KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT FOR THE IMPROVEMENT OF SERVICE DELIVERY IN SOUTH AFRICA'S MUNICIPALITIES

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ABSTRACT

The problems with service delivery remain unresolved in almost all of South Africa's municipalities. It seems that the South African local government is struggling to fulfil its mandate of effective and efficient service delivery. Recipients of services generally perceive their delivery to be progressing at a snail's pace and not visible enough to the majority of the people who still live in abject poverty. The predominance of these societal perceptions gave rise to the so-called service delivery protests, some of which are violent, in South Africa in recent years. Apparently, governments across the world are facing unprecedented challenges (as well as opportunities) attendant on the emerging knowledge economy and society. As a result, governments are starting to adopt new management practices, such as Knowledge Management (KM) from the private business sector. KM is generally referred to as the way an organisation creates, retains and shares knowledge. In the era of the knowledge economy, KM plays a significant role in the health and competitiveness of many organisations. This paper argues that there is potential for KM to drastically improve service delivery in the public sector. Moreover, KM can enable local governments to deliver the best possible services, function effectively and operate in an environment characterised by transparency and accountability. Therefore this paper seeks to explain how knowledge sharing as a critical component of KM may lead to improved service delivery in Limpopo Province of South Africa.

INTRODUCTION

The 21st century has ushered in an information and knowledge revolution that is of the same magnitude as that of the industrial revolution in the 18th and 19th centuries (Okemwa & Smith, 2009:31). As a result of this revolution, governments are facing unprecedented challenges as well as opportunities brought by the emerging knowledge economy and the knowledge society, and are starting to adopt new management practices, such as Knowledge Management (KM) from business (Cong, Li-Hua & Stonehouse, 2007:250). According to Karemente, Aduwo, Mugejjera and Lubega (2009:39), KM is the process by which an organisation

generates wealth from its knowledge or intellectual capital. This paper argues that KM is among the most modern management concepts, having a significant impact on the success of businesses and organisations. Alshboul, Al-diabat, Abu-A, M'ra and Aldiabat (2012:18) define KM as the process of identifying and seeking the intellectual experiences and assets that individuals inside an organisation possess, and transferring and conveying them to an organisation through publications, or through the auxiliary systems for conveying knowledge, with a view to disseminating knowledge and improving performance.

From the definition, this paper deduces that for government departments and municipalities, an effective KM would encourage sharing of knowledge and information. As knowledge is shared among employees, departments and even with other organisations in an effort to devise best practices, service delivery is improved. It is for this reason that managing and sharing knowledge is the main focus of modern organisations because knowledge is considered to be the primary factor of production rather than capital and labour. In the public sector, knowledge sharing is as important as in government knowledge work because no single individual possesses the combination of knowledge, skills and authority to complete a procedure without the input of others (Riley, 2003:11). From the sharing of knowledge arise innovation, effectiveness, efficiency and growth of value. This means that knowledge means very little unless it is shared with other people (Botha, 2007:35).

THE STATE OF SERVICE DELIVERY IN SOUTH AFRICAN MUNICIPALITIES

The local sphere of government is currently faced with critical challenges and problems pertaining to effective and sustainable provision of basic services, administrative capacity and institutional performance to drive service delivery and effective implementation of government policies and programmes (Koma 2010:116). Netswera and Phago (2011:132) share the same sentiments by stating that municipalities are confronted with challenges in implementing their strategic plans in the form of the integrated development planning, of the changes in basic service delivery to benefit the poor majority. As a result, the demand for more efficient and effective delivery of services in South Africa has increased over recent years (Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010:1). These demands contributed significantly to the so-called service delivery protests and boycotts in South Africa, where residents have complained about poor services and, in some cases, the non-existence of service delivery (Netswera & Phago, 2011:132).

There are grounds for tracing service delivery protests to the apartheid era, and a strong case can be made for linking them to the discontent that was noted in surveys conducted in the late 1990s and to the social movements that emerged in

the years after 2000 (Alexander, 2010:25). Since 2004, South Africa has experienced a movement of local protests amounting to a rebellion of the poor. On the surface, the protests have been about service delivery and against uncaring, self-serving and corrupt leaders of municipalities. Booysen (2007) draws on national survey data and case studies conducted in five municipalities where service delivery protests had occurred in the two years preceding the March 2006 election. Booysen (2009:128-129) indicates that, while the "service delivery protests" continued to be "grassroots" actions, the triggers were increasingly responsibilities such as housing, land and jobs. This paper adds that while statistics for the "roll-out" of services often show significant improvements on the pre-1994 position, they tend to "gloss over the realities of uneven and insufficient delivery to the most needy in society". Atkinson's (2007) account largely confirms that of Booysen (2009), but provides some new emphases. She indicates that the problem is not merely with a lack of services, but with something not picked up in roll-out statistics: poor maintenance and management of those services (lack of repairs, problems with billing and other issues).

