

Developing Knowledge Management Implementation Frameworks: Implications From Translation Perspective

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management implementation frameworks in the literature tend to provide one-fit-all models, assuming homogeneous organizational contexts and passive recipient organizations. This is an important drawback, as knowledge management (KM), like any management concepts, evolves in implementation through custom adaptation and reconfiguration by local actors to become meaningful and suitable within specific organizational settings. This helps explain why a significant portion of KM initiatives fails despite considerable resources and commitment of the organizations. Therefore, it is necessary that directions be provided to help KM implementation frameworks take into consideration the evolution of KM in the organizations. We introduce translation perspective as an appropriate theoretical foundation to meet this need. This perspective argues that a management concept, when moving from one context to another, is implemented in a new way by local actors in accordance with local conditions. This process is called “translation”. Two real-life examples of KM implementation are provided to illustrate the essence of translation. Relying on translation perspective, we discuss important guiding principles for developing KM implementation frameworks. The discussion is made in light of the common features of the existing frameworks to show how translation perspective contributes to enhancing the KM literature.

Keywords: Translation Perspective; Knowledge Management; Implementation Framework

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) has become a term commonly used in today’s business environment. A significant number of organizations have invested in various KM programs in their efforts to enhance organizational performance. The preoccupation now is not whether organizations need KM or not, but rather how they can implement and manage it (Wong & Aspinwall, 2004). To this end, research has been devoted to developing KM implementation frameworks, which serve as guidance for organizations in implementing KM.

However, the extant research focuses on providing one-fit-all models, implying their universal application across organizations. We argue that although KM may be “the most universal management concept in history” (Takeuchi, 2001), it cannot be adopted and then implemented by user organizations as “off-the-shelf” solution. It rather evolves during the implementation process through custom adaptation and reconfiguration by local actors to become meaningful and suitable within specific organizational contexts (Robertson, Swan, & Newell, 1996). KM implementation frameworks in the literature have not been able to take into account this dynamics. This is because of their underlying assumptions that organizations are homogeneous (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010), and that the organizations adopting the concept are passive followers (Huczynski, 1993). We claim that this omission is an important drawback, which contributes to the failure of many KM programs despite significant efforts from the organizations (Storey & Barnett, 2000).

In this article, we present translation perspective as an appropriate theoretical foundation to fill this need. This theory has been largely mobilized in studies on the implementation of management concepts (Ansari, Fiss, &

Zajac, 2010), but remains unknown in the KM literature. According to translation perspective, a management concept, when moving from one context to another, is implemented in a new way by the local actors in accordance with the local conditions. This process is called “translation”. Relying on translation perspective, we will discuss important guiding principles for developing KM implementation frameworks. The discussion is made in light of the common features of the existing frameworks. This article, thereby, contributes to the literature by providing a new perspective that helps develop KM implementation.

The paper is organized as following. We will first review the existing research on KM implementation frameworks. The review will be then followed by a discussion of the assumptions currently underlying this literature, in which their drawbacks are pointed out. The third section will present the translation perspective. Examples of KM implementation in two branch of a same multinational are then provided to illustrate the translation perspective. In the final section, we will discuss the implications of the translation perspective, which future KM implementation frameworks should take into account. The paper will end with a conclusion.

