

Knowledge Transfer and Non-Governmental Organizations in Cambodia

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In spite of the popularity of knowledge transfer amongst academicians and practitioners, little research has been done in relation to non-profit organizations (Lettieri, Borga, & Savildelli, 2004) and even less in non-governmental organizations (NGOs) in many developing countries (Syed-Ikhasan & Rowland, 2004). The NGOs in Cambodia act as a very important catalyst for the development of the country and they are largely operated by expatriates from western countries. This study explored how knowledge was transferred from expatriates to local staffs, from one department to another and from the top management to lower management. Two NGOs in Cambodia were selected as case studies of which in-depth interviews were conducted in March 2007 because both of them were founded more than 10 years and they could successfully convince the donors to release the fund by using the tacit and explicit knowledge to develop a good funding proposal. It revealed that knowledge transfer is a new concept and not yet seen as vital for the organizations. The current setback is that the staff turnover is disrupting the organizational operation principally because knowledge management was not yet established. This study provides an exploratory study of where sharing and/or transferring of knowledge lies within the operation of NGOs with avenues for further research suggested.

Keywords: knowledge transfer, non-governmental organizations, Cambodia knowledge transfer, non-governmental organizations in Cambodia

Almost three decades of civil war, Cambodia, one of the Association of South East Asian Nation (ASEAN) members, had its first election which was called “the Universal Suffrage” (United Nations [UN], 2003) in 1993 prepared by the United Nations Transitional Authority of Cambodia called “UNTAC”. UNTAC was one of the teams, assigned by UN in 1991 to come to Cambodia in order to help this country to prepare its election and to assure the peaceful nation (UN, 2003). The most important point after the arrival of UNTAC was the creation of huge amounts of the Non-Governmental Organizations (NGOs) operating to help on various areas considered as urgent human basic needs such as micro-finance, infrastructure development (e.g., building roads, the pathways in the

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small villages connected to the cities, construction of the schools in rural areas), providing free vocational trainings, helping orphanages and widow women with a lot of dependants such as children, handicap, etc. These NGOs were in needs to request for funding from donation countries such as France, Japan, Australia, China, and United States.

Importance of Knowledge Transfer in Organization

In order to gain the confidence from donor agencies and to be granted the funding, each NGO has to continue its ability to run the proposed development project(s) by using specific knowledge in developing better project proposal than those of other developing countries. Most expatriates were responsible for writing funding proposal and introducing the developing techniques to Cambodia because they had more knowledge (tacit¹ and explicit² knowledge) constituted by their experiences and their formal education which sometimes are difficult to share or transfer. The staff turnover rate amongst the expatriates was high because they came to work on a mission basis (for a short period of time in an average of two or three years). Thus, once they left for another mission, the NGOs would be affected because successors have to spend their first period of time to learn about the NGOs in Cambodia; investigate the organizational culture; search the way how to adjust the funding proposal into the context of Cambodia and so forth. This is very costly and time consuming. The case study of a knowledge-intensive company by Zolingen, Streumer, and Stooker (2001) argued that the staff turnover is the problem occurring when the employees with knowledge and experience, which in most cases are not recorded, leave the organization. Despite the importance of the knowledge transfer for the success and competitiveness of the organizations, none of researches have been conducted in the context of NGOs in Cambodia.

According to Kakabadse, Kouzmin, and Kakabadse (2001), Levine and Moreland (1999), and, Syed-Ikhasan and Rowland (2004), the organization recognizes that creation and transfer of knowledge is a critical factor for its success and competitiveness. To create and transfer both tacit and explicit knowledge is believed to be one of the best ways to reduce the time consuming and the cost due to the shortage of information. Knowledge Management (KM) has been recognized by both the academicians and practitioners about its great importance for the life of the organizations or companies (Abu-Rashed, Bertaux, & Okunoye, 2005; Davenport, De Long, & Beers, 1998; Fida, 2007; Foos, Schum, & Rothenberg, 2006; KPMG Consulting, 2000; Lettieri et al., 2004; Nonaka, 1991, 2000; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995, 2004; Senge, 1990, 2000; Sveiby, 1996; Wiig, 1999).