Otherwise both peaceful and violent protests were experienced in different municipalities in various provinces of South Africa. Some are known as they were in the media such as television, newspapers and radio stations. In most cases the protests were about poor services (roads, dirty water supply, and insufficient sports facilities were specifically mentioned), and pitiable local government (including nepotism, lack of transparency and indifferent, incompetent, and contemptuous officials). The Municipal IQ report dated 29 November 2009 mentions some of the protests that occurred between 2004 and 2007. For example, the Phomolong, Free State, protests took place between 4 February and mid-April 2005. Botes *et al.* (2007:17) describe the protesters as brandishing toilet buckets and banners, and armed with pipes and sticks, singing protest songs and blocking the streets. In the wake of this protest, people employed outside the area were prevented from going to work, and schools were closed for a month. Other major concerns included the continuation of the bucket system and complaints about housing delivery.

Research conducted by Yusof and Ismail (2009:1) identifies the low level of information and knowledge sharing among government agencies as the prime contributor to poor service delivery in the public sector. A study by Grant, (1996, cited in Chieh-Peng Lin 2007:457) found that government employees do not share their knowledge and experience as do their counterparts in the private sector. This is the reason why in South Africa service delivery is still an issue in almost all provinces (Mkhabela, Mafela & Harper, 2009:13) because South African local government is struggling to fulfil its mandate – effective and efficient service delivery (Mathoho, 2013:1). Recipients of services generally perceive service delivery as being at a snail's pace, not visible enough to the majority of the people who still live in abject poverty (Monyai 2007:33). A survey conducted by the US Department of State, (2008) revealed that millions of people in South Africa still live in areas that lack

basic shelter, clean drinking water, proper sanitation, electricity and transport that is safe and affordable.

The lack of public services or their poor delivery imposes severe limitations on the local development environment, thereby derailing the potential for Local Economic Development (LED) (Tsheola & Mokgokong, 2012:379). These authors argue that poor or inadequate service delivery for South Africa's impoverished communities makes it virtually impossible for communities to take control of their own development. As Tsheola and Mokgokong (2012:379) put it "a limiting local development environment implies that the local people would be unable to make use of the limited productive opportunities available and that they would not gain the capacity to resist threats such as hunger, crime, vulnerability and disease". It is based on the background above that this researcher views knowledge sharing as a critical management tool that, if adopted, may lead to improvement of service delivery**.**

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM) IN LOCAL MUNICIPALITIES

KM has become a significant management concept in organisations. The literature indicates that KM had been widely applied in the private sector. However, with the development of the knowledge economy, KM can also be applied in the public sector. Various authors advance reasons for the use of KM in the public sector:

KM can fit into the South African government's *Batho Pele* (people first) principles, because it can reduce the cost of operations and improve customer service.

The environment in which government operates is significantly more uncertain and competitive than it was in the past (Haricharan & Moollan, 2010:23).

As public programmes and services grow more complex and interdependent, knowledge and information sharing is essential across the boundaries of government agencies and levels of government (Zhang, Dawes & Sarkis, 2005:549).

Most public sector organisations now follow a business-like approach where the focal point of service provision is responding to citizen needs and providing integrated and comprehensive service delivery (Fowler & Pryke, 2003:258).

There are huge pressures on governments to modernise and transform into institutions capable of facilitating and driving development in a knowledge economy.

Dikotla (2014) reveals, on knowledge sharing as a means of improving municipal governance, that municipalities do not have formal functional knowledge management programmes. However the culture of knowledge sharing does exist

within individual municipalities but not across the municipalities. This means that municipalities that perform well do not share best practices with underperforming ones. The type of knowledge that is commonly shared within municipalities is ranked as educational, work and personal. The literature explains several barriers that can obstruct knowledge sharing activities in various organisations, departments and municipalities. In many instances there are existing organisational, political and technical factors that may posit serious barriers to the effectiveness of inter-organisational knowledge sharing. Riege (2005) and Ling *et al.* (2009) have classified knowledge sharing barriers into three broad categories.