LITERATURE REVIEW

The KM implementation frameworks presented in the literature can be grouped into three categories (Wong & Aspinwall, 2004). The first category is system-oriented. For example, Holsapple and Joshi (2002) proposed a threefold framework with three main building blocks, namely knowledge resources, KM activities and KM influences. Jarrar’s framework (2002) comprises four building blocks: set a strategic priority for KM, define and understand organizational knowledge, manage knowledge, knowledge environment. Each block contains a set of activities and practices to successfully implement KM. Similarly Gore and Gore (1999) prescribed a framework which includes the exploitation of existing explicit knowledge, the capturing of new explicit knowledge, and the creation of tacit knowledge and its conversion into organizational knowledge. The second category is process-oriented. Examples include the implementation frameworks of McCampbell et al. (1999) and Wiig (1999). They outlined two major sequential components of KM implementation: achieving an understanding of the knowledge management landscape, which means to obtain an appropriate perspective of the actual organizational situation, and performing knowledge management tasks, which means to translate knowledge managers’ understanding of the current state of affairs to knowledge management initiatives (including capturing, codifying, storing, and transferring knowledge). The third category develops frameworks that combine both system and step approaches (e.g. Mentzas, 2001; Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001). A variation of the third category is the framework of Shankar and Gupta (2005) that incorporates the knowledge processes and the system of the organization. In the framework, the components corresponding to the knowledge processes are knowledge creation, organization, dissemination, and use; the ones corresponding to the organizational system include individual and group, organization, customer interface and virtual enterprise.

Alternatively, the existing KM implementation frameworks can also be classified into four groups: classical, contingency, behavioral, and political (Dufour & Steane, 2007). The classical one is founded on the unitarist view of strategy, that formulation and implementation can be controlled from one centre of authority, and that they are two sequential phases of knowing and effecting strategy. The contingency one emphasizes that implementing KM is subject to the influence of the relationship between organization and its environment. The behavioral one incorporates individual and organizational sources of resistance in implementing KM. The political one is primarily concerned with the impact of patterns of power and influence on the implementation processes and outcomes. Although the contingency category of this typology does acknowledge that no one best way is evident in KM implementation, it does not go further to discuss in more details implications for developing KM implementation frameworks.

Other authors focus more on the social aspect of KM in their frameworks. For example, Wenger and Snyder (2000) developed principles for cultivating communities of practice. They include three main tasks: identifying potential communities of practice, providing supporting infrastructure, and assessing the value of the communities.

UNDERLYING ASSUMPTIONS OF THE LITERATURE: THE DRAWBACKS

The above frameworks can be criticized for assuming a population-level perspective and ignoring the contextual differences across organizations. Underlying this assumption are simplifying views about “the homogeneity of diffusing practices across time and space, treating them as essentially invariant rather than mutating” (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010). However, taking into account the possibility of multiple interpretations and remoulding across organizational settings in developing implementation frameworks is highly important. In fact, research has pointed out practice variation at the organizational level when a management concept is implemented (Cool, Dierickx, & Szulanski, 1997) and the issue of adaptation and internal variety when the concept winds its way through organizations (O’Mahoney, 2007).

Another criticism is related to the emphasis on the suppliers, gurus (Huczynski, 1993) or carriers (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002) of the frameworks. The relation between the “idea supplier” (the guru/consultant) and the “consumer” of frameworks (the organization) is often viewed as a one-way relation, where the organization is assumed to blindly put in action the frameworks as depicted (Hislop, 2002). However, Hislop (2002) and Benders and van Veen (2001) argued that organizations play a key role in implementing management ideas. KM implementation frameworks can be adjusted into new and different forms (Morris and Lancaster, 2005). They can be interpreted and implemented by the potential adopters in ways, which are appropriate to their contexts (Scarbrough & Swan, 2001). For example, Scarbrough (2002) claimed that the transformation of KM frameworks into management practices seems to have taken place primarily under the professional aegis of information system functions. KM has been taken advantage by information system specialists to legitimate and mobilize management support for organizational change programs that center on using information technology to capture and codify knowledge (Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

These assumptions of KM implementation frameworks represent an important drawback. They may help explain the failure of a significant proportion of KM initiatives, although the initiatives are reasonably well resourced and there appears to be ample commitment from top management (Storey & Barnett, 2000). They also help explain why few organizations are truly capable of leveraging and managing knowledge despite the acknowledged importance of KM (Wong & Aspinwall, 2004).

We argue that it is necessary that sound implementation frameworks be developed to guide organizations to ensure the success of their KM endeavors. The issue here is to provide directions on constructing KM implementation frameworks and to reveal what key elements should be included (Wong & Aspinwall, 2004). In the next section, we will present translation perspective, which is a suitable theoretical foundation to meet this need.

