

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN THE FIELD OF EDUCATION: HOW DO SLOVENIAN PRINCIPALS ACQUIRE KNOWLEDGE IN THE FIELD OF ARRANGING LEGAL MATTERS

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Abstract:

The purpose of this paper is to present a study on knowledge management processes between Slovenian principals in the field of legal matters. Many critiques, that have recently been expressed in the field of education summarize, that principals are overwhelmed with administrative tasks, which among other includes arranging legal matters. A lack of knowledge in the field of dealing with legal matters causes that they spent most of their working time arranging administrative tasks. A systematic introduction of knowledge management processes in this area may represent one of the solutions. On the basis of data, that was collected through quantitative study, we have investigated what kind of a burden the arranging of legal matters represents to Slovenian principals and how they acquire knowledge necessary for dealing with legal matters and the extent to which it affects their work. On the basis of the results we can say, that arranging of legal matters is perceived as a very difficult task for Slovenian principals. The research shows that certain activities of knowledge management in this area are already in place, but the effects are not significant. In order to increase their impact, it is necessary to provide a more systematic approach to these processes and consider them as a whole

Keywords: knowledge management, education, principals, legal matters

1. INTRODUCTION

The public puts increasing demands on schools. The demands are reflected in the pressures on the education itself and quality of teaching, in political pressure to cut public spending on education and economic pressures, such as finding a balance between the cost of education and school performance. Educational systems are now perceived like organizations, and by exploring the similarities and differences with others in other environment, new paths are being explored in order to achieve school efficiency, accountability and quality (Konidari and Abernot, 2005, p. 8).

School leadership is increasingly approaching the way of managing organizations in the field of economy. Principals are now encouraged to think of themselves as CEO of their schools, and to manage their schools like companies □ by leading people, producing results and answering to "shareholders" and "customers", and talking about service, marketing, getting results, bottom-line and vision statements (Retna and Ng, 2006, p, 144). When adopting these "new" tasks, principals in Slovenia often take the view that they work overloaded with legal matters, and pedagogical leadership is something that principals want to do, but do not have enough time for (Koren, 2007, p. 131). A number of records in which principals write about this dilemma can be found both in the scientific literature as well as in daily newspapers (Selan and Župančič 2002; Rejc, n.d.; Rogelj, 2013; Selan, 2008). They all summarize the assessment that the principals are overwhelmed by the performance of the management body of the school, as required by existing law and suggest the need for a lesser degree of legal regulation in education. Aware of the need for legal regulation of social relations in the field of education on the one hand, and a number of criticisms on a congestion of administrative tasks, of course, the first issue to raise is the proper amount of regulation in the field of education, but this is something this paper does not deal with. Quantity and quality of legislation is only one of the dimensions of the raised problem. The reasons may be sought in the competence of principals to perform such tasks.

The terms of the appointment of principals is provided by Article 53 of the Slovenian Law on the Organization and Financing of Education. The cited article defines that the principals in most cases are teachers or school counselors with at least five years of professional experience in education. Taking this into account, it is possible to conclude that principals as a rule do not have an extensive knowledge of the law.

The article will address two main questions:

How difficult and time-extensive is arranging of legal matters for Slovenian principals?

Where do Slovenian principals acquire knowledge in the field of arranging legal matters? The purpose of the research is to explore if and in what kind of form processes of knowledge management are present.

In the first part of the article the usage of knowledge management processes in nonprofit organizations like schools is discussed. Chapter three shows methods used in the research. In Chapter four the results of the research are presented and the conclusion follow in chapter five.