Firstly the individual barriers refer to personal barriers such as lack of trust and motivation, lack of communication skills, lack of social networks, differences in culture, lack of time, lack of awareness of the benefit of knowledge sharing, lack of interaction, fear of not receiving recognition. Lack of trust and motivation has been widely highlighted in the literature as major barriers of knowledge sharing. For instance, people may not only be hesitant to share what they have, but they may be hesitant to use the knowledge of others. Differences in culture also negatively impact on knowledge sharing. This could be relevant in Limpopo Province where the government sector employs individuals from different ethnic groups. Due to the differences in their culture, they may find it impossible to share some of the knowledge possessed. For example, in Northern Sotho/Sepedi there is the expression "*kgomo ga e ntšhe boloko ka moka*". Loosely translated, it means that a person cannot and should not share his or her entire knowledge with others. Bock *et al.* (2005) suggest that individuals' knowledge sharing behaviours are influenced by motivational forces and organisational culture or climate. Most organisations have developed a culture of mistrust. Various reasons, such as political affiliation, play a role as a barrier in KM. For example, people do not feel free to share their views and insights about certain issues in their organisations with colleagues belonging to other political parties. Kankanhalli *et al.* (2005) show that people are often hesitant to share knowledge for fear of having their power decreased.

Misconceptions about knowledge sharing also act as barriers. The MBA research project by Khoza (2008) reveals that South African public sector workers, unlike private sector ones, do not have a clear appreciation of KM in service delivery. Furthermore, the study reveals that in most cases, senior officials and politicians do not even understand what KM means (Khoza, 2008:92). Moreover, the results that emerged from Khoza's (2008) study reveal that the South African public sector knowledge and understanding about the leveraging of KM for service delivery is poor, there is no KM culture in the public sector and there are only a few structures that drive KM for the service delivery in the public sector. Staff turnover also poses problems for KM in that vital organisational knowledge may be lost in the event of employees retiring or moving on to other positions(Gaffoor & Cloete, 2010:3).

Secondly, Gorry (2008) finds, on knowledge sharing in the public sector in the USA, that lack of institutional commitment (lack of leadership and top management

support) are the main barriers to knowledge sharing. Organisational barriers are barriers that originate from the organisation. Examples of such barriers are lack of rewards, lack of support from top management, ineffective Human Resource Management practices, weak organisational structures, inadequate infrastructure, a poor organisational culture, office politics, lack of KM strategies, lack of formal and informal avenues to share knowledge, competition between business units, and lack of training (Riege, 2005; Jain *et al.*, 2007; Ling *et al.*, 2009).

Lastly, knowledge sharing in government possesses unique challenges because government agencies have inadequate technology. Riege (2005) refers to lack of integration of IT systems/processes, lack of technical support, lack of maintenance of integrated IT systems, people's reluctance to use IT systems and lack of training for familiarisation of IT systems and processes as the main barriers in knowledge sharing. In most cases in the South African public sector and municipalities in particular, employees have limited or no access to technology. Municipalities create a great deal of knowledge that is stored in various systems but not optimally shared among the employees and municipalities in Limpopo Province. The knowledge that is available in municipalities' systems needs to be shared among the employees. However, Renzel (2002:1) points out that knowledge cannot be transferred like a package of materials and also that it is not used up when transferred but shared among the employees. The success of knowledge sharing in municipalities is largely dependent on Information Communication Technologies (ICTs). Although ICT infrastructure enables knowledge sharing, many of these municipalities do not have the relevant infrastructure to facilitate an effective and efficient means of knowledge sharing.

Another empirical study on knowledge sharing issues in the public sector was conducted by Liebowitz and Chen (2003). The study revealed the following as barriers to knowledge sharing are: poor organisation and management, lack of knowledge sharing culture, low motivation to share knowledge, bureaucratic structures, and a knowledge hoarding culture. Syed-Ikhsan and Rowland (2004) in their study on KM problems in the Malaysian public sector identified bureaucratic culture and structure, poor communication channels, and political interference as major barriers to knowledge sharing. The implementation of knowledge processes in an organisation can be very costly, and the effects and benefits of KM investment are hard to calculate and take a long time to visualise (Soliman & Spooner, 2000). Knowledge sharing in government possesses unique challenges because government agencies are typically hierarchical and bureaucratic organisations that make sharing of knowledge difficult (Sandhu, Jain & Ahmad, 2011:210).