TRANSLATION PERSPECTIVE

Many scholars have argued that management concepts evolve during the implementation process in accordance specific organizational contexts through adaptation and reconfiguration (Benders & van Veen 2001; Robertson, Swan, & Newell, 1996; Hislop, 2002). An important perspective in this line of thinking is that of “translation” offered by Callon and Latour (Callon & Latour, 1991; Latour, 1986) and popularized by Czarniawska and Joerges (1996) and Czarniawska and Sevon (2005). The translation literature rejects the notion that organizations adopt “the same thing for the same reason” and instead focuses on how actors modify ideas to “fit their unique needs in time and space.” It argues that management ideas travel between apparently dissimilar contexts by being distilled into generalized abstract concepts (Strang & Meyer, 1993). When the abstract concepts reach the organizations, they are adopted and implemented through a translation process. In this process, they are reinterpreted and adapted in accordance with the new settings, they are edited, not simply recited (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996; Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002). Thus, a same concept may be implemented differently across organizations.

Translation process is a collective one involving a series of interpretation whereby meanings and interests are made equivalent, redefined or transformed by one or more actors. The success of these translations leads to the institutionalization of the new management ideas (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). It creates gradual assembly and expansion of a network of supporters – comprising both human and non-human (e.g. artifacts or technologies) actors – simultaneously establishing the fact and reshaping larger social structures.

In order to shed light on how translation happens in practice, we will present concrete examples of translation in KM implementation in the next section.

TRANSLATION IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IMPLEMENTATION: EXAMPLES

This section provides two real examples of KM implementation to illustrate the translation perspective. It discusses how two branches of a same multinational implement the KM concept differently. The information on the examples was obtained from a KM consulting project that we conducted with the company during four years. The identity of the company is kept anonymous for the purpose of confidentiality.

In the multinational, the adoption of KM was officially announced by 2000. In the first branch, a Portal was developed to archive knowledge documents. This branch groups its plants into four different regions throughout the world. The branch set up in each region one Technical Center to bring technical assistance to local plants. A Technical Know-How Center was also set up thirty years ago to benchmark performance across dispersed sites. When the KM was implemented, staff of the Technical Centers was assigned the responsibility of providing codified knowledge to the Portal. The Technical Know-How Center was given the responsibility of ensuring the exchange of knowledge via the Portal. It coordinated a network of five knowledge managers in the Technical Centers, responsible for motivating plants staff to use the Portal. The specific tasks of the Technical Know-How Center included obtaining knowledge documents from staff of the Technical Centers for the Portal and maintaining the Portal. The knowledge managers at the Technical Centers had to provide plants with training sessions on the Portal.

In the second branch, when KM was adopted, an intranet was also developed to store and share knowledge. In contrast with the first branch, where knowledge was provided by the Technical Centers and plant staff was receiver of knowledge, everybody in the second branch was at the same time provider and receiver of knowledge. All staff was encouraged to contribute to the intranet and consult it when needed. There was no staff, who held the status of knowledge providers. In each of the branch's twelve Business Units (BU), there was one knowledge manager, who was responsible for collecting knowledge documents for the intranet, for promoting knowledge sharing throughout the BU, and for stimulating local communities of practice and obtaining new knowledge from them. There was also a sponsor, who was usually the BU director, in charge of supporting the knowledge manager's work. At the corporate level, there was one knowledge manager, whose main responsibilities included coordinating the network of BU knowledge managers and communicating throughout the organization about KM's benefits.

As can be seen from these two examples, although an information system was implemented in both branches, the translations into KM practices were different. In the first branch, the number of staff devoted to KM was limited to a small number of knowledge managers. In the second branch, the knowledge managers not only took care of the information system but also spent time on communication activities to promote knowledge sharing and on stimulating communities of practice. Everybody was supposed to involved in KM.