To date, Knowledge Management (KM) concept has not been used by the NGOs in Cambodia. This study is the first research into knowledge transfer within NGOs in the Cambodian context. It would prove valuable to underline the usefulness of KM and make NGOs recognize the importance of KM. This study focused on one of the elements of KM which is *Knowledge Transfer* (KT) as depicted

¹ Tacit knowledge is that which is very difficult to describe or express (Polanyi, 1966). In this case, it means that the proposal development skills are embedded in the individuals.

² Explicit knowledge is that which is easily written down or codified (Polanyi, 1966). In this case, it refers to the techniques of writing proposal which are archived into the documents (could be soft or hard copy).

earlier with special reference to proposal development within two NGOs in Cambodia: Hagar International Organization and Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP). This is principally because KT is important when the turnover rate in the organization is high and also when the organization uses knowledge as a core competency to challenge with the competitor (Evangelou & Karacpilidis, 2005; Foos et al., 2006; Liebowitz & Chen, 2003; Syed-Ikhsan & Rowland, 2004; Walter, Lechner, & Kellermanns, 2007; Zolingen et al., 2001).

Research Objectives and Research Questions

This research aims to explore the current practice of the knowledge transfer from expatriates to local staffs, from one department to another and from top management to lower management in NGOs in relation to the funding proposal writing, and makes the knowledge transfer concept acknowledged by professionals in NGOs management. Once the management has realized the importance of sharing and transferring among their staffs in various departments and different management levels, they could take into consideration the practice of knowledge transfer which will lead them to reduce time consuming and cost caused by the *New Comers* or the *Successors* (Levine et al., 1999). Two research questions were formulated to guide the study: (1) What types of knowledge are being used currently within the NGOs in Cambodia in order to compete for financial support from various donating countries? (2) How the knowledge has been transferred from the top management to the lower management as well as among the staffs themselves within an organization?

Method

This study is a mix of *exploratory* and *formal studies*. As the approach of this research is qualitative which is inductive in nature, conceptual framework was not set and hypotheses were not established to be tested. Literature reviews as well as in-depth interviews were used as data collection methods. The sampling design method was non-probability; the in-depth interviews were applied with conveniences, networking and snowballing method, which means that the interviewees were suggested from one sample to another sample who know the person involved. Two NGOs were selected for the study: (1) *Hagar International Organization*, a Swiss-based Christian development organization, founded in 1994 in Cambodia as local NGO helping Cambodia's disadvantaged women and children who are dealing with serious crises in their lives; (2) *Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)*, a local youth non-governmental organization initiated in 1992 and registered with the Ministry of the Interior in 1999, aiming to support the development of Cambodian civil society by providing non formal education and capacity strengthening opportunities .

The population of this study is people who were in charge of developing the funding proposal in two different organizations in March 2007: Hagar International Organization and YRDP. Three persons (2 from Hagar International Organization, Executive Director and Senior Manager; and an Executive

Director from YRDP) were purposely selected. The in-depth interviews, using the ethnography theory, were conducted in face to face by using three techniques: close-ended questions, open-ended questions, and role-playing. The content analysis¹ was used to diagnose the findings of the primary and secondary research.

Results

Knowledge Transfer Findings in Hagar International Organization

Knowledge transfer concept is not a very new concept for the academicians and the practitioners in the western world but it is still ignored by organizations in Cambodia. Surely, it is a really new concept for NGOs but what they are practicing follows the knowledge transfer path which means that knowledge sharing concept is embedded in the organizational culture of Hagar. In Hagar International Organization, the proposal developer wrote the proposal development guideline textbook and the internal guideline for Hagar. This is a way to capture the expert knowledge to store in the organization. Now, the individual tacit knowledge is transformed to be explicit and organizational knowledge in term of document based guidance. However, two of the three interviewees mentioned that “the proposal development is an art which the human being could not develop it by just reading the textbook or guideline since it requires special knowledge and skills”. Only some parts of proposal development knowledge such as format, language usage and structure, can be written down and transform into explicit knowledge. Other than the aforementioned parts, knowledge and skills to convince the donors are remaining individual asset or in other word, tacit knowledge, i.e. understanding the preference of the donors, donors’ expectation and so forth. Even though all the knowledge and skills are not totally written down, it still can help the organization to decrease disconnected workflow. That way then, the staff turnover would not be a main problem for Hagar any more because it is turned to be a tangible asset. The new successors can quickly start their work promptly by reading the guideline.

