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Research Note

Strategic knowledge management failures in small professional service firms in China

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ABSTRACT

In this paper, we report and reflect on Knowledge Management (KM) projects conducted in two China-based, smaller-sized professional service firms. The authors acted as Action Researchers, assisting each firm extensively as it prepared for its implementation of an IT-based KMS. However, neither KMS implementation significantly improved knowledge transfer or work productivity. We analyze the project failures, noting the significance of specific strategic management deficiencies as well as inadequate employee involvement and incentives. The implications for the strategic management of knowledge and organizational change in China are considered.

1. Introduction

Knowledge is commonly regarded as an important organizational resource and its effective management is key to the success of organizations that wish to enhance employee productivity and reduce redundancies associated with recreating knowledge repeatedly (Ou, Davison, & Wong, 2016). Knowledge Management (KM) research focuses largely on the capture, retention, processing, and reuse of explicit knowledge (Gold, Malhotra, & Segars, 2001). Indeed, since knowledge is recognized as a driver of competitive advantage (Kogut & Zander, 1992), there is considerable interest in the application of IT as a facilitator of “collaboration among different units and individuals unconstrained by the boundaries of geography and time” (Lu, Leung, & Koch, 2005). Thus, it is not surprising that successes with formal knowledge management systems (KMS) in large, Western-based firms dominate the KM literature (Oshri, Fenema, & Kotlarsky, 2008; Von Krogh, 2012).

Given that organizations benefit from successfully implemented KM systems, it is not surprising that China, the world’s second largest economy, should also pay attention to this phenomenon. Indeed, the last decade has witnessed considerable interest in KM research in China. Unfortunately, most of this research has involved surveys of captive or convenience populations (Chow, Deng, & Ho, 2000; Ou et al., 2016). Intensive studies of projects where a KM initiative has failed are difficult to find in any location, with Olesen and Myers (1999), Storey and Barnett (2000) and Davison, Martinsons and Ou, (2013) being rare exceptions. This limits opportunities to learn from past

mistakes and for organizational leaders to avoid repeating the errors of others. KM studies in both smaller organizations and less developed settings are also rare (Atherton, 2003; Empson, 2001). This is unfortunate given the substantial economic importance of both small enterprises and emerging markets.

The knowledge gap that we identify relates to the absence of significant literature intensively investigating KM failures in the Chinese context. By reporting and reflecting on KM failures in two small professional services firms based in China and identifying lessons that can help organizations avoid KM failure in future, we aim to redress this deficiency. Our guiding research question is thus: Why do formal Knowledge Management initiatives in China fail?

Following this introduction, we review the KM literature, with a focus on failure factors and KM experiences in China. We then present the theories that guided our action research (AR) investigations in these two firms, summarize our findings and reflect on the failures. We conclude with suggestions for further research.

2. Literature review

Knowledge management (KM) is a crucial activity for organizations. It enables them to identify, promote and spread best practices while improving productivity and other key performance measures. Many organizations have initiated KMS projects, but implementing such systems is both resource intensive and risky (Oshri et al., 2008). KMS projects often fail to meet deadlines, budgets and/or performance expectations. They may be unsuccessful “even when they are reason-

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Table 1
Failure Factors for Knowledge Management Systems (adapted from Chua and Lam, 2005).

Category	Description
Technology	Deficiencies related to infrastructure, software applications and tools, and hardware equipment. Common problems include: poor connectivity, either to the KM system or between the sources and users of the knowledge; difficult to use applications, tools or equipment; and excessive costs to operate or maintain the system.
Culture	Deficiencies related to the softer aspects of individual or organizational behavior. Common problems include: political conflicts that impede the planning, design, implementation or operation of the system; reluctance or inability of organizational members and other stakeholders to share their knowledge; reluctance to rely on a formal KM system.
Content	Deficiencies related to the knowledge in the system. Common problems include: insufficient or fragmentary coverage; inadequate or inappropriate structure; lack of filtering or distillation of the knowledge to extract value from lengthy documents or general discussions; and a lack of relevance or currency in the knowledge.
Project Management	Deficiencies related to the planning, organization or control of a KM systems project. Common problems include: lack of user involvement; lack of technical or business expertise; inappropriate or inadequate allocation of resources; inability to manage conflicts; inadequate cost control; and poor relationships with consultants or other key stakeholders.
Strategic Management	Strategic management factors that can contribute to the failure of a KM system include: poor alignment of KM efforts with strategic goals; lack of a clear vision for KM; inadequate top management commitment and support for the KM system.

ably well resourced and there appears to be ample commitment from top management” (Storey & Barnett, 2000, p.155).

