Knowledge Management in Culture
A Flight of Fancy, or a Stroke of Genius?

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Abstract: Knowledge management appears to have conquered many areas of business and administration, yet it is not normally associated with cultural institutions. Plausibly, this is owing to the specific nature of art and culture – which at first glance appears to be incompatible with knowledge management as such – and the influence which both of these phenomena exercise on the people who take part in shaping and administering them. The prospect of creating such a system in some area of the cultural sector appears to be rather innovative. The following paper describes the process of applying a knowledge management system within an existing cultural institution, and examines the effects of this undertaking.

1 INTRODUCTION

The realm of culture, which assigns great value to creativity, intuition, aesthetic sensations and irrational sources of knowledge, appears to be naturally immune to management processes and to codification strategies. Accordingly, to create within a cultural institution an independent post where the occupant should be responsible for gathering, analysing and sharing knowledge – something that in this particular sector is not only well guarded, but often quite elusive – would appear to be a rather daring act. Consequently, it should be deemed quite radical to empower knowledge management in this sector in line with project management, marketing and finances, while to give it a strategic and advisory role, granting it the power to enact changes within the institution and to advance suggestions as to the directions of development of its employees, ought to be deemed nothing short of revolutionary.

Thus the aim of this paper shall be to tell of the war that science, knowledge and experience wage with imagination, emotion and the intangible. In other words, it is an attempt to answer the question: what is knowledge management in the cultural sector? Is it an impractical system that vanquishes creativity and invention, or rather an imagination-friendly process that facilitates the exchange of knowledge?

Two examples shall be put forth, illustrating a narrow area of knowledge management activity within a Polish cultural institution, where the objective is to implement internal knowledge and hard outside knowledge, respectively.

2 KNOWLEDGE AND CULTURE

2.1 Daydreamers within a Labyrinth of Management Systems

In order that the ensuing argument may present itself with clarity, one should first attempt to portray the environment in which the knowledge management processes described further below have been carried out.

In the cultural sector, a typical manager is a well-educated, well-read intellectual, informed of global trends and cultural diversities, and able to distinguish between high art and pop culture, avant-garde and kitsch, fringe and mainstream. He is expected to have a solid background enabling him to parley of the meanders of culture in an international milieu of his counterparts, being highly knowledgeable in least one artistic domain. Oftentimes he is that which one may call an artistic soul. These are the types of managers sought by nearly all the cultural institutions in the world, which seldom take into account that the word *manager* describes someone who takes to *managing*, and should also be able to *run*, *plan*, *decide* and *foresee*;

moreover, that the word comprises many other equally mundane connotations. On the American market, which is famed for its intense competition and relative scarcity, it is absolutely necessary that the manager embody both these mega-traits. On the Polish market, upon which this paper is based, such a scenario often appears to be either inconceivable or virtually impossible.

Subjecting a cultural manager to popular psychological and competence tests (Belbin, MBTI) often reveals that he is more of a "seeder", or a creative generator of ideas, or better yet, a radical idealist with a disrupted decision process, and that owing to his intuition and instinct, he harbours an open mind and a broad imagination. Even if a cultural manager in Poland happens to be savvy in management, he is bound to be forced to work with artists and all sorts of daydreamers who are all but predisposed to work within systems and according to rules. This, more or less, is the terrain in which a cultural institution must carry out knowledge management.

Thus the resistance to knowledge management in the institution in question manifested itself for the first six to nine months in messages of both verbal and behavioural natures, summarised by expressions such as: "What's this for?", "I've no time for these boring processes", "My work depends on knowledge *sui generis*", and the classic evasion: "The truly important things are incommunicable anyway". Such an attitude, which nurtures a circulating notion of "impractical" and "unnecessary" knowledge, can effectively hamper the development of knowledge management and may constitute a significant impediment in the development of the institution or company.

One should care to add that the wilful transition of knowledge is further impeded by the fact that knowledge yields power, and as such constitutes an element of micropolitics within an organisation. Identifying obstacles, one should also remember the textbook mistakes in knowledge management, most notably the overabundance of available information – as this may paradoxically discourage analysis to the effect that decisions will start to be made without regard for any assembled documents.