Furthermore, the study found one more way to transfer knowledge in Hagar. The programming manager provides the training of the proposal development to his supervisees and to the managers of the various projects. He delegated some sections in the proposal writing to his supervisees and his supervisees learned how to develop and where to find the information to add in proposal. Additionally, the project managers had to develop the conceptual paper for their own project. Everyone captured the knowledge from the trainings and the guideline books and they also transferred this knowledge to their supervisees since they did not develop the whole concept paper by themselves. As a result, the proposal development skills were widespread across the organization. Hagar is now becoming to a learning organization without knowing that it is now following the learning organization concept. Besides the knowledge transfer in proposal writing, knowledge sharing have also been seen every where in Hagar

¹ Content analysis was a standard methodology in the social sciences on the subject of communication content, it describes about the behavior of asking who, what, where and how questions within explicitly formulated systemic rules to limit the effects of analyst bias (Cooper & Schindler, 2006).

via the formal meeting such as staffs and managers meeting weekly, monthly staffs meeting, and informal meeting (i.e., coffee break time) where most of the staffs joint together to discuss about various topics and allows the staffs from other departments to communicate in a friendly environment and help each other to solve the problem. It has now becomes one of the cultural characteristics of Hagar. Despite the larger size of Hagar, the technology infrastructure allows a very smooth communication flow.

In sum, Hagar has already set up the knowledge management framework and also the learning organization's framework. And of course, knowledge transfer is now constantly practiced. It is commence sense to say that the knowledge sharing culture already exists in the organization.

Knowledge Transfer Findings in Youth Resource Development Program (YRDP)

In Youth Resource Development Program, the proposal development skills are also transferred from the executive director to employees. During the interview, the executive director mentioned that all of his staffs are capable of developing proposal because he used to train them how to do it but he did not write it down the way Hagar did due to the lack of time. He sometimes assigned his supervisees to write it. It depends on its importance in financial supports. This means that the tacit knowledge is still with the individual asset. Since it is not tangible and organizational assets, it is very risky for the organization when that person left the organizations bringing all the knowledge and skills with him. The new comers need to spend a lot of time to learn it by themselves again. Surprisingly, the interviewee argued that it is not a problem because the staff turnover rate is very low.

All the employees committed to work with the organization as much as possible. In terms of knowledge sharing, the director did not feel that it is a new concept because he considered that the policy of the organization. The policy states that all the staffs have to share whatever knowledge and skills acquired from wherever (such as seminar, workshop, meeting, training, study etc.) to other staffs who did not attend those events. This policy set up a sharing habit among the staffs. How do they share? For example, after attending a seminar, the participant has to write a report and set up meeting with other staffs in the same department to present what he/she has learn from the seminar and share the material received to others. So sharing knowledge is become one of the organizational culture. Everyone is willingly to share voluntarily even without the organizational policy.

Apart from the afore-mention that YRDP had many ways to transfer the knowledge and skills to all the employees in the organization such as through formal and informal meeting. They normally organized technical meeting every one or two weeks, in which all the employees had to participate and share the new knowledge acquired through the whole month; the executive committee meeting, CEO and other department directors (the chair person is selected alternatively) which a review and discussion about the quality of project activities every months; and the individual meeting can be done formally during the executive committee meeting, technical meeting and so forth or informally during

coffee break, lunch time, and in other occasions. However YRDP still has a lack of technology infrastructure such as internet, intranet, e-mail... because it does not have a big amount of financial support like the international NGOs. By reviewing to what the executive director mentioned, the study found that YRDP has created a learning organization as their core policy already but the framework does not exist.