IMPLICATIONS OF TRANSLATION PERSPECTIVE

Adopting a translation perspective in developing KM implementation frameworks leads to several implications. The table below summarizes the main points of our discussion. The first column lists the common features of extant KM implementation frameworks. The second column introduces the arguments of translation perspective regarding implementation of management concepts. The third column provides corresponding implications for developing KM implementation frameworks.

Table 1: Implications for Developing KM Implementation Frameworks from Translation Perspective

Common Features of Extant KM Implementation Frameworks	Translation Perspective	Implications for Developing KM Implementation Frameworks
All frameworks are one-fit-all	Implementation is contingent upon local organizational context	Incorporating guidelines to assess the context and to “fit” KM implementation with the organizational features
Implementation are imposed by top management	Implementation is dependent of social power relationship	Emphasizing the utmost importance of support from top management for implementation
Emphasis is placed on the choice of CKOs	Implementation involves local actors with personal characters	Careful choice of not only CKOs but also KM team
Factors influencing KM implementation are discussed separately from the implementation frameworks	Implementation is anchored in local context.	Including factors influencing KM implementation in the implementation frameworks
KM is implementation once for all	Implementation is ongoing	Incorporating blueprint in implementation frameworks
KM is implemented at one single organizational level	KM is implemented at multiple organizational levels	Suggesting appropriate organizational structure for KM implementation frameworks

First, existing implementation frameworks tend to provide one-fit-all models that assume to be applicable in any organization. However, implementation ought to be seen as an activity primarily taking place at the receiving end and dependent on the local conditions (Johnson & Hagstrom, 2005). Empirical studies show that recipient organizations do play an active role in adapting management concept implementation to suit organizational contingencies (Morris & Lancaster, 2005). Typically, certain particularistic elements are discarded and others added as they are translated into actions and the idea is re-formed (Czarniawaska & Joerges, 1996).

Therefore, KM implementation frameworks should place emphasis on assessing the organizational attributes, tasks and environment and on how to align KM implementation with features of the organizations. As mention previously, Dufour and Steane (2007) have discussed about the contingency approach in KM implementation. It is the engineering circumstances, or contextual factors such as environment or technology, or the type of knowledge, which defines the KM implementation process. The organization makes choices but in an appropriate manner, in line with a KM strategy and structure best adapted to the characteristics of these contexts, technology or prior knowledge. The contingency approach can be pushed further to become the “fit” perspective (Ansari, Fiss, & Zajac, 2010). In this perspective key internal administrative and organizational mechanisms are placed in line with an intended KM strategy (Dufour & Steane, 2007).

Second, the existing KM implementation frameworks are developed with the assumption that they are chosen and then imposed by the top management (Dufour & Steane, 2007). However, from translation perspective, the implementation process never takes place independently of social power relationships. Implementation is regarded as a battle between competing interpretations vying for supremacy (Johnson & Hagstrom, 2005). The actors in the implementation process are, consciously or unconsciously, involved in a power struggle. However, this does not mean that everyone has the same potential for exercising power. Some people have at their disposal resources – in the form of knowledge, status and contacts or in the form of an institutional base – which drastically alter the conditions for their participation in the implementation process (Czarniawska-Joerges & Joerges, 1996).

The implication is that the implementation frameworks should put at first and foremost the importance of top management support for KM implementation. In this way, the executors are empowered to implement KM in accordance with the organizational contingencies. For example, if management spends a significant amount of resources on either purchasing or developing and implementing such technology, employees could interpret this as a signal of management’s support for this ideal and act accordingly. If employees perceive that management is not very committed to implementing this new technology, then the initiative to promote a strong knowledge-sharing culture is not likely to be successful (Martinsons, 1993). The literature has also pointed out that the role of organizational leadership, especially that of the top managers (Farrell et al., 2005), is essential for the success of knowledge management implementation (Benby & Belbaly, 2005), as it is with other organizational initiatives that involve changes in processes and employee behavior. But the utmost importance of top management support to KM implementation has not been emphasized.