2.2 Who Needs Knowledge in Culture?

The second issue that ought to be resolved at the start of these considerations is the definition of knowledge in a cultural institution. This is to ensure that knowledge is distinguished from terms such as archiving, databases and information gathering,

which, if used improperly, may become reminiscent of digital waste. In search for a frame of reference, the KM Department in question adopted the concept of Ikujiro Nonaka, which assumes that typical digital initiatives are limited to "static" information management, and describes the process of knowledge management as one that is linked to values, experiences, actions, and an overall context, thus presenting it as a dynamic process of gathering and creating knowledge (Nonaka and Reinmöller, 2001: 827-829). What will now be tested is whether this concept, when implemented in a cultural institution, shall remain a mere "flight of fancy", or whether it will prove to be dynamic and applicable.

2.3 How a Knowledge Management Strategy Might Present Itself within the Cultural Sector

Relying on Nonaka's concept, the institution in question created its own system of knowledge management, a scheme which has now been tested over a three year period. The goal was attained without appropriate benchmarks, which one can only wish to locate within the cultural sector. The fact should be viewed as an additional challenge, which, contrary to expectations, stimulated innovation in the creation of a system designed to suit the needs of a particular institution along with its quite sophisticated environment.

Taking into account all of the above, the strategic goals set by the KM Department in the institution are as follows: 1) to utilise knowledge in setting strategic goals and to use it to stimulate the institution's growth, 2) to increase work effectiveness, and 3) to set standards of organisation and communication. This paper will proceed to describe the innovative process of their implementation, drawing attention to the resistance that is characteristic of the aforementioned group of managers. For the process to work, it was considered necessary that the institution comply with the rule of five steps of knowledge management: 1) identifying sources of knowledge, 2) creating knowledge, 3) gathering knowledge, 4) sharing knowledge, 5) **implementing knowledge**. The fifth step was deemed an **irreplaceable indicator of achieving the goal to which the Department of Knowledge Management had been appointed**.

In order to convey the KM Department's effective and, for a cultural institution, innovative process, it is necessary to discuss the individual actions that were carried out en route to accomplishing the strategic goals.

3 CASE STUDIES & INTERNAL KNOWLEDGE

3.1 Getting Past the Psychological Barrier

For the purposes of analysing the experience gathered by project teams, the popular tool that is the CASE STUDY was selected. Such an analysis was to constitute part of the evaluation of a completed project. It was found that an exhaustive presentation of CS rules proved to be crucial for overcoming the resistance of managers in confronting the problems, errors and traps that had come up during a given project. In an environment where nearly every premiere or concert is a great success, it was crucial to get across the point that CS's seek a discussion of the effects, the incidents and the entire system regardless of the project's outcome and, indeed, of its reception. Another measure that proved to be helpful was a constant reassurance that the CS serves to draw meaningful conclusions from a project, and not to assess the team with the intention of either praising or condemning its manager. This allowed for the gradual dismantling of the psychological barrier, which obstructed the path to an honest analysis of the errors that were committed during the project. It should be noted that out of the 13 managers that were subjected to a CS by the KM Department over the course of three years, only 4 of them did not exhibit any problems when asked to analyse their own errors by the CS team. Occasionally, coaching methods serving to overcome psychological obstacles were put into use in the process. Naturally, in the case of managers who had difficulties analysing their mistakes, the risk of running an unsuccessful CS was greater. Therefore, in order for the process to be valid, it was imperative that more meetings be scheduled and that their time be extended, thus allowing for the manager to make progress, and for the subject to be handled appropriately.

3.2 The Innovation behind the Process

It was proposed that the CS method embrace a logical search for the sources of problems, followed by an identification of the problems' consequences and, finally, of the actions that were carried out in response. The method was to be applied in three areas: Analysis and Planning, Implementation, and Communication.

On multiple occasions, an effective CS required that meetings be scheduled between the project team and a services department such as Controlling (whose responsibility it is to oversee that projects are carried out in accordance with the Public Procurement Act and the Public Finances Act), Administration (responsible for supplying the project teams with appropriate IT equipment), or Communication (responsible for the projects' promotional campaigns).

3.3 The Results

Result 1. The KM Department considers it a special achievement that the CS has not only become a tool for extracting lessons from experiences (which is the basic aim of the CS), but has also become an irreplaceable link in the exchange of knowledge and experience, as well as a starting point for strategic guidance in the institution, pertaining to:

- changes to the structures of the various departments, and modifications in the scope of their responsibilities,
- changes in the system of project managing, which maximize the effects of work and simplify internal cooperation,
- suggestions regarding the directions and ways in which the institution and its employees should develop (e.g. carrying out creativity workshops).

