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Research Associate Summary Report

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Hidden gold

Schools managing knowledge capital during periods
of change

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Introduction

The aim of this study was to explore the ways in which schools manage knowledge capital during periods of change. If we define knowledge capital as the 'talent, skills, know-how, know-what and relationships' (Stewart, 2001) of an organisation, then both internal and external factors can obviously alter this capital and it is how schools deal with these changes that was the focus of this study.

Background

Since the mid-1990s interest has grown in the relationship between knowledge capital and the creation of wealth within commercial organisations. While educational organisations have a different philosophical foundation and purpose, focusing on the importance of knowledge capital in adding value to the educational organisation's performance is equally significant.

Developments in the school system mean that schools as organisations are experiencing more significant periods of internal and external change than ever before. Many of these changes have a particular impact on the turnover of staff, and especially on the issue of leadership continuity and succession planning. Therefore it is vital that effective ways of understanding and addressing the implications of these changes are identified.

Understanding knowledge

In looking at the role of teachers in the knowledge society, Hargreaves (1998) draws upon the Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995) model of knowledge creation to offer useful definitions of explicit knowledge and tacit knowledge. This has particular relevance for school leaders. Some of the professional knowledge of school leaders is explicit: it is easily talked about or written down. For example, an existing curriculum model for a school can be seen in the form of a spreadsheet, with teacher names, number of periods and year group weightings allocated accordingly. Each part of this model can be explained in terms of personnel or curricula development or cost or the historical focus of the school. However, if that model were drastically changed, you would need the implicit knowledge of a school leader to ensure the new model could be effectively delivered. For example, the leader would have to consider the appropriateness of the curriculum for each year group and class, who were the most effective teaching personnel, the organisation of parts of the curriculum in terms of rooms and times of the day and so on.

This professional knowledge can then be transferred through a series of links, based upon trust, respect and informal and formal networks, which enable knowledge to be shared through conversations and dialogue, recorded information and existing school systems. However, as many school leaders will have experienced, the mere existence of a meeting, document or database does not ensure that the professional knowledge has been effectively and accurately transferred.

Methodology

Face-to-face interviews were conducted with the headteacher or the senior leadership team at five schools. The interviews focused on exploring schools' approaches to managing knowledge capital during periods of change. Follow-up interviews were undertaken after two years, to further explore these issues.

Findings

The majority of the schools studied tended to approach the challenge of managing knowledge capital as an opportunity to confront existing orthodoxies, aim towards new ways of thinking and challenge received wisdom. At the same time, care was needed to ensure that the willingness to embrace new ideas did not result in the unnecessary loss of good practice and understanding.

Examples of creative strategies used by schools to promote knowledge capital management included:

- creating additional capacity, for instance by replacing an outstanding head of department with two part-time post-holders and delegating teaching tasks to associate staff; in another school the operational responsibilities of one senior leader were distributed amongst three highly capable, existing associate staff to increase capacity and reduce risk
- promoting greater ownership of knowledge management in general, for instance, by moving towards flatter non-hierarchical management structures
- promoting the culture of learning within the organisation by encouraging staff to embrace the organisational fear that comes with change, for instance one school used its high staff turnover as an opportunity to focus upon the creation of new knowledge that was brought in by new staff rather than simply bemoan the loss of existing knowledge
- accepting that, to some degree, knowledge would inevitably be lost when staff left, and that the introduction of formal mechanisms could reduce the potential impact of this attrition; for instance several schools used exit interviews to capture essential knowledge capital and set it within a specific context that the school could apply in its own setting
- recognising that technology has a major role to play in managing knowledge in the future but, at present, it may be insufficiently sophisticated to meet all schools' needs in this regard; for instance, one school used new technology to move its whole performance management system from paper to an electronic database and, in the process and through exploiting the technology's potential, began to capture far more knowledge than was previously possible

Recommendations

Based on these findings, there are four key implications for school leaders in the management of knowledge capital.

The nature of knowledge

Schools must develop their understanding of approaches to managing their knowledge and, in particular, managing tacit knowledge. Building capacity and developing appropriate structures to support this is critical, for instance by introducing systems for exit interviews and promoting more distributed approaches to leadership.

Communication is fundamental

Communication is critical to understanding the context of knowledge management, enabling it to be reinterpreted and making it applicable to new settings. While the schools that participated in the study were sceptical as to the extent to which new technologies represented a universal panacea to address communication, schools should nevertheless continue to explore the use of technology to capture knowledge. Indeed, between the first set of interviews and the follow-up two years later, a significant development in ICT enabled one school dramatically to improve how it captured knowledge.

The management of people

Schools must recognise the strengths and limitations of their current knowledge management structures. This requires an openness and honesty that will upset and disturb some staff by challenging the traditional way of doing things. This calls for careful and sensitive leadership if schools are to establish the culture of innovation, creativity and challenge needed to support this work.

Networking

Membership of networks offers schools real possibilities for sharing learning and good practice and several of the schools involved in this study were already rethinking existing approaches in the light of lessons learned from partner schools. However, while recognising these potential benefits, school leaders must also be aware that networking introduces new complexities to the management of knowledge as it moves from an intra- to an inter-organisation model. Leaders should therefore weigh up these potential costs and benefits in determining their approach to networking.

Acknowledgments

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