Third, for implementation to happen, there must be local actors, prepared to take these ideas as a starting point, transport them into their organizations and, once there, translate them into action (Czarniawska & Joerges, 1996). The extant literature has discussed primarily about appropriate profiles and expertise of CKOs (Chief Knowledge Officer).

From translation perspective, as there are local actors transforming KM concept into concrete working practices at the receiving end, the implementation process has a personal character (Johnson & Hagstrom, 2005). Latour puts this point clearly and eloquently: “[T]he spread in time and space of anything – claims, orders, artifacts, goods – is in the hands of people; each of these people may act in many different ways” (Latour, 1986, p. 267). Generally, the intangible nature of packaged ideas enables the carriers who circulate management knowledge to transform them to the extent that often it is difficult to disentangle the roles of those who are creating, mediating and using ideas (Sahlin-Andersson & Engwall, 2002).

The implication is that the choice of not only the CKOs but also of all staff involved in KM implementation is crucial, as they all have an influence on the success of KM implementation. They must have appropriate skills and social status to be capable of implementing KM. For example, they need to have well-rounded competences in multiple areas disciplines such as IT, inter-personal communication, training skills, and importantly they must have organizational reputation and credibility (Earl & Scott, 1999). Davenport et al. (1998) suggested that creating a core team with specialized skills in KM is critical, as they then have the skills to most effectively promote and drive KM throughout the organization.

Fourth, there have been quite a few studies discussing factors influencing KM implementation. But the discussion is separated from that of the implementation frameworks. Two distinguishable streams of research can be identified: KM implementation frameworks and factors influencing KM implementation. Translation perspective posits a different view. Implementation is always anchored in local contexts (Johnson & Hagstrom, 2005). In other words, it does not – cannot – lead to convergence, standardization or uniformity in any absolute sense. From translation perspective, the specific rather than the general is emphasized. The degree of translation made for KM implementation in a new setting depends on the specificities of the factors that influence KM. Thus, frameworks should take into account the factors that potentially influence KM implementation in local context. The two streams of research mentioned above should be tied together in providing guidance on KM implementation.

Common factors influencing KM implementation can be divided into three sets: strategic, IT-related, and organizational. In terms of strategic factors, KM must be closely aligned to business strategy (Lam & Chua, 2005), articulate an organization’s knowledge sharing objectives, so that they may be conveyed to all members of staff, not only senior managers and project members (Mason & Pauleen, 2003). In terms of IT-related factors, although a capable technology structure is far from KM itself, technology is vital in enabling and facilitating KM (Davenport et al., 1998). Davenport et al. (1998) claim that KM implementation have the best chance for success when the organization’s technology infrastructure is already in place, is robust, and is diversified enough to suit the differing needs of multiple audiences within the organization. Alavi and Leidner (2001) stated that a KM system is used only when it has high quality and useful. System quality is determined by attributes such as ease of use and effectiveness of search mechanism. In terms of organizational factors, organizational culture is often cited as one of the most difficult factors to achieve as well as one of the biggest barriers to KM (Conley & Zheng, 2009; De Long & Fahey, 2000). A wide range of cultural factors has been identified as conducive to different processes of KM, such as prioritization of knowledge, critical attitude toward existing knowledge, trust, care, openness, proactiveness, innovativeness, entrepreneurship, warmth, support, risk, reward, and so on (Zheng, 2005).

Fifth, the extant frameworks tend not to take into account the time dimension. It is assumed that once KM is implemented, the job is done. Translation perspective argues that translation is not a finite process, taking place once and for all; it should be seen as an open-ended, unfinished process (Johnson & Hagstrom, 2005). The model is one of a continuous process of adaptation (Sahlin-Andersson & Sevon, 2003). Where the contexts of the original concept and its recipient organization differ, reinterpretation through repackaging and simplification into tools and techniques over several cycles is necessary (Morris & Lancaster, 2005).