Result 2. An invaluable effect of the employment of the CS is the ability to discriminate between the different types of innovation within a given project. The analysis of a number of CS's allowed the institution to draw up an internal definition of *innovation*, and led to the creation of an innovation index for future projects. Upon considering projects submitted for realisation, the board now determines whether they are innovative in the following areas: *process, context, aim*. In the past year, this procedure has increased the innovativeness of projects by 20%.

Result 3. It should be noted that the methods put forward by the KM Department have proven themselves effective in resolving many internal conflicts, and have rendered the CS a tool of internal audit for project management, leading to changes in teams' work methods.

Result 4. The KM department has created a new tool, ZOOM, which serves as an internal audit for entire departments and for permanent projects. By analysing an undertaking's current progress and its projected effects, the tool allows one to assess at any given moment whether goals are being fulfilled, and

to point out any errors as well as put forward appropriate solutions.

Result 5. Best practices and a checklist for project management have been developed for managers and project executers.

Result 6. Meetings between the project team and supporting teams – encounters which often begin in an aura of conflict due to one or both of the parties not meeting the expectations of the other during the project – serve not only to analyse the errors that have been committed, but render it possible for new and effective forms of communication to be devised. This allows for needs and expectations to be fulfilled and met in line with the project timetable.

Result 7. It ought to be mentioned that interactive presentations of CS's are unveiled to all of the institution's employees, regardless of their position or the degree of their involvement in the project. This has become a phenomenal means of internal communication, and has stimulated awareness regarding the institution's activity among employees who hold positions seemingly far removed from project management.

Result 8. Project partners and stakeholders are invited to participate in the CS's, which demonstrates openness and caters not only for effective collaboration, but also for effective evaluation.

Result 9. The CS yields the opportunity to analyse useful knowledge gathered during a project, including such knowledge as may be required for planning future projects, e.g. those taking place in the same geographic location.

Result 10. Over the course of three years, it is possible to see a shift in the way the institution's employees perceive knowledge management, and in the way project teams approach it. This has stimulated the development of competences such as analytical thinking, problem solving, group work, internal customer care, and maintaining course with regard to aims.

Result 11. The KM Department has developed its own tool for carrying out a CS, which is also used to effectively present the study to a wider audience: *problems - consequences - action taken - recommendations*.

4 BRAND VALUE ASSESSMENT & EXTERNAL KNOWLEDGE

4.1 The Desacralisation of Knowledge in Culture

As the competition on the culture market intensified, the institution in question began to search for new and more effective forms of presence, and was accordingly forced to adopt a modern take on culture.

We often find a nation's culture to be perceived as an indisputable or "untouchable" value. Meanwhile, by promoting it on foreign cultural soil, we must be ready to confront a **consumer** who is equipped with a system of values, experiences, expectations and valuations that is different from ours. In order that we may be triumphant in this confrontation, we are forced to "desacralise" that which to us is holy and indisputable, and to approach national heritage as one might approach a **product** that is subject to ruthless market forces.

4.2 The Conflict of Hard and Soft Knowledge

Experience in planning cultural projects had long supported the impression that a recognition of foreign markets through requited study visits, trend and market tracking, and knowledge exchange with partners, curators and institution directors was often enough of a foundation for the strategic promotion of Poland and for cultural exchange abroad. Unfortunately, this was not entirely the case, for such an approach did not allow one to assess the change in the final recipient's perception of Poland. Even in a scenario where concert halls and theatres were sold out for concerts and performances, it was not possible to gather any rational data that would indicate whether we had succeeded in transmitting a positive image of Poland, whether the stereotypes had been refuted, and who exactly it was whom we had managed to reach.

The institution thus found itself facing several dilemmas:

- should one go beyond applying only soft knowledge in project planning?
- should one attempt to make use of marketing knowledge?
- should one allow for the evaluation of culture by means of quantitative studies?

Mindful of the significance of culture not only for

the image of a nation but also for its economy, and seeing that in recent times numerous congresses and conventions have deemed culture to be an object of fierce market competition, only an affirmative answer to the above questions seemed appropriate.

