lurkers” on the web who read but did not share any information.

VI. CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Personnel in different geographical location have their own approaches to operations and solving of problems. Capabilities in performing tasks do not include only information regarding the work processes but also the ability to analyze the problems at hand. Personnel could accumulate the knowledge through colleagues, supervisors and own experiences gradually which lead to personal learning and knowledge. Knowledge, if organized properly, can help to enhance other personnel’s learning timeframe.

There were some problems regarding the attitudes towards knowledge sharing among personnel of the university. These attitudes restrict people’s participation on the webboard. Some personnel were willing to share their information but not on the internet or webboard. Sharing of knowledge on the internet needs some efforts. Such attitude made knowledge sharing unsustainable. Personnel would do it once in a while or when pressed by supervisors. In order to create a sustainable knowledge sharing process, common vision and better understanding regarding knowledge sharing should be created. Training courses should be provided in order to convince personnel so they would realize the significance of sharing knowledge on the internet - sharing is caring.

An important challenge is to convince personnel to participate and share their knowledge both formally and informally. All personnel learn certain detailed aspects of their jobs. The sharing of knowledge can upgrade the operations to higher standards and create shared vision. The university should make people’s perception of knowledge transfer a natural behavior, not a burden. Designing rewards to motivate people to share their knowledge could help. Interpersonal relationship should be enhanced among personnel throughout the country as in case of community colleges in Thailand where personnel in various colleges were close to each other and exchange knowledge [47].

Webboard moderators should be more active in collecting and presenting information to create an interest in the webboard. Moreover, proper organization of the webboard as well as the provision of interesting topics including personal life issues might help to generate interests in using the webboard [48].

The use of several media might help people to share knowledge [49] such as through email list, etc.

REFERENCES


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