2. USE OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PROCESSES IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

The greater part of the literature found in the field of knowledge management refers to the processes of knowledge management in companies, where the authors as a fundamental objective of these processes expose the acquisition of sustainable competitive advantage (Yang, Hong, Bock and Kim, 2002, p. 479), business process improvement (Ranjbarfard, Aghdasi, Albadvi and Hassanzadeh, 2013, p. 264) and raising the level of productivity (Holsaple and Jones, 2005, p. 3). The advantage of using knowledge management processes in profit organizations is also suggested by a number of case studies that describe the use of knowledge management in companies such as BP (Choen, 1998), Xerox (Powers, 1999), HP (Davenport, bl) or Samsung SDI (Jang, Hong Bock , & Kim, 2002). This raises the question of whether knowledge management is only suitable for profit organizations, or can it be successfully applied in the public sector, in non-profit organizations. Notwithstanding the fact that most of the sources connect knowledge management with profit organizations, the use of knowledge management processes can be highly effective even in public sector organizations. Knowledge management is considered a prerequisite for higher productivity and flexibility in both the

private and the public sectors (Martensson, 2000, p. 204) and should be largely applied to non-profit organizations (Teng and Hawamdeh, 2002, p. 188). Even in non-profit organizations knowledge management can be used to improve communication among and between top management and the rank and file employees to improve work processes, to instill a culture of sharing and to promote and implement a performance-based reward system for its employees (Teng and Hawamdeh, 2002, p. 188). Considering the potential benefits of the implementation of knowledge management processes in the management of schools and therefore the in the work of principals, achieving improvements and streamlining of work processes comes to the fore. If the processes of knowledge management would improve the efficiency of principal's work in the field of arranging legal matters, they would devote less time to managerial tasks, which would consequently mean that principals could have more time for the educational leadership.

3. THE KNOWLEDGE CHAIN MODEL IN EDUCATIONAL INSTITUTIONS

In reviewing the existing forms of knowledge acquisition by principals we based on the knowledge chain model as presented by Holsapple and Jones (2004 and 2005). The model consists of five primary and four secondary activities of knowledge management. In the research we only focused on the question of if and how the activities of the knowledge chain model are present in the field of the principals and their duties regarding to arranging legal matters. Therefore we limited the research only on primary activities of the model, as secondary activities such as leading, coordination, control and measuring do not enter the field of competence of principals and can only be carried out by the competent ministry, if we consider the meaning of the term organization (all Slovene principals) for the purpose of this research. When reviewing the primary activities of the knowledge chain model, it is possible to establish a connection with the area of educational institution management and associate primary activities with certain education and training programs, already carried out by public institutions. The activities of knowledge acquisition, which according to Holsapple and Jones (2004, p. 159) means acquiring knowledge from external sources, and making it suitable for subsequent use may, in the case of educational institutions, represent activities such as the acquisition of knowledge outside the area of education and training, external training, observation of successful or unsuccessful practices, hiring of external experts, acquisition of data, behaviour patterns, protocols, etc. As with the activities of knowledge acquisition that are outward directed it is also possible to find more activities related to the educational institution management in activities of knowledge selection, for which it is typical to acquire knowledge within the organization by selecting needed knowledge from internal sources and making it suitable for subsequent use (Holsapple and Jones, 2004, p. 161). The activities of knowledge acquisition, arising from principals' collectives, could represent the following activities: participation in professional collectives (at the local level, depending on the type of institution by level of education, etc.), networking, creation of professional communities of practise for sharing best practice and pooling of individuals with the same interests or needs, identifying experts in a subject matter etc. The activities of knowledge generation are defined by Holsapple and Jones (2004, p. 63) as the production knowledge either by discovering new knowledge or deriving new knowledge from the already existing knowledge. For the purposes of knowledge management in the field of educational institution management we could use the activities of knowledge generation such as: developing and improving the strategies or protocols, data mining, the preparation of new patterns of legal and administrative acts, records of good practice, the integration of educational policy-makers for the creation of new views, brainstorming, etc. Activities of knowledge assimilation represent the state of knowledge resources in an organization and include storage and internal distribution of the acquired, selected or produced knowledge (Holsapple and Jones, 2004, p. 165). If for the purposes of present application of knowledge management processes in the field of educational institution management we understand, under the term of organization, all public schools, then the activities of knowledge assimilation are of key importance. Principals operate independently and have limited possibilities of contact with colleagues. Thus, it is of crucial importance to ensure effective knowledge flow among principals by carrying out activities of knowledge storage and distribution. In the example dealt with the activities of knowledge assimilation can represent the following activities: publication of manuals, protocols, samples of regulations or contracts, publication of legislative newsletters via e-mail or other electronic resources, issue of internal circulars and news, sending informal ideas and news via e-mail, sharing practical knowledge in informal way, introducing forms of in-service training, networking, sharing examples of best practice, tutoring, etc. Activities of knowledge emission can be represented by all documents and tasks of principals in the performance of tasks that regard to school leadership.