The KM Department proposed that the expertise carried out for the purposes of project planning be complimented by a brand value assessment of Poland and Polish culture in foreign markets. The study's unique approach was based on a description of cultural products in classic brand marketing terms. Individual products and projects were to be considered by factoring in the target group, the competition, the promotion and the location, among others.

The brand value assessment was carried out in eight capitals across the world, and upon receipt of the results, the KM Department found itself facing the task of utilising this previously absent hard knowledge, expressed in the new language of brand marketing, to implement innovation in cultural project planning. The chief difficulty now was to find a means of employing this new, unfamiliar, and, according to some employees, redundant knowledge. Again, the implementation of knowledge became the foremost challenge in the institution's process of knowledge management.

Aware of the scale and magnitude of this transition, the KM Department invited the managers to a separate meeting, where the proposal of implementing the new knowledge was presented by explaining that hard knowledge had a status equal to other project planning tools. It was further suggested that knowledge be utilised in project programming by presenting the tangible advantages of a) the possibility to create new cultural and communicational products, b) attaining a negotiating position in talks with partners, c) aiming the appropriate products at particular target groups indicated in the assessment.

Using the new knowledge to select the products and target groups proved to be the greatest obstacle of the enterprise. A natural conflict emerged, associated with discarding old, tested methods in favour of new ones. Anxiety sprouted from doubts such as the following: what if the "hard" knowledge were to have a negative influence on the quality of the projects? Would it not deform or drown out those planning tools which had been considered reliable up to the present day?

4.3 Taming Hard Knowledge

The fear that the newly attained knowledge would

not only lie dormant, but be wrongly interpreted, proved to be another obstacle in the implementation of the new knowledge. A reiterating doubt on the part of project managers concerned the selection of the assessment group, as well as the answers that were attained in that group. A mini-lecture in sociology, statistics and the science behind the assessment proved to be necessary. The lecture was carried out so that the managers – people who rely on intuition rather than science in their everyday work – would accept the results of the assessment as adequate and usable. This example goes to show that the preparation of terrain for the utilisation of hard knowledge in a cultural institution should be planned with greater attention to detail, and a more precise estimate of the scale of transition should be accounted for. The conclusions that followed from this experience allowed for the institution to develop a list of steps that should be taken when "new and alien knowledge" is to be utilised:

- carry out an internal lobby within the institution and prepare the terrain through workshops or meetings with the board,
- allow managers to participate in the process of choosing a method of assessment, determining its scope, selecting a sample group and creating the actual survey,
- arrange for specialists to give mini-lectures, so that everyone may become familiar with the method of assessment,
- explain the tangible advantages of utilising knowledge in project programming and communication,
- explain the tangible advantages of having additional tools for evaluation,
- explain the tangible advantages of determining measurable aims,
- oversee the utilisation of hard knowledge by ensuring the presence of an expert in all meetings at the stage of defining and planning the project.

Difficulties with the above show that processes of knowledge management in a cultural institution must take into account the following:

- the type of environment,
- the need to include internal clients in the process of creating KM systems to ensure trust and understanding,
- the selection of the appropriate tools for knowledge sharing, with regard for psychological factors,
- establishing methods and rules of cooperation,
- the employee's right to committing errors.

5 CONCLUSIONS

Managing the circulation of knowledge within a cultural institution proved to be a task marked by far greater difficulty than that of presiding over knowledge reserves. The examples presented above shed light only on a narrow area of activity that aims to implement knowledge within a cultural institution – in the first case, own knowledge, and in the second, hard external knowledge.

In answering the question set in this paper, whether knowledge management in culture is a flight of fancy or a stroke of genius, I made an effort to show that in light of my experiences it is without question a stroke of genius, one that nevertheless requires a good deal of imagination – needed in order to adapt this exceptionally demanding "dreamers'" environment to the idea of moving about in earthly systems, and to acquire its permission to bring culture into a definable and manageable world. Why is it worth the effort?

Because in reality, nations compete with one another mainly through their cultures. It is in this sphere that socioeconomic growth, international competitiveness and civilisation progress get determined long-term. It is none other than mental and cultural competence that determine which nations win, and which nations lose.

Prof. Jan Szomburg, The Fifth Congress of Citizens, Warsaw 2010.

In the best case scenario, applying knowledge management within the cultural sector will help render the economy a part of culture, while in the least optimistic one, it will allow for a joyous marriage of knowledge and imagination.

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