

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES IN NONPROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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Abstract. *The paper investigates to what extent the membership in umbrella organizations helps NGOs improve their knowledge management strategy. Umbrella organizations are nonprofit structures, developed to support the development of the nonprofit sector by providing information, resources, promoting good practices in various ways and contributing to knowledge and skill development in the member organizations. Therefore, intra-organizational and inter-organizational knowledge management is at the core of the activity of umbrella organizations and they could be a positive factor in shaping knowledge management strategies. Some authors recommend that knowledge management should be approached in a similar manner in NGOs compared to firms, due to the existence of the same set of subsystems to be considered – people, technology, task, and structure. Some others, quite on the opposite, support the need for an adaptation, necessary due to the existence of specific stakeholders and beneficiaries. The 12 interviews undertaken in Greece, Poland, and Romania show that access to information and networking are key elements in being a member of umbrella organizations. These would support a more effective knowledge management in the nonprofit organizations in all countries considered.*

Keywords: *NGOs; umbrella organizations; knowledge management in NGOs.*

Introduction

Knowledge management is a theme increasingly more present in academic research. Most of the articles published in this domain refer to knowledge management approaches in business organizations (Centobelli, Cerchione & Esposito, 2017; Cerchione, Esposito & Spadaro, 2016; Heisig, 2016; Patil & Kant, 2014). Some of them investigate the specific strategies of public organizations (Amayah, 2013; Garlatti et al., 2014; Massaro, Dumay & Garlatti, 2015). The academic interest in the approaches knowledge management strategies adopted by NGOs is relatively recent, and the

number of studies is not so large as in the case of corporations, or even public organizations. Nevertheless, we could mention a list of studies which draws a relevant framework for further research: Bebensee, Helms & Spruit, 2012; Corfield, Paton & Little, 2013; De Vasconcelos et al., 2007; Guldberg et al., 2013; Hasnain & Jasimuddin, 2012; Hume & Hume, 2008, 2015; Hurley & Green, 2005; Matschke, Moskaliuk & Cress, 2012; Ragsdell, 2013; Rathi, Given & Forcier, 2014; Renshaw & Krishnaswamy, 2009; Kwon, 2012; Zbucnea & Leon, 2015. Many of these studies investigate knowledge management practices in NGOs compared to the ones in a corporation, identifying specific aspects for this type of organizations.

Qualitative research predominates the investigation in knowledge management (Patil & Kant, 2014), which could be explained also by the need to better understand the processes related to this relatively new domain of investigation. The studies which have been developed up to now do not present a complete puzzle of the domain, focusing more on knowledge management systems, knowledge sharing and the digital side of knowledge management (Mariano & Awazu, 2016). Also, the research concentrates on internal processes, rather than on inter-organizational processes and systems related to knowledge management.

The present paper investigates knowledge management related processing in NGOs. The framework considered is inter-organizational – how is the knowledge transfer and control mediated by umbrella organizations. These are private nonprofit structures, assuming the mission to support the development of the nonprofit sector, the professionalization of a specific domain or the capacity development of (specific) NGOs.

Literature review – an outline

De Vasconcelos et al. (2007) show that, in the context of digital society, knowledge management is a useful tool for non-governmental organizations to achieve their civic mission, to share with the society knowledge and practices, to give back. In this way, NGOs would contribute to the development of communities and citizens. In addition, knowledge management strategies impact positively the internal environment of an NGO. Corfield, Paton, and Little (2013) posit that personnel evaluates and reacts positively to such approaches. Knowledge management could be a means to facilitate learning, to develop a learning organization (Guldberg et al., 2013). Knowledge management strategies could create an environment proper for learning, for the creation, the share and the reuse of knowledge, for collaboration and for innovation (Bratianu, 2014; Bratianu & Bolisani, 2015; Lefter et al., 2011).

The effectiveness of knowledge management strategies in non-commercial contexts was investigated by Corfield, Paton, and Little (2013). Their research helps NGO implementing such approaches, cautioning them to the need to be selective. Hume and Hume (2008) draw the attention on the need for a personalized approach to knowledge management. In order to prove effective, formal knowledge management strategies should be supported. The knowledge of the members of an NGO is its most valuable resource (Matschke, Moskaliuk & Cress, 2012). Top-down strategies facilitate the sharing and development of knowledge, but the voluntary involvement of staff and experts is also valuable.

Various studies point out the constraints associated with knowledge management in NGOs (De Vasconcelos et al., 2007, pp.124-125; Hasnain & Jasimuddin, 2012; Soakell-Ho & Myers, 2011) such as lack of specific and personalized information related to the environment in which NGOs are operating, dysfunctional communication inside an NGO and/or between NGOs, communication with stakeholders – including beneficiaries, or a weak knowledge network. Inadequate funding is also a barrier to innovative and effective knowledge management. Volunteer management and better management of organization culture could contribute to better knowledge management in NGOs (Soakell-Ho & Myers, 2011).