4. RESEARCH METHODS AND DATA ANALYSIS

4.1. Research background

By confirming the possibility of using knowledge management processes in non-profit organizations and public institutions, however the question what represents the organization in a given case raises. If the purpose of knowledge management processes is to improve the efficiency of the principals in the field of legal matters, we proceeded on the assumption that there each school separately cannot be identified as an organization. For the purposes of this study, which examines the processes of knowledge management of principals in the field of arranging legal matters, we decided to define the entire Slovenian school system as an organization.

4.2. Research methods and data analysis

A questionnaire, which included open-ended question too, was designed for the purpose of the study. The data was collected from Slovenian principals, which were selected with nonprobability sampling. The data was collected from Slovenian principals of schools, registered in a project of legal consultative visits, performed by the National School for Leadership in education. Since the method used nonprobability sampling, which provides less reliable results, were tried to improve the quality of data so that cover as large a geographical area. Data collection was carried out over a longer period of time, in the years 2011, 2012 and 2013. The sampling method used in the research will not allow a generalization of the results to the entire population, still the research findings could serve as guidelines for further research in the field of knowledge management processes in the work of principals.

The study included 57 principals from Slovenian schools. 56.1 % were female, 33.3 % male and 10.5 per cent of respondents did not answer this question. Significant differences between the responses, regardless of gender, were not expected. The participants were also separated according to their experience in performing the duty of the principal, which was established using data on working experience as principal (seniority). Considering that principals do not have a lot of knowledge and experience in the field arranging legal matters during their first mandate, and they gain knowledge and experiences through training, education and practical work, we expected certain discrepancies between the groups regarding seniority.

Table 1: Classification of respondents according to their experience in performing the duty of the principal

	Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	
Valid	Less than 5 years	21	36,8	38,2
	From 5 to 10 years	14	24,6	25,5
	From 10 to 15 years	12	21,1	21,8
	More than 15 years	8	14,0	14,5
Total Valid	55	96,5	100,0	
Missing	2	3,5		
Total	57	100,0		