2.1. Knowledge management failure factors

Given the time, effort and financial resources that are expended on KMS projects, there is a need to understand why they often fail to meet expectations. Chua and Lam (2005) inductively analyzed five KM failures in large Western multinational enterprises (MNEs). They built upon an earlier classification of factors influencing KMS (Holsapple & Joshi, 2000) to identify four specific categories of failure factors: technology, culture, content and project management. These, together with a more general category, which we label as strategic management factors, are presented in Table 1, and briefly introduced here.

The technology category refers to infrastructure, software tools and hardware equipment. It includes issues of poor connectivity (such as bandwidth limitations); difficult usability; over-reliance on KM hardware; and excessive maintenance costs.

The culture category refers to the softer aspects of human and organizational behavior. It includes issues of politics, self-perception, leadership and motivation. For example, employees may be unable or unwilling to share their knowledge due to factors such as selfishness or self-interest (Lu et al., 2005).

The content category refers to the characteristics or properties of the knowledge itself. It includes issues of coverage (which can be insufficient or fragmentary), structure, usefulness (especially relevance or currency), and knowledge distillation (which is critical to extract value from lengthy documents and general discussions).

The project management category refers to the planning, organization and control of a KM project. It includes issues of: user involvement, technical and business expertise; cost control; and the management of relationships with consultants and other stakeholders.

The strategic management category of failure factors includes: poor alignment with strategic goals and priorities; unclear vision for KM in the organization; and the lack of top management support and commitment.

Chua and Lam (2005) were unable to identify a singular set of factors that were consistently responsible for KM failure in the five MNEs. Nevertheless, they concluded that: technology issues can be a major obstacle to KM success; cultural challenges can occur at three different levels: personal, group, and organizational; and content can contribute to KM failure if it is incomplete, outdated, irrelevant or poorly structured.

Chua and Lam (2005) found that key factors contributing to KMS success in large Western firms include: alignment of KM efforts with organizational goals; a clear vision for KM; top management commitment to and support for KM; and a culture that encourages knowledge

sharing. However, they admit that their multiple case analysis “has inevitably obscured the nuances found in individual KM projects” (Chua & Lam 2005, p.15). They recommend more intensive studies “to validate, refine or add to the overall completeness of the model” (Chua & Lam 2005, p.16) and suggest further research of KM in different organizational and social contexts. We have responded to their recommendation with AR of KM in China. The next section reviews the existing literature on KM in China.

2.2. Knowledge management in China

We undertook a thorough review of the literature across multiple disciplines using the following keywords: China; Chinese; knowledge management; knowledge sharing; knowledge exchange. Through this process; we identified 257 articles; over 200 published since 2008. Unfortunately; most lack academic substance. A careful screening for rigor reduced the total to 82. Of these; the most influential 26 articles are compared across multiple dimensions in Table A1 in Appendix A in order to illustrate the diversity of research on KM in China.

Many of the studies explicitly compare Chinese KM experiences with those in other, usually Western, cultures (e.g., Chang, Hsu, Shiau, & Tsai, 2015; Chow et al., 2000; Weir & Hutchings, 2005), document knowledge transfers to China (e.g., Li & Scullion, 2006; Hutchings & Michailova, 2004; Martinsons and Hempel, 1998) or identify factors that influence KM adoption in China (e.g., Lin & Huang, 2008; Lee, Wang, Lim, & Peng, 2009; Teo & Men, 2008; Wang, Noe, & Wang, 2014). More reflexively, Lu et al. (2005) adapt Western theory to compare the knowledge sharing practices of two Chinese managers. Similarly, Burrows, Drummond, and Martinsons, (2005) draw on distinctively Chinese cultural factors to not only describe and explain the prevailing KM approach in China, but also to contrast it with those prevailing in the U.S. and Japan. Meanwhile, case studies of Siemens (China) by Voelpel and Han (2005) and of two public relations firms by Davison et al. (2013) focus on KM arrangements in Chinese contexts.

Since the late 1990s, KM articles have also appeared in Chinese language business journals. They tend to prescribe how KM initiatives *should* be implemented in China (cf. Gao & Gu, 1998; Zhu, 2004). Few report on how KMS *has been* implemented in China, let alone *what really works* or *does not work* in Chinese contexts.

Chinese organizations increasingly recognize that effective KM is critical to innovation and competitiveness (Martinsons, 2005; Wang & Wang, 2012). Nevertheless, they are generally acknowledged to trail their Western counterparts with KMS (Burrows et al., 2005). No Chinese firm has ever won the annual Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise (MAKE) Award, although Lenovo was an Asian MAKE Award finalist (Teleos, 2016). KMS pioneers in China have commonly adapted Western models while relying on both technologies and professional

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