The implication for KM implementation frameworks is that they should incorporate blueprint (Remus & Schub, 2003) in the models to provide guideline across multiple time horizons. A blueprint describes processes on

different layers of abstraction and can be used for different tasks when implementing KM. It supports the implementation of KM in different process areas and shows ways to extend KM in the future. It sets a quality standard for KM implementation and allows a certain degree of flexibility to adapt different processes. A common application of blueprint in KM implication is to display possible strategic roadmaps to KM implementations. For example, it may give a detailed description of the different types of knowledge processes and their interrelationships and interfaces. It may also map instruments for KM activities and processes and outline system requirements for the design of KM systems.

Finally, in the existing frameworks, KM implementation is assumed to be at only one organizational level. The translation perspective argues that implementation occurs at multiple levels, across a range of firms and down to the level of application in workplace practices (Morris & Lancaster, 2005). The first level is translation at policy-maker level. The second level is translation from policy-maker to firm practices, which includes such activities as redefinition of roles, value and behavior, reorganization of internal structure, and improving internal communication. Translation is then executed inside the firm. This involves a third level of translation, in which translation is further made to create a set of working practices for execution.

The implication is that a suitable organizational structure does play a role in the success of KM implementation (Conley & Zheng, 2009). Implementation frameworks should provide guidance on choosing appropriate organizational structure for KM implementation. A structure for KM indicates an enduring configuration of tasks and activities and provides guidance in determining whom people interact with in conducting KM tasks. For example, new organizational positions and roles may be assigned and ranged from appointing a steering committee to the implementation of a separate organizational unit responsible for KM (Benbya & Belbaly, 2005). For Benbya and Belbaly (2005), key components of organizational structure for KM include KM champions responsible for the coordination of knowledge sharing and acquisition within the business units, and content experts or editors responsible for the quality and update of knowledge within the systems. A non-hierarchical, self-organizing organizational structure is the most effective for knowledge sharing.

CONCLUSION

In the literature, there have been a large number of frameworks developed to guide organizations in implementing KM. An important drawback of this line of research is to provide one-fit-all models, assuming that organizational contexts are homogeneous and that organizations are passive receivers of the models.

To address this research issue, we have proposed to rely on translation perspective in developing implementation frameworks for KM. According to this perspective, KM is interpreted and implemented differently across organizational contexts. This is because local actors always engage in a translation process when they implement KM. In this process, they have different interpretations about KM; they also have to adapt the implementation to the local contingencies, such as culture, resources, structure, and so forth.

From translation perspective, KM implementation frameworks should take into account the following implications:

- Incorporation of guidelines to assess organizational attributes and to “fit” KM implementation with the organizational features
- Emphasis on the utmost importance of support from top management
- Careful choice of not only CKOs but also KM team
- Incorporation of the contextual factors influencing KM implementation
- Inclusion of blueprint
- Suggestion of appropriate organizational structure

The first implication is to emphasize the needs for guidelines in assessing local contexts and aligning KM with local contingencies. It cautions scholars to not to develop one-fit-all models for KM implementation, a common shortcoming of the extant literature. The second implication is not a new insight because it has been mentioned. But it raises the point that the literature has omitted, which is the paramount importance of top

management support. The third implication goes further than the literature, which focuses on discussing choice of CKOs, to include the KM team in the discussion. The fourth implication is an extension of the literature by suggesting incorporating factors influencing KM into implementation frameworks. Taking into account the fifth implication, implementation frameworks include the time dimension. The ongoing nature of implementation, which has been neglected in the literature, is thereby addressed. The final implication puts forth the importance of proposing organizational structure. The purpose is to highlight that implementation occurs at multiple organizational levels, not at a single level like the literature has always assumed.

In short, by proposing translation perspective as theoretical foundation for the development of KM implementation frameworks, this article makes an important contribution to the literature. Relying on translation perspective, future KM implementation frameworks will be more practically relevant than the existing ones, as they take into consideration the evolution and adaptation of the KM upon new organizational conditions.

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