Application of Knowledge Management Pillars in Enhancing Performance of Kenyan Universities

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Abstract

Data are simple, discrete facts and figures such as names, characteristics and amounts. Information is more complex, for it organizes data for a meaningful purpose. Data might be a table of circulation statistics, but once those statistics are arranged or organized in a meaningful way to describe trends in library use, they become information. According to Davenport and Prusak, **knowledge** is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experience and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of those who know. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents and repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms. While data and information are in a sense bound objects, knowledge is a process, a dynamic, or an ability to understand and to share understanding. There is need for institutions of higher learning to consider the creation of knowledge management (KM) departments which enhance the application of KM elements into the institutional processes. This paper endeavors to identify the need for application and integration of KM pillars for organizational success. Through non-probability sampling, the author observed issues relating to applicability of KM pillars in Kenyan universities, besides analyzing statements in journals, print and electronic documents on this subject. The discussions show the current KM status is still not exploited in Kenyan universities. The main aspects found include current proposals with regard to information and communication technology infrastructure, harnessing and preserving knowledge, knowledge and skills development in the context of KM. The author suggests ways of enhancing the efficiency and effectiveness of KM pillars in the performance of Kenyan universities.

Key Words: *Information, knowledge, knowledge management, pillars, leadership, organisation, technology, learning.*

Background Information

The emergence of the knowledge-based economy has highlighted the need for effective exploitation of knowledge, making knowledge management essential in organizations. Knowledge management (KM) is a systematic process of taking advantage of intellectual capital and knowledge assets for organizational success. It helps build the capacity of the organization by developing, organizing, retaining and utilizing human and knowledge resources which contribute directly to its survival and profitability. With the increased realization of the value of knowledge and the need to exploit it in day-to-day operations, both public and private sector organizations have embarked on KM initiatives. Many have created formal positions and formed new divisions or departments to look into ways and means to apply KM in their operations. This

has created a need for training of KM professionals capable of taking the lead in the development and implementation of KM initiatives within their institutions or organizations.

Knowledge Management in Higher Learning Institutions

By its nature, university environment is suitable for the application of knowledge management principles and methods (Mikulecky and Mikulecka, 1999). Universities usually possess modern information infrastructure, knowledge sharing with others is natural for lecturers, and the desire of students is to acquire knowledge from accessible sources as fast as possible. Universities have to live up to expectation of the global society. They must adopt and adapt good practices that emanate from ICT and globalization. Traditionally, the main functions of universities are to create and disseminate knowledge and these are done through their research and teaching activities as well as outreach programs. Metaxiotis and Psarras, (2003) outlines three major missions of universities: Teaching, research and service.

Institutions make references to the capturing of knowledge, the sharing of knowledge and the delivery of knowledge from faculty to students. Higher education institutions have significant opportunities to apply knowledge management practices to support every part of their mission, Kidwell et al (2001). Knowledge management should not strike higher education institutions as a radically new idea; rather it is a new spin on their raison d'être". As public, private, and for profit higher education institutions alike respond to the phenomenal growth of online courses, elearning, cyber colleges, and virtual universities, the need to adopt KM applies. It is with integration and application of KM that universities will increase student retention and graduation rates; retain a technology workforce in the face of severe employee shortages; expand new web based offerings; work to analyze the cost effective use of technology to meet more enrollment; transform existing transaction-based systems to provide information, not just data, for management; and compete in an environment where institutions cross state and national borders to meet student needs.

Pillars of Knowledge Management

Leadership

Leadership develops business and operational strategies to survive and position for success in today's dynamic environment. The strategies determine vision, and must align knowledge management with business tactics to drive the value of KM throughout the institution. Focus must be placed on building executive support and KM champions. A successful implementation of a knowledge management system requires a leader at or near the top of an organization who can provide strong and dedicated leadership needed for cultural change.

