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Enabling a Knowledge Creating Workplace: A research based case study in the Telecommunication Industry in Asia Pacific Region

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The Background and Purpose of the KM Effort in the Case

This case study research is based in the telecommunications division of Motorola in Asia Pacific Region. Telecom firms fall in the so called knowledge business category – such as engineering services and design, advanced electronics and telecommunication networks.

Knowledge businesses while emphasizing the process of innovation are also known to continuously create complex markets and environments. Motorola was an appropriate case study setting as it is not only in the knowledge business but is also a high technology oriented, multidivisional multinational operating in a dynamic business environment.

Organizational knowledge is perceived to be the driving variable for competitive advantage in the current era of globalization and technological change. The fundamental argument in this case study is that creating, organizing, and using knowledge assets are the essence of what firms do and it is their effectiveness in these activities, relative to the competition, that determines performance.

This case study adopts the model of knowledge creation anchored in the critical assumption that human knowledge is created and expanded through social interactions between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. While companies have made huge strides in the use of information technology and communications globally, there is a need to develop organizational forms that provide the social contexts in which collective knowledge sharing takes place among people.

The specific issues explored in the case study are

- In what ways does the organization structure enable a knowledge creating workplace?
- What are the structural facilitators and inhibitors of knowledge creation processes?

Techniques Used

The scope of the study primarily covered telecom projects and engineering support operations in India, China, Thailand, Indonesia, Hong Kong, Japan, Singapore and Australia.

Information was gathered through independent networking and coordination across the project offices in the region. Appreciative Inquiry and Critical Incident techniques were applied in the 65 face-to-face one-on-one interviews with managers and team members associated with the projects. Additionally relevant company documents were examined and work practices were observed over a 12 month period.

The data was analyzed using the computer aided analytical tool Nvivo. This ensured rigor in data coding, developing concept maps, rich pictures and mapping knowledge value networks to arrive at analytical conclusions.

Lessons Learned

Identification of structural enablers and inhibitors of knowledge creation provides insights on structural elements that adopt collaborative approaches for creating knowledge across project and country boundaries.

- Many different structural forms can be used to advantage within the same organization. The co-existence of various structural characteristics contributes to creating a workplace unrestrained by geographic and organizational boundaries, thus facilitating collaboration and flexibility of knowledge resources.

- The key structural features identified as enabling a knowledge creating workplace are Distributed Authority, Circular Structures, Relational Networks, Multi point Resource Coordination, Role Ambiguity and Symbiotic Teams. These elements promote the social contexts for knowledge interactions to take place.
- The collaborative structural contexts enable interactions between individuals and groups promoting discussions and dialogues, and increased knowledge sharing. Autonomy in transfer of resources between projects in the region develops diversity in the regional talent pool, creating a regional caucus of knowledge resources.

Impact and Benefits

- Structural flexibility provides the enabling contexts for creating and replicating new knowledge for performance benefits.
- The regional collaboration of skills and expertise provided projects with access to appropriate knowledge to take informed actions.
- The fluidity of resources stimulated internalization of knowledge in project routines.
- Project level problems were resolved on site by pooling variety of perspectives.
- On time problem resolution and completion of projects were reflected in the positive customer satisfaction results and improved operating margins.
- Overall, a knowledge creating workplace enabled the company to strengthen its knowledge capability to effectively respond to organizational and customer expectations.

Insights and lessons learned from case study discussions

1. Knowledge Creation framework consisting of the four phases is useful for enabling knowledge sharing in the workplace
2. Knowledge creation cycle takes place in four phases between people - one on one, within teams, sharing across the organization through the communication and KM systems and finally accessing and using the organizational knowledge for performance benefits
3. The workplace can support knowledge sharing by creating favourable conditions for knowledge creating processes
4. In the absence of a KM favourable culture and structure, it is difficult to sustain KM initiatives.
5. Organization structures can create conditions for knowledge creation through distributed authority, networking, collaborative processes, role overlaps, multi point resource coordination and reducing organisational boundaries
6. Authoritative and hierarchical structures not good for knowledge sharing
7. Design of any KM system has to take into context the organization culture and structure.
8. Mentorship could be a techniques used for tacit to tacit transfer of knowledge
9. Emphasized the importance of practical research in KM
10. Established model to instill KM discipline through people and process focus

For any enquires on discussions on “Enabling a Knowledge Creating Workplace” please contact Dr Grant at janaky@grantconnexions.com