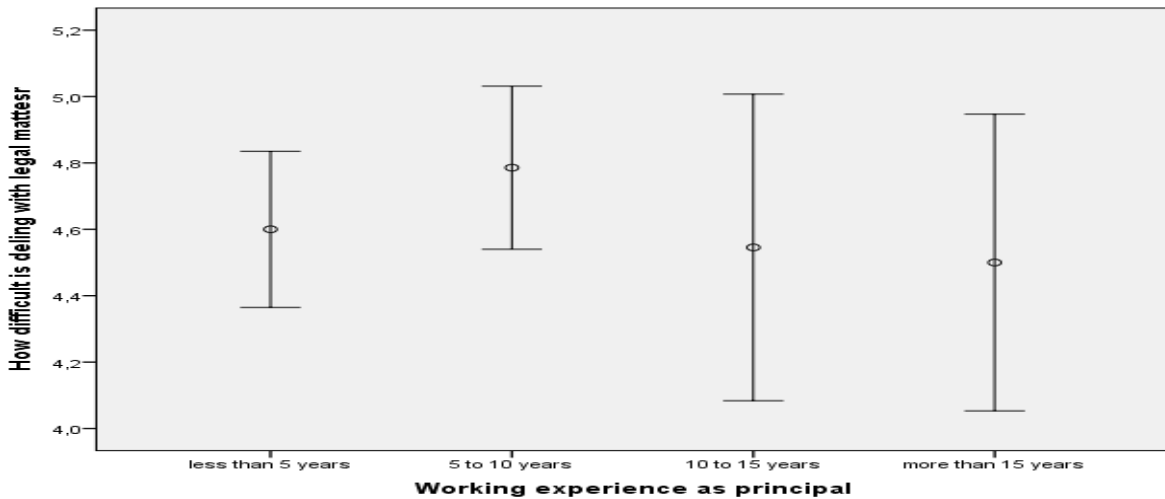
5. RESULTS

5.1. The complexity of dealing with legal matters

In recent years the field of Education in Slovenia is facing with a flood of regulations that directly or indirectly regulate the processes of education, with its quantity and content the regulation is restricting or even suffocating education in its core mission (Cerar, 2011, p. 90). The quoted argument is confirmed by the results of this research. 61.4 % of respondents assessed dealing with legal matters as very difficult, 31.6 % of respondents as difficult and only 1.8 % of respondents considered that this is a medium difficult s. None of the respondents responded that it is not, or not at all difficult.

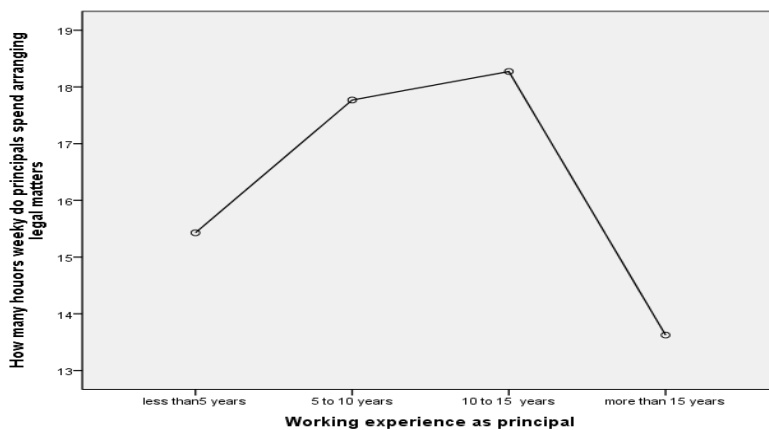
In this context, we expected that responses of principals with less experience will vary from the responses of principals who already have more experience in the field of dealing with legal matters. The hypothesis was examined with the implementation of the Kruskal-Wallis test in which we compared whether there are differences in the perception of the difficulty of arranging legal matters between groups of principals regarding seniority. The results of the test show that differences in the perception of the difficulty between groups of principals regarding seniority do exist. P-value of the test was 0.566 and is greater than the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$), so although differences do exist we can not claim that they are statistically significant.

Picture 1: The perception of the difficulty of arranging legal matters between groups of principals regarding seniority



In view of the fact that principals often point out that due to administrative burdens they are often overloaded and therefore do not have enough time to devote to the tasks of pedagogical leadership, we assumed that principals with more working experience would find arranging legal matters less time consuming. In this context, we examined whether the number of hours that principals weekly devote to arranging legal matters vary between groups of principals regarding seniority. We assumed that principals with less working experiences spend more time arranging legal matters than their colleagues with more experiences. The results were analyzed using the ANOVA test. After the implementation of the test, we found that differences between the groups of principals with regard to their working experience do exist. P-value of the test was 0.327, and is higher than the significance level ($\alpha = 0.05$). Therefore the differences between groups regarding seniority, although some differences do exist, are not statistically significant.

Picture 2: The hours weekly spent arranging legal matters between groups of principals regarding seniority