Another barrier relates to the misconception that KM is simply the use of IT. Presently, the efforts of Limpopo municipalities towards knowledge sharing are confronted by a number of challenges. Among the challenges are knowledge hoarding, organisational culture and employees' attitudes towards knowledge sharing. As a result knowledge sharing in these municipalities remains a problem

that affects municipalities' ability to render quality basic services to Limpopo citizens.

KNOWLEDGE SHARING FRAMEWORK

Knowledge sharing is considered a core process of KM because it fosters the flow of knowledge among individuals (Shin, 2004:179). Knowledge sharing refers to a social interaction culture, involving the exchange of employee knowledge, experiences and skills through the whole department or organisation and the means by which an organisation obtains access to its own and other organisations' knowledge (Karemente, Aduwo, Mugejjera & Lubega, 2009:55). The primary objective of knowledge sharing is to facilitate an effective knowledge flow among organisational members (Tagliaventi, Bertolotti & Macrì, 2010). Van den Hooff and Van Weenen (2004) identify two dimensions of the knowledge sharing process, namely knowledge donating and knowledge collecting. Knowledge donating can be defined as the process of individuals communicating their personal intellectual capital to others, while knowledge collection can be defined as the process of consulting colleagues to encourage them to share their intellectual capital (Lin, 2007:318). Knowledge sharing may take place in two ways, for example, formal and informal. Formal sharing takes place through official channels such as meetings, discussions, e-mails, web-postings and memos, while informal sharing takes place inside or outside the office, for instance, during breaks and time out (Koh *et al.,* 2005). There are several ways of transferring knowledge. Initiatives discussed in the literature are communities of practice (CoPs), storytelling and intranets (Sandhu, Jain & Ahmad, 2011:210).

CoPs is one of the most significant means of fostering KM in the twenty-first century. Brown and Duguid (2001) define CoP as people bound by informal relationships who share common practices. When an employee collaborates with fellow employees to share their objectives, a common context for knowledge-sharing will then exist (Averweg, 2012:1). Members of CoP typically spend time helping each other solve problems. For example, CoPs members may identify a particular topic and share their ideas around it. In the context of this study knowledge sharing can be within a municipality or between two or more municipalities.

Storytelling has always been one of the most popular and effective ways of knowledge transfer (Botha, 2007:35). Storytelling could provide a useful tool for capturing and disseminating knowledge in organisations. For instance, a storytelling approach was used by the governing African National Congress (ANC) during the launch of its manifesto and its election campaign (ANC, 2013:1). The party used the "good story to tell" slogan to highlight and share its achievements in the past 20 years. Botha (2007:36) states that stories already exist as an integral part of defining what that organisation is, what it means to buy or get service from it and what it means to work for it.

Intranets are a powerful tool for communication and collaboration that present data and information and the means to create and share knowledge in one easily accessible place (Sayed, Jabeur & Aref, 2009:228; Averweg, 2012:1). For example, municipality's reports and documents, such as strategic plans, reports, policy and frequently asked questions and answers can be contained in an organisation's intranet and made available and easily accessible from a single point of access electronically. Lin (2007:316) and Alavi and Leidner (1999:20) support each other on the following KM framework for effective service delivery. The framework consists of process outcomes and organisational outcomes.

Table 1: Perceived benefits of existing KM

Process outcomes	Organisational outcomes
Communication: Enhanced communication, faster communication, more visible opinions and increased participation	**Financial:** Increased service, decreased cost and higher profitability
Efficiency: Reduced problem-solving time, shortening proposal times, faster results and delivery market, and greater overall efficiency	**Marketing:** Better services, customer focus, targeted and proactive marketing
	General: Accountability, continuity, consistency, improved project management

Source: Lin (2007:316); Alavi and Leidner (1999:20)

Knowledge sharing may occur at the individual and organisational levels. For individual employees, knowledge sharing is talking to colleagues to help them get something done better, more quickly, or more efficiently. Knowledge sharing among individuals could bring benefits of innovative ideas, enhanced personal capability, improved work efficiency, and better decision making (Fong & Chu, 2006). Kumaraswamy and Chitale (2012:309) also state that effective knowledge sharing enhances individual learning because new knowledge is created when one's knowledge is combined with the knowledge of others. Therefore one may argue that knowledge sharing provides a basis for organisational learning in municipalities.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND SERVICE DELIVERY IN MUNICIPALITIES