A study of Hume and Hume (2015) documents that knowledge in NGOs is mostly tacit. Therefore, it is not formalized and documented, being related to individuals and working groups. In this framework, knowledge sharing is opportunistic in many situations and people should be stimulated to share. Knowledge sharing is critical for operational knowledge management (Holzer et al., 2016).

Another relevant aspect is the insufficient resources of NGOs which limit their options for complex knowledge management practices. In this context, the internet and new technologies offer a strong support (Matschke, Moskaliuk & Cress, 2012). An investigation of Bebensee, Helms, and Spruit (2012) reveals that web 2.0 is used in a knowledge management framework in nonprofits create knowledge, to innovate and for better asset management. The internet and social media are also systematically used by NGOs to develop and manage partnership, involving also knowledge sharing (Rathi, Given & Forcier, 2014). The typology of knowledge sharing covers all options: uni-directional, bi-directional and multi-directional knowledge. The sharing could be informal, formal, as well as semi-formal. The study evidenced eight partnership categories: business partnerships, sector partnerships, community partnerships, government partnerships, expert partnerships, endorsement partnerships, charter partnerships and hybrid partnerships.

Even if the staff of NGOs would openly and voluntarily participate in knowledge sharing, the role of managers and outside experts would facilitate the development of these processes (Hume & Hume, 2015). Managers could enable a more intense learning and valorization of experience and expertise inside and outside a nonprofit organization, mediated by personal and community narratives and storytelling (Wenger et al., 2011).

Methodology

Aim of the research

The present investigation is part of a larger study related to the cooperation and sharing practices of NGOs members of umbrella organizations. In the context of knowledge management, the main research question aims the understanding of the extent and how umbrella organizations facilitate knowledge sharing and knowledge management processes in NGOs.

Method

Semi-structured interviews have been developed with members of 3 umbrella organizations in 3 different countries: the Higher Incubator Giving Growth and Sustainability - HIGGS (Greece), the Foundation for the Support of Nongovernmental Organizations "Umbrella" (Poland) and the Romanian National Network of Museums - RNNM (Romania). All these umbrella organizations are dynamic structures, with diverse activities aiming a large number of beneficiaries relevant for their environment. The youngest of the three organizations is HIGGS, which was launched in 2015 to support the initiation and development of NGOs operating in Greece. The members of RNNM are museums, which in Romania are mainly public non-profit organizations.

Sample

12 persons representing non-profit organizations affiliated with the specified umbrella organizations were interviewed.

Table 1. Profile of the interviewees

ID	Umbrella org.	Years of experience	Type of non-profit	Position in the organization	Educational level
G1	HIGGS	Less than 3	Small	Top management	B.A.
G2	HIGGS	Less than 3	Small	Top management	B.A.
G3	HIGGS	Less than 3	Small	Top management	B.A.
G4	HIGGS	Less than 3	Small	Top management	M.A.
P1	Umbrella Foundation	5-10	Small	Execution	High-school
P2	Umbrella Foundation	5-10	Medium	Top management	B.A.
P3	Umbrella Foundation	5-10	Medium	Top management	M.A.
R1	RNNM	5-10	Large	Middle management	M.A.
R2	RNNM	5-10	Medium	Top management	Ph.D.
R3	RNNM	Less than 3	Small	Top management	M.A.
R4	RNNM	5-10	Small	Middle management	Ph.D.
R5	RNNM	3-5	Medium	Top management	B.A.

Note: All HIGGS members are young NGOs, considering the history and the aims of the organization. We considered small organizations those with up to 15 employees/volunteers, medium - 16-100 employees/volunteers, respectively large with more than 100 employees/volunteers.

Findings

All the organizations evaluate positively the membership in the umbrella organizations primarily because of the access to information and additional knowledge they gain. The umbrella organizations help members connect and be more effective in knowledge management.

The membership allows access to material about NGOs (project management, volunteers, fundraising, marketing, legal & accounting issues). Also, members can arrange weekly meetings with consultants about legal, marketing and accounting problems they face. (G1)

Knowledge of experts' network (...in very important for us...) – there's also a network of experts (from academic sectors, specialists in social fields, local politicians, representatives of local institutions) around Umbrella. (P1)

... knowledge about good practices – membership in UO gives much more possibilities to know better good practices from another organization, as well as to present own good practices to other organizations and institutions. (P2)

... because being a member facilitated the communication and collaboration with other similar institutions, implied access to knowledge and the latest information in the field, professional training... (R1)

Access to knowledge offered by HIGGS on its online platform/ via the Internet, provided as part of counseling or during training sessions is specified by all the respondents. The knowledge valued most by the members of HIGGS is mostly operational in nature. This could be related to the characteristics of the members: very young organizations, eager to be initiated into the specificity of the NGO sector, looking for support to gain experience and to successfully implement projects in a context of little previous experience. The other respondents connect more knowledge sharing to networking.