5.2. The primary activities of the knowledge chain in educational institutions

Based on data collected through questionnaires, we tried to find out how principals carry out primary activities of the knowledge chain model. The results of the analysis are presented in the Table 2 and show answers to the following question: How do you act when you are confronted with the field/question/issue you are not familiar with? With this question we wanted to find out how principals get new knowledge when they are confronted with the field/question/issue they are not familiar with and on which they don't have adequate knowledge. The question was open-ended and was prepared in such a way to allow multiple answers, thus, there are 199 answers. We found out that the activities of knowledge acquisition are very frequently used. In cases when principals are confronted with a problem for which they don't have appropriate knowledge, they often find it in external sources. They then elaborate the knowledge and prepare it for further use in their schools. 42,9% of respondents stated in their answers that they are assisted by lawyers or other legal services providers, whereas 55,4% of respondents find help in different institutions, operating in the field of education. The majority of respondents, 78,6%, however, turned to the ministry, competent for education. The results show that the activities of knowledge acquisition from external sources are frequently present among principals. When discussing procedures of knowledge selection for which it is characteristic to acquire knowledge within organization, it is necessary to recall the definition of organization, as used for the purposes of this research. If the organization is considered to be the whole population of Slovene principals, procedures to acquire knowledge within organization can be seen in the procedures to acquire knowledge from other principals. 89,3% of respondents report to refer to other principals, in case they don't have enough knowledge to solve the problem. This data is not surprising as already Cheng in his research (2012, p. 586) notes that schools are more likely to transfer knowledge through interpersonal contacts, rather than through the application of strategies for storage and transfer of codified knowledge. Thus, in the school environment the knowledge is often transferred through interpersonal contacts between colleagues, rather than using resources of information technology. 69,9% of respondents said that they try to solve the problem themselves. It means, therefore, that they produce new knowledge on the basis of knowledge they already have. Research participants didn't give any answer regarding activities of knowledge assimilation and emission, which presents a weakness for present research.

Table 2: Where do principals get knowledge?

How do you act when you are confronted with field/question/issue you are not familiar with?			
	N	Percent	Percent of Cases
I'm trying to solve the problem itself (the study of legislation, case law, etc.).	39	19,6%	69,6%
I seek help by lawyers or other legal services providers	24	12,1%	42,9%
I seek help by the ministry, competent for education	44	22,1%	7
I seek help by other ministries	8	4,0%	14,3%
I seek help by other principals	50	25,1%	89,3%
I seek help by different institutions, operating in the field of education (Center for Education of Adults, Center for Vocational Education, National School for Leadership in Education, Institute for Education, ipd.)	31	15,6%	55,4%
I seek help by my co-workers at my school	3	1,5%	5,4%
Total	199	100,0%	355,4%

6. CONCLUSIONS

Principals consider arranging legal matters as a heavy burden. Due exposed to criticism that the regulation of all legal transactions do not have enough time to devote to teaching leadership, subject matter is a major problem both in Slovenia and in other countries. Due to the often exposed criticism, that because of the complicated and time consuming nature of the administrative tasks, principals do not have enough time to devote to teaching and pedagogical leadership, the subject matter is a major problem both in Slovenia and in other countries. Therefore the policymaker should seriously consider a systematic introduction of knowledge management activities.

The results of the research showed that some differences in the perception of the difficulty of arranging legal matters between groups of principals regarding seniority do exist. More experienced principals assessed the arranging of legal matters as slightly less demanding, but the differences between groups do not represent a statistically significant difference. The results also showed some differences between the responses of principals to the question of how much time they devote to arranging legal matters. More experienced principals spend less this time arranging legal matters than less experienced, but even here differences were not statistically significant. One reason for not getting statistical significant results is the size of the sample (57 principals).

From the perspective of knowledge management the results insinuate that the existing processes of knowledge management have a little effect on work the of principals, regarding legal matters in the sense that the more experienced principals would consider arranging legal matters as less difficult and would devote less of their time for it. The research results show the relevance of activities of knowledge selection in the procedures of principals' knowledge management in the field of legal business.

Considering this, a number of new research questions arise:

- What are the existing forms of networking among principals?
- Are there professional communities of principals (regional teams) that address the issue of legal business, sharing of best practices, experiences?
- How strong links between principals and how strong is the level of confidence?
- How do principals make contacts and communicate?

The research show that certain activities of knowledge management in this area are already in place. In order to increase their impact, however, we think it is necessary to provide a more systematic approach to these processes and consider them as a whole. An upgrade of existing activities could provide a sufficient degree of primary activities, which by itself does not guarantee success. In connection to the primary activities it is also necessary to focus on the implementation of the secondary activities of the knowledge chain. Activities as coordination, control and measurement could only be carried out by the ministry competent for education.

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