

## THE IMPORTANCE OF CONCEPTS OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND LEARNING ORGANIZATION IN MANAGING THE KNOWLEDGE - FLOW IN ORGANIZATIONS

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### **Abstract:**

Knowledge economy imposes new demands and imperatives. To achieve a sustainable competitive advantage today means to achieve primacy in knowledge. Therefore it is not surprising that the move towards knowledge-based competitive advantage has become an imperative, not only for individuals, but also for organizational and national strategies. The drastic shift from products to services, observing knowledge as the product, constant innovation, the necessity of managing intangible assets, and the free flow of knowledge, present some of the postulates for modern businesses and organizations. Organizations today seek not only the simple generation of knowledge, but also to provide the knowledge that will create added value to the organization. In this sense, special attention is paid to the concept (s) of knowledge management and learning organization, which should provide the right knowledge at the right place at the right time. By applying the above (s) of concepts, organizations achieve their competitive advantage based on what they know, how effectively and quickly they acquire and use their knowledge. The objectives of this paper are:

- to determine whether and how the organizations are conscious of the importance of knowledge as the key issue in modern businesses,
- to explore the ways that organizations use to modernize their knowledge in order to achieve sustainable competitive advantage and
- to analyze how knowledge is exchanged between employees and what are the main barriers to knowledge-flow in organizations.

*Keywords: knowledge economy, knowledge-flow, knowledge management, learning organization, competitive advantage.*

This paper is the part of a research project “Improving Serbia’s competitiveness in the process of accessing the European Union”, number 47028, for the period 2011/2014, which is supported by Ministry of Education and Science of the Republic of Serbia.

## 1. KNOWLEDGE ECONOMY

Peter Drucker was the first author who saw the significance that knowledge could have in creation of economic benefits for the organization and society in general and he that kind of economy called knowledge economy. In his book *The Age of Discontinuity: Guidelines to Our Changing Society* in twelfth chapter with the title *The Knowledge Economy*, Drucker is focused on forces, which are changing present economy and creating the society of future (Drucker, 1992, pp. 263–268). Beside rapid development of technology, globalization and creation of new economy, appearance of new political and social challenges, which are changing society and present economy, Drucker emphasizes the need to put the knowledge and education and their implications on work, leadership and society in general, in the center of a new economy.

Almost all authors, who are trying to define main features and characteristics of knowledge economy, agree that the key drivers of this economy are: information revolution, flexible organization, knowledge, skills and learning, innovation and knowledge networks, learning organizations and innovation systems, competition and production (Houghton et al, 2000).

Knowledge and continuous learning are the key elements of success in the new economy. Dominant value component, which products or services bring to the customers, is exactly the knowledge incorporated in that products or services. Therefore, shift towards knowledge as the crucial source of value, made obvious that new economy should be lead by the people who can effectively and efficiently manage the knowledge, who can create, keep, share and on the new way combine knowledge in organizations, integrate that knowledge in products and services and do all of this faster than their competitors.

In the knowledge economy, if company wants to be successful and gain its competitive advantage, it is necessary to constantly increase its value with the knowledge, which possesses. Potential, which company has for the creation of the added value, so called KnoVa-factor of knowledge value in the knowledge economy depends on two elements. First element is the level of services which company provides and intensity of use of companies' knowledge and the second element is the level in which company uses that knowledge in product production and services provision. If one organization wants to be so called KnoVa company it is necessary to have six basic competencies (Andriessen & Depre, 2006, pp. 16–40):

1. *Production ability*. Many companies know only one thing to do - to produce products and provide services. Now, they have to do it with proper use of knowledge in appropriate structures and processes. So it means that companies, with effective use of knowledge, have to provide constant control of complex business processes, harmonization of suppliers network and the most effective and cheapest way for product to reach the final customers.

2. *Ability to make fast response*. Large number of companies, which successfully keep their places in the top of competitive environment, believe that the key of their success lies in fast response to the changes and requirements of the market. One way to be able to respond properly is connection with customers' needs and creation of business units, where every unit will cover specific segment of the market. These business units provide decentralization of authority, so every unit can faster bring decisions about how to react on changes on the market.

3. *Ability of prediction.* If company wants to be truly successful it has to be capable to perceive business environment as whole picture and not only to respond to the trends, but also to predict them.

4. *Ability of creation.* Companies constantly have to search for the new ways to maintain their competitive advantage. It depends on their ability to create knowledge and to create it on different ways by producing new products or technologies, using existing knowledge on the new manner or acquiring fresh knowledge about the clients.

5. *Ability of learning.* The book “The fifth discipline” by Peter Senge (Senge, 2003) popularizes concept of learning organization. Learning organization is the organization that encourages continuous learning and knowledge generation on all levels and which developed ability for constant learning, adjustments and necessary changes. In that kind of organization, employees manage the knowledge by the constant adoption and exchange of knowledge with each other. In learning organization employees are ready to implement knowledge in making the decisions or doing business.

6. *Ability to last.* Knowledge workers will have crucial role in knowledge economy. Companies will have to adjust to the employees’ possibilities to require better work conditions and bigger autonomy. Firms will have to develop ways to revitalize and they will achieve that by constant update and regeneration of employees’ knowledge.

## **2. IDEA AND SIGNIFICANCE OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT**

Intellectual component of products and services gains in significance, so knowledge management development in organization also starts to become a priority. Possibility of managing the knowledge is becoming more and more important in modern economy. Knowledge creation and expansion in modern organizations