The members of the umbrella organizations interviewed would probably appreciate a more complex knowledge sharing. Access to information is the most common benefit.

Organizations share knowledge, information, material things, networks, but in our opinion, information is the most shared by use of communication channels. (P1)

Not only access to information is important, but also to the bearers of information or the timing. For instance, see the following observation:

I had access to knowledge until then, but sometimes valuable information was received late. (R2)

Networking was a main benefit specified by most of the interviewees. The value-exchange in such framework is mostly informational.

Than without networking, there will be harder to exchange knowledge and ideas. (P1)

We are finding out more and more promising news about the network from other colleagues in the country. In addition, we felt the need to belong to a larger group, amid the increase in local autonomy and the disappearance of the centralized system. In the years following the accession, we have benefited directly from the offers. (R2)

Additional, interviewees from all three countries mentioned a strengthened competitive advantage, in relation to networking and know-how.

The HIGGS' staff is very popular and respectful in the NGO ecosystem, so the HIGGS' members are more trustworthy than others. (G1)

Of course, it is a competitive advantage to be membership in HIGGS because took so many knowledge and good practices to be able to support people and society. (G3)

We are very satisfied with this membership because Umbrella offers a complex help to other organizations. First, the working space, then knowledge as training, individual consultations, advising, promotion, possibility to participate in a very big number of events. Without this help probably we would develop much slower than we do. (P1)

It gives knowledge advantage, especially in the dynamically changing market, makes easier the transfer of knowledge. (P2)

RNNM offers the opportunity to develop relationships with important museums and institutions in the sector... RNNM is connected to the latest trends in the European museum sector. (R3)

The stress on know-how was put mostly by young organizations. Sharing of knowledge and a systemic view are related rather with older organizations active in the framework set by umbrella organizations. On the other hand, young organizations are also open to sharing, expecting a *quid pro quo* from other organizations, which would lead to increased resources and higher effectiveness. Further research could investigate if there are significant differences related to the attitude to knowledge sharing and knowledge management practices between NGOs active in umbrella organizations and "lonely" nonprofit organizations, meaning NGOs which chose not to be formally affiliated to various types of professional and sectoral organizations.

The perspective of middle management and executive staff could be a bit different from the top-management respondents. Those on the lower hierarchical levels might consider they benefit less from the information and knowledge sharing associated with the umbrella organization.

I think the RNNM lacks a bit in terms of vertical communication, namely the distribution of information between museum management (that often takes part in RNNM meetings and discussions) and other employees... R4

Conclusions

Most respondents stressed the opportunity to be informed, to gain additional skills and to network with organizations from the same country or from Europe as main drives for membership. Therefore, access to information and sharing knowledge are key elements, helping nonprofit organizations in developing their activities.

The nonprofit organizations do not formally assume a strategy for knowledge development in the context offered by umbrella organizations. We could observe an

assimilation and sharing of knowledge among members in a rather tacit knowledge framework. It is accumulated by individuals and used for the benefit of the organizations. Knowledge sharing among and even inside organizations seems to be informal.

Access to best practices and counseling are two other praised benefits by the interviewed organizations. This type of knowledge helps NGOs to deal mainly with operational aspects, gives them points of reference for activity development. Umbrella organizations are considered a resource of knowledge, including know-how by many respondents.

Networking is another positive aspect related to the membership in umbrella organizations which was stressed by most respondents. Networking is associated with even deeper benefits, such as (professional) community integration, access to information and know-how, opportunity identification, project development, etc. Networking is, therefore, directly and in-directly related to knowledge development and knowledge sharing.

The formal knowledge sharing in the framework investigated is designed and controlled by the umbrella organizations. Therefore, their strategies and activities are the ones which have the greatest impact on the effectiveness of sharing process between organizations and towards members. This process could be facilitated by proactive knowledge management from the part of the members, but the undergone interviews show a rather opportunistic and in some cases passive approach from the part of the member organizations.

Knowledge development and sharing are key elements in connection with the membership of nonprofit organizations in umbrella organizations. In order to maximize their benefits, we recommend an integration of the knowledge management strategies within NGOs with the management of information and knowledge available in the framework of umbrella organizations. A more strategic approach of the membership, not only an operational one, would lead to increased benefits and a more complex valorization of available knowledge generated by the strategy of umbrella organization and its inner dynamics.

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Umbrella organization websites:

HIGGS – <https://higgs3.org>

RNNM – www.muzeo.org

Umbrella - <http://fundacja-umbrella.org.pl>