In brief, both Hagar and YRDP have created a very good sharing and learning organization culture within their employees already but they just do not know how to manage and take benefits for this to promote their organizations to reach the excellences. It is true that the knowledge sharing culture exists but the organizations do not have a knowledge transfer structure, strategy, and framework. It is a kind of traditional habit of the employees embedded in the organization.

Discussion

As aforementioned problem, the fundamental challenge facing the non-governmental organizations in Cambodia is to compete with each others in order to obtain funding from the donors. A perfect proposal development is undeniably an advantage for fund raising because the proposal is an initial means of communication tools between the organization and the donor. The proposal development is originally the western concept which requires a certain level of understanding about the format, the language used, the information and data in the proposal (Foundation Center [FC], 2004). It should make an impact for the local people who are in charge of proposal development. However the study shows that this thinking is not true. It was found that local people were also capable of developing a good proposal because they acquired the knowledge from the expatriates who knew how to write the proposal effectively.

In this light, knowledge sharing is very important for the task of the organization. If the expatriates did not share their knowledge and skills to the successors and other employees, it is quite certain that the organization will fail to attract donors to grant the fund. Accordingly, knowledge transfer is very important for the organization where the staff turnover rate is high.

Another interesting finding is that both organizations are now following the path toward the learning organization. The concept of learning organization is not the same as organizational learning, first introduced by March and Simon (1958) in their early work on organizations. The process of organizational learning is defined as “increasing and organization’s capability to take effective action” (Kim, 1998). The learning organization is defined as an organization that embraces (either consciously or unconsciously) the principles of organizational learning and supports and environment where organizational learning can flourish. Schein (1997) identified a useful distinction made by Lundberg (1995) between organizational learning, by which we typically mean learning by individuals and groups in the organization, versus the learning organization by which we typically mean learning by the organization as a total system. In the cases of the organizations in Cambodia, the characteristics of

its organizational culture trace its path toward the learning organization. The organizations have policy to encourage all the staffs to pursue their studies by paying the tuition fees to attend the short course and long term trainings as well as the formal education such as Bachelor degree and Master degree for them. Once they have acquired new knowledge and studied materials, they have to share with others. Moreover, the organizations even selected some books to read and discussed among the staffs in the organizations. Some competitions to answer the questions related to the books chosen were frequently organized by Hagar. For YRDP, all the employees are learning the same things as a total system because they frequently organize the meeting to discuss and make presentation.

The study found that the non-governmental organizations (Hagar and YRDP) are preparing its system toward the learning organization because the knowledge and skills acquired by the staffs are not only possessed by the individual but by the whole organization.

Recommendations for Further Research

This study is subject to a number of limitations. First, the selection of only two non-governmental organizations as sample for the study is not appropriate because the information/data collected could not represent the NGOs in Cambodia as a whole. It is recommended to select larger the number of the sample next time.

Second, a study of learning organization could be an avenue for a future study because the data collection process showed that all the interviewees suggested that their organizations were now preparing itself toward the learning organization continuum.

Third, the content analysis should be replaced by other techniques because it is not appropriate with this type of study. Even though this technique is famous among the researchers who conduct the qualitative research, it is considered inappropriate to use in this study because this techniques require to identify the frequencies of most used keywords (KeyWord in Context: KWIC) by detecting the more important structures of its communication content (“Content Analysis,” 2007). Or in other word, it means that this techniques need to compare the keywords detected from the documents (secondary data) with the keywords mentioned by the interviewees (primary data). However, knowledge transfer is new concept and there is now written document where the keyword detection could not be done. It is time to look for a new research methodology.

Another future challenge research should be the synergy of the knowledge management with the learning organization research because these two concepts have a very close relationship (Jensen, 2005). Jansen (2005) mentions that “learning is the process in which changes in knowledge take place inside an individual”. The learning organization and the organizational learning are not the same concept (Senge, 1990; Schein, 1997). One of the interviewees was very pessimistic and mentioned that his organization is a learning organization but he could not proof this concept properly. The next study

should explore if NGOs in Cambodia are the learning organization type or the organizational learning (see in discussion above for the difference between organizational learning and learning organization).

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