

ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: A PRACTICE-BASED PERSPECTIVE

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Abstract:

This paper explores how a practice-based perspective, as developed in Knowledge Management in recent times, might contribute to a more holistic understanding of the concept of active citizenship. Traditionally, views of active citizenship are steeped in Enlightenment ideas and values – that free-thinking individual citizens need ready access to high quality information in order to participate in democratic processes and that full participation may involve an oppositional stance. The present paper offers an alternative, critical perspective: one grounded in an understanding of the essentially social nature of people's knowledge practices. This paper adopts a practice-based perspective on Knowledge Management (KM) to develop a more complex understanding of knowledge sharing as a means of exemplifying the skills of active citizenship within the workplace. It draws on empirical findings in a corporate context to illustrate that people's decision making processes are inextricably linked to their discursive context: the existing knowledge, values, social norms and conventions which underpin their everyday knowledge practices

Keywords: Knowledge management, active citizenship, knowledge sharing, practice-based perspective, discourse analysis

1. INTRODUCTION

Governments, firms and other organisations on a global level are grappling with issues of declining engagement in democratic decision-making processes. As a result, we find a growing interest in re-engaging people as 'active citizens' in their political lives, workplaces, and local communities (European Commission 2003). Similarly, in the corporate sector, there have been attempts to address engagement issues through fostering knowledge sharing, often within the framework of the 'learning organisation'. This paper explores how recent developments in knowledge management theory and practice can contribute to a more rounded understanding of how and why citizens engage – or choose not to engage – with the processes of democratic governance.

The concept of 'active citizenship' is central to the western ideal of participatory, liberal democracy. Traditionally, views of active citizenship are steeped in Enlightenment ideas and values – that free-thinking individual citizens need ready access to high quality information in order to participate in democratic processes. The present paper offers an alternative, critical perspective: one grounded in an understanding of the essentially social nature of people's knowledge practices.

This paper adopts a practice-based perspective on Knowledge Management (KM) to develop a more complex understanding of knowledge sharing as a means of exemplifying the skills of active citizenship within the workplace. It draws on empirical findings in a corporate context to illustrate that people's decision making processes are inextricably linked to their discursive context: the existing knowledge, values, social norms and conventions which underpin their everyday knowledge practices.

2. THE PRACTICE-BASED PERSPECTIVE IN KM

2.1 Epistemological assumptions

Knowledge Management is a field in the process of transition where there is a growing recognition that a more sophisticated understanding of the nature of knowledge is needed for effective practice. Critics such as Wilson (2002), Snowden (2002) and Olsson (2007) have highlighted the epistemological naivety of early approaches to knowledge management:

...mainstream [knowledge management] theory and practice have adopted a Kantian epistemology in which knowledge is perceived as a thing, something absolute, awaiting discovery through scientific investigation. (Snowden, 2002, 101).

The practice-based perspective described here should be seen as an attempt to address the shortcomings of prevailing approaches through applying an alternative epistemological lens to understanding people's relationship with knowledge.

The turn to "practice" is an increasingly influential paradigm in the wider social sciences, with significant roots in the work of authors such as Wittgenstein, Bourdieu, Giddens, and Lyotard (Schatzki, Knorr-Cetina & von Savigny 2001). It is thus not surprising that knowledge management researchers show a growing appreciation of practice in their conceptual frameworks (Hislop 2009, p. 17).

The practice-based perspective sees an understanding of knowledge as either a cognitive entity or a corporate commodity as equally problematic (Gherardi 2000). This is because practice-based thinking is underpinned by an epistemology of duality, which sees knowledge as both shaping and being shaped by situated practice (Schultze & Stabell 2004, p. 554). Knowledge, or rather knowing, is understood as a collective situated activity that occurs within the framework of the tacit rules of broader epistemic communities (professional, organisational, social). What is considered as knowledge and 'good practice' is culturally and historically specific. Rather than being seen as 'true' in an objectivist sense, knowledge becomes intersubjectively valid through the legitimisation practices that govern particular social worlds.

2.2 Implications for KM

A practice-based perspective in KM directs our attention towards the working practices of communities and the ways in which these communities interact with other communities and networks within and outside the organisation. It provides a focus on facilitating rich social interactions so that practitioners can develop trust and insights into each other's tacitly held values and assumptions. This is particularly relevant at the boundaries of communities (e.g. IT and Sales; head office and local offices) where different tacit rules shape the beliefs and actions of its participants (Heizmann 2011, 2012).