Organization

The value of knowledge creation and collaboration should be intertwined throughout an enterprise. Operational processes must align with the KM framework and strategy, including all performance metrics and objectives. While operational needs dictate organizational alignment, a

KM system must be designed to facilitate KM throughout the organization. Operational processes must be aligned with the new vision while redesigning the organization and identifying key levers of change, including roles and responsibilities. Introducing knowledge management requires organizational change, and KM inevitably acts as a catalyst to transform the organization's culture. The increasing value placed on highly capable people, rising job complexity and the universal availability of information on the Internet are fundamental changes contributing to the move by organizations to leverage KM solutions. In order to begin changing the organization, knowledge management must be integrated into business processes.

Technology

Technology enables and provides the entire infrastructure and tools to support KM within an institution or organization. While cultural and organizational changes are vital to achieving a KM strategy, lack of the proper tools and technology infrastructure can lead to failure. Any technical solution must add value to the process and achieve measurable improvements. Properly assessing and defining IT capabilities is essential, as is identifying and deploying best-of breed KM software and IT tools to match and align with the organization's requirements.

Learning

The best tools and processes alone will not achieve a KM strategy. Ultimately, people are responsible for using the tools and performing the operations. Creating organizational behavior that supports a KM strategy will continue long after the system is established. Organizational learning must be addressed with approaches such as increasing internal communications, promoting cross-functional teams and creating a learning community. Learning is an integral part of knowledge management. In this context, learning can be described as the acquisition of knowledge or a skill through study, experience or instruction. Organizations/institutions must recognize that people operate and communicate through learning that includes the social processes of collaborating, sharing knowledge and building on each other's ideas. Managers must recognize that knowledge resides in people, and knowledge creation occurs in the process of social interaction and learning.

It is evident that the need for knowledge management translates throughout the entire organization. It is not a separate function characterized by a separate KM department or a KM process; it must be embedded into all of the organization's business processes. Knowledge management is crucial to achieving permanent performance improvements and innovation. Efficient knowledge-intensive core processes and a fundamental architecture must be established to effectively initiate and implement KM. The four pillars clearly provide that necessary architecture.

Discussion

With rapid changing economic environment, the role of universities or higher education institutions as knowledge providers has been scrutinized and challenged by the various stakeholders, including the public. To answer this challenge, knowledge management ideas and

principles need to be employed by universities for the purpose of fundamental and applied research, teaching suitable curricular program, utilization of knowledge for management decision support to improve internal document management and exploitation to increase the level of knowledge dissemination, and utilization of knowledge for a qualitative change in the educational process. The introduction of KM methods and tools would enable the universities to share their knowledge, improve the level of teaching and research collaboration, and improve the working relationships among the staff and students (Mikulecky and Mikulecka, 1999) and other stakeholders. All these are possible if universities fully integrate and apply the knowledge management elements.

To successfully manage KM initiatives in universities, the management needs to consciously and explicitly manage the processes associated with the creation of their knowledge assets, and to recognize the value of their intellectual capital to their continuing role in society (Rowley, 2000). However, focusing on the technical side alone, such as increasing the level of computer literacy and providing adequate information and communication infrastructure will not ensure the success of the KM initiatives. The management needs to also overcome the more difficult problems related to social and cultural issues in organizational knowledge management.

The new business environment demands foresight, superior performance, innovation and adaptation, rather than the traditional emphasis on optimization. Effective and complete planning for an organization's knowledge management is critical. According to Marwick (2001), efficient and effective knowledge management typically requires an appropriate combination of organizational, social, and managerial initiatives along with the deployment of appropriate technology. Thus, the main objective of this article is to evaluate and emphasize the application of knowledge management pillars/elements towards enhancing the performance of Kenyan universities in delivering their core businesses.

Conclusion

Knowledge management is of great importance especially to Kenyan universities, since using management techniques and technologies in higher education is vital and if done effectively, it can lead to better decision-making capabilities, reduced "product" development cycle time for example, curriculum development and research, improved academic and administrative services, and reduced costs.

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