The provision of services as the basic right of citizens remains the core business of government, and it requires efficiency and effectiveness in order to satisfy citizens. Although certain services have improved, research findings reveal that

the improvement has been minimal in a number of municipalities that were and still are affected by service delivery protests (Mpehle 2012:221). The inability of government to have adequate, standard and quality services that community consultation needs, lead to violent protests that affect the lives of community members negatively. Against this background and the fact that the country is twenty years into democracy, and has a Constitution that upholds the right of citizens to receive quality public services and to protest when they are dissatisfied with the services they receive, knowledge sharing is the answer. Knowledge sharing is important to municipalities for various reasons. Dube and Ngulube (2012:69) indicate that knowledge sharing is critical to knowledge creation, organisational learning and performance achievement. For municipalities, knowledge sharing is capturing, organising, reusing, and transferring experience-based knowledge that resides within the municipality and making that knowledge available to others in the organisation.

A Community Law research report by Jain (2010) shows that community protests have been becoming more common, frequent and violent since 2007. These protests came as a result of lack of service delivery, corruption in general, lack of leadership, poor financial controls, corruption on allocation of houses, lack of proper water and sanitation, unavailability of land, unemployment, and lack of electricity. The municipalities need to take appropriate steps to address the pertinent issues raised by communities. Looking at the trend of lack of effective and efficient delivery of public services, one notices that there is lack of accountability, no continuity due to political infighting, and incomplete projects, while on the other side the same mistakes continue with the new personnel. The protests were also because communities had been waiting a long time while service delivery moved very slowly. Knowledge sharing between employees and within and across teams allows organisations to exploit and capitalise on knowledge-based resources. Lin (2007) has shown that knowledge sharing is positively related to reductions in production costs, faster completion of new product development projects, team performance, an organisation's innovation capabilities, and its performance. Reid (2003) points out that KM creates opportunities to maximise an organisation's ability to meet those needs and generates solutions and efficiencies that provide a business with a competitive advantage. Again it is the fundamental means through which employees can contribute to knowledge application, innovation, and ultimately the competitive advantage of the organisation (Jackson, Chuang, Harden, Jiang & Joseph, 2006). Through knowledge sharing, differently functioning departments/sections in municipalities are able to build a jointly held knowledge base, which enhances mutual understanding (Liu & Phillips, 2011) and improves coordination efficiency (Srivastava & Bartol, 2006). If knowledge sharing takes place, municipalities will know what went right and wrong in previous projects and if such experiences are shared, there will be better and improved ways to solve problems on a new project. Municipal officials will be able to access appropriate

knowledge resources from others, and then create new knowledge by combining existing knowledge with their knowledge.

According to Nonaka (1994), knowledge sharing leads to new knowledge creation because interactive dialogue often leads to the discovery of new relationships and collaboration often results in the formation of new ideas. Knowledge sharing leads to the dissemination of best practices among staff members and continuity even when other staff retires or is retrenched. High levels of knowledge integration allow people to better understand each other's work, explore the root causes of problems, question assumptions, and then develop novel solutions to problems that markedly improve on current practices (Lam, 2000).

Without knowledge sharing, people in organisations tend to remain fixed in silos, poorly knitted together, prone to duplication of work and repetition of mistakes, wastage of resources, forgetful of good ideas, and without harnessing the strengths (Gafoor & Cloete, 2010:1). Dube and Ngulube (2012:69) point out that knowledge residing with only select individuals deprives the organisation as a whole of effective and efficient work practices and limits new knowledge generation opportunities. The unwillingness to share knowledge causes fatalities for organisational survival and poor service delivery (Zhou, 2004:18). Kumaraswamy and Chitale (2012:309) point out that effective functioning of government rests on effective sharing and use of knowledge by public sector employees at various levels, central or local. Therefore possibilities are that the implementation of knowledge sharing activities in municipalities of Limpopo Province, may improve functionality and the quality of outputs, thus resulting in improved service delivery in the province.

CONCLUSION

This paper reveals that the challenge for local government in South Africa is to transform itself into an effective governance system that is able to respond to the current challenges of development and fast-track service delivery (Netswera & Phago, 2011:132). To achieve this, a new approach is required and such approach appears to be knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing is a critical component of knowledge management and has become an important strategy for enhancing creativity (Alavi & Leidner, 2001:107) and innovation in both the private and public sectors. Management of knowledge has to do with how organisations use information for decision making, planning and problem solving in their everyday lives. Therefore successful adoption of knowledge sharing in municipalities of the Limpopo Province of South Africa may lead to improvement of service delivery. It is thus imperative that government municipalities take cognisance of the KM strategies and systems to improve conditions of the public through effective and efficient delivery of public services.

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