The practice-based perspective is thus less concerned with managing individual knowledge and integrating it into a central organisational repository but suggests that organisations will benefit from the density and quality of interactions among their staff. Practices and boundaries of practice are seen as the spaces where learning, organising and innovating takes place (Brown & Duguid 1991).

Applications of the practice-based perspective in KM include the fostering of communities of practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002), the initiation of cross-communal knowledge sharing forums (Boland & Tenkasi 1995), the design of mentoring and coaching systems (Swart & Kinnie 2003), the empowerment of staff through participatory decision-making (Robertson & O'Malley Hammersley 2000), as well as an appreciation for less purposive activities such as small talk and storytelling (Boje 1995). The underlying belief is that information/knowledge practices and technologies should support and be a part of, rather than operate separately from, day-to-day practice (Orlikowski 2002).

3. ACTIVE CITIZENSHIP AND KM

Our view of active citizenship similarly is one which is practice-based. Here, we follow the approach of Onyx, Kenny and Brown, rather than that of Kymlicka. From a political perspective, Kymlicka argues that citizenship is more than a relationship of rights and responsibilities, it should be concerned with membership of a political community (Kymlicka and Norman 1994, p. 369). That is, people should not only be well informed, listening to the discussions of decision-makers, but they should be prepared to take part in those discussions, thereby increasing their own understanding of political processes and at the same time strengthening the decision-making processes (Kymlicka 2002). However, Onyx, Kenny and Brown (2012) argue for a practice-based notion of active citizenship. They found that from the perspective of people engaged in organizations in civil society in six countries, active citizenship involved being well-informed about local and global issues and having a commitment to making the world they lived in a better place. Their findings did not support a view that active citizenship was concerned with active involvement in the political process. Rather, the subjects in their study avoided this, preferring instead to take an associational approach to citizenship, similar to that identified by Walzer (1995). That is to say, they chose an approach based on working in community-based organisations and establishing collaborative links with government decision-makers, especially at the local level. This approach to active citizenship values collaboration and trust over conflict and opposition and places emphasis on the ability to use information in sustaining working relationships.

The approach to active citizenship to be found in the *EU Memorandum on Lifelong Learning* similarly is one which is practice-based. In this context, "Active citizenship focuses on whether and how people participate in all spheres of social and economic life, the chances and risks they face in trying to do so, and the extent to which they therefore feel that they belong to and have a fair say in the society in which they live."

From the perspective of the EU memorandum on lifelong learning, there is an assumption that contemporary society is a 'knowledge society' based on economic and social relations and up-to-date information and the skills to use it are essential. In this context, skills for using information include information and digital literacies, but they also include skills for leadership, decision-making and risk-taking. Thus for active citizenship to emerge, people must be supported in schools and in the workplace, with user-oriented learning programs making the most of information and communication technologies. They must also learn to pursue their own personal and professional development, and may need mentors and mediators to help them to take charge of their own work lives and community-based lives. Information-based self-help services which enable people to gain access to specific information which helps them to make decisions are deemed essential. Advice and counselling services run by skilled professionals should be available to bolster the information which people gather from their friends and family and other 'unofficial' sources. These advice and counselling services are likely to be part of the market rather than part of government.

In this paper, we draw together these practice-based approaches to active citizenship with a practice-based perspective on knowledge management within organisations.

4. EMPIRICAL ILLUSTRATION

A practice-based perspective provides insight into the social nature of people's knowledge practices and its implications for the collaborative relations among practitioners (Heizmann 2011, 2012). We argue that an appreciation of these social dynamics is necessary to understand how people develop the capacity for active citizenship through interactions in their everyday work life.

To illustrate this point we draw on the findings of an empirical study of a network of Human Resources (HR) practice in a corporate environment (Heizmann 2010, 2011, 2012). The data presented here are drawn from semi-structured interviews with seventeen HR practitioners and five business managers. They show how individuals express their understandings of KM practices which in turn influence what they see themselves able to achieve in their work environment. The study's findings are derived from inductive analysis of the interview data using a discourse analytic approach (Grant, Keenoy & Oswick 2001; Hardy & Phillips 2004; Phillips & Hardy 2002). This approach involved examining the participants' discursive constructions of the knowledge sharing relationship between HR practitioners and business managers and, more specifically, identifying constraints and enablers that impacted on the participants' ability to accomplish their work. Discourse analysis was an appropriate methodology because it focuses specific attention on the implicit assumptions and cultural values which underpin participants' accounts of their behaviour.

4.1 Findings

4.1.1 *The empirical context: InsuCo Australia*

The empirical setting for this study was InsuCo Australia (pseudonym), a multinational insurance corporation with offices throughout Australia. InsuCo's Human Resources department had undergone a shift from a back office administrative function to a shared services department that was designed to respond more proactively to the needs of InsuCo's business units. HR practitioners thus positioned themselves as business partners to promote the transformation of InsuCo toward a more open and participatory organisational culture. They worked closely with frontline and senior managers in business units to advise them on more effective people practices. Fostering such a participatory culture has long been regarded as a key goal of effective knowledge management practice.

4.1.2 *Engaging managers in the project of cultural change*

At the time of the study, the HR department's central efforts were geared towards promoting a transformational leadership style amongst business managers that was intended to facilitate broader organisational cultural change. To engage frontline and senior managers in this process, HR consultants made use of various knowledge sharing practices through workshops and cultural seminars, the corporate intranet, and one-on-one conversations with managers.

A key finding of the study was that the mere provision of access to HR knowledge was not a sufficient means to engage managers in the cultural change project.

There's so much HR information on the intranet, there's a whole suite of tools around salary related activity, remuneration, reward, learning programs. Now that's great but I don't really use it that much to be honest. Whenever I've gone on there it's like 'What does this even mean? How do I apply that to my team?' (Phil, frontline manager)

HR practitioners needed to demonstrate the value of their ideas and initiatives in the context of business managers' actual work practices, establishing the potential for their knowledge and expertise to increase the productivity of staff. As one business manager explained:

We've got to have a conversation that translates some of this intranet stuff into our world. For example, if they said 'in your environment you got a lot of sales people, surely there'd be some people that would be interested in influencing skills. Let's look at your staff list ... and let's look inside your personal development plans for each of your divisions. How many of them want to improve on their influencing skills? Go and target those people.' You know assisting us with bringing that stuff to life. (John, senior manager)

Most HR practitioners understood this challenge and constructed themselves as “knowledge brokers” who needed to translate elements of HR practice to multiple other communities of practice in the business (Wenger 1998).

Sometimes it's a bit like being a broker. So here's the HR strategy and HR programs ...and how does that work with what say Finance see as their priority and their responsibilities? They are focused on numbers and tangible results. We're focused on people objectives. How do you frame stuff in a way that they'll understand and buy into? (James, HR consultant)

An example that demonstrated how HR practitioners were able to engage managers through connecting with their prevailing discourses was provided by another participant:

When I went and talked to one of the business groups I made sure that as part of my presentation I included their KPIs [key performance indicators] and showed them how what I had to say related to their business. And straight away there was a different mind-set, you know, there was an acceptance of that. (Eric, HR consultant)

Thus, connecting with the performance-driven rationality that governed InsuCo's business units allowed HR practitioners to engage managers in cultural change and establish the legitimacy of their own discourse.

4.1.3 Discursive constraints

While the previous section highlighted the value of effective influencing and rhetorical skills, the study also showed that HR practitioners operated within the constraints of wider organisational discourses which governed InsuCo's network of power/knowledge relations (Foucault 1980).

For instance, one of InsuCo's most dominant managerial discourses revolved around the value of hierarchy and control as a means of ensuring business results.

You need to have some discipline imposed in a large organisation like this. I need to know exactly what my staff is doing. Now people are going to react in different ways to this. 'What the hell is this?' you know, 'don't people trust me?' – 'Yes, we absolutely trust you.' All that is to create a bit more transparency around the activities and measuring them for return-on-investment. And that's where the success comes from. (Phil, middle manager)

HR practitioners often challenged this hierarchical, controlling approach, highlighting its negative effects on knowledge sharing, trust and staff engagement. One HR practitioner recalled a case where Executive managers had initially authorised a steering committee to decide on a shortlist of future 'high potential' candidates. However, after the steering committee's members had provided Executive Managers with a shortlist, the latter questioned the selection and decided to re-review all of the material. The participant reflected on the process as follows:

I thought there was a bit of lack of trust in the steering committee... you know they made a considered decision why they were putting forward this group, so for the senior managers to come back and say actually we want to see all the nominations and all the detail demonstrates a bit of a lack of trust. And it ended up being a waste of time having a steering committee altogether and the people that were on it felt pretty crushed. (Elisa, HR consultant)

Thus, HR practitioners' efforts to engage a wider number of people in the decision-making process were hindered by a more powerful managerial rationality at InsuCo. When activated, this rationality not only stood at odds with HR practitioners' participatory discourse around decision-making but effectively undermined its legitimacy and generated disengagement among staff members.

5. DISCUSSION

The previous examples show how it is possible to support employees in the development of active citizenship through knowledge management practices and at the same time to undermine approaches to active citizenship. Active citizenship as identified by Onyx, Kenny and Brown (2012) requires not just access to information, but an environment where individuals can come to an understanding of the meaning of information for them and for the collective of which they are a part. In other words, it requires an environment where social capital can flourish.

Essential to a practice-based understanding of active citizenship is an appreciation of the differences in perspective between communities of practice (Boland & Tenkasi 1995; Gherardi & Nicolini 2002; Wenger 1998). HR practitioners who engaged business managers successfully across boundaries of practice (Wenger 2000) were doing so by connecting HR knowledge with prevailing managerial discourses and practices, thus allowing it to be recognized and accepted within the wider network of IncuCo's power/knowledge relations. Similar to the active citizens in Onyx et al.'s study (2012), HR practitioners refrained from taking an oppositional approach but rather sought to drive cultural change through establishing collaborative links.

However, the possibility of change under this approach remains subject to the constraints of prevailing organisational, political and social discourses (Foucault 1979, 1980). In our case example business managers assumed the importance of maintaining control over knowledge practices and decision-making processes. Thus, even though HR practitioners sought to promote a discourse of collaboration and knowledge sharing, they were faced with competing and – in the given context – more powerful discursive rationalities. Consequently, trust became harder to develop as there was little common ground which would allow for the development of shared interpretations of events.

The practice of active citizenship is complex. The collaboration and knowledge sharing which are fundamental to it are about more than transparency in decision-making; they are about being able to use information to understand the point of view of others and to work with those others to a set of shared goals (Onyx, Kenny & Brown 2012). The work environment offers significant opportunities for people to develop, explore and practice skills in active citizenship which may be transferable, as practices, to other communities of practice and other aspects of their lives (Wenger 1998).

6. CONCLUSION

The practice-based perspective offers researchers a powerful new conceptual tool to understand the social practices, values and assumptions which underpin individual's everyday actions, whether in the workplace or as citizens. Traditional approaches, both in management and the promotion of active citizenship, have demonstrated their philosophical indebtedness to the post-Enlightenment liberal tradition in their construction of the ideal citizen/employee as a free-thinking, rational individual decision maker. Practice oriented approaches highlight the limitations of such approaches by emphasising that each individual's actions, beliefs and decision making processes are inextricably linked to a complex, shifting discursive network of knowledge and power (Foucault, 1980).

The limitations of liberal approaches to active citizenship are visible in our newspapers every day. From the disaffection of many, especially among the young, in the developed world with mainstream political parties, the rise of neo-Fascism in Europe, to the dismay of western commentators at the success of Islamist parties in post-Arab Spring elections, the need for approaches which give greater weight to cultural factors seems apparent everywhere. We hope that the present paper will encourage other researchers to follow Onyx, Kenny and Brown (2012) in adopting a practice based approach to studying active citizenship.

The practice-based approach also has clear implications for government policy makers seeking to foster greater community engagement in democratic processes. Rather than adopting an objectivist approach to information provision, where a single construction of knowledge is reified as an absolute truth, a practice-based approach requires practitioners to consider the many and various ways in which citizens' cultural embeddedness will cause them to construct meaning and the discursive practices that may cause them to accept or reject a given truth statement. In such an approach, prevailing 'one-size-fits-all' models need to be superseded by systems grounded in principles of inclusiveness.

Equally, policy makers seeking to increase citizens' participation in the democratic process need, in an increasingly multi-cultural world, to consider the complex network of professional, political, educational and epistemic discourses with which their citizens engage. Modernist notions of a single 'public sphere' (Habermas, 1989) where all citizens meet on an equal footing need to be replaced by a recognition of the complex, multi-layered and often contradictory networks of discursive power/knowledge (Foucault, 1980) that shape citizenship in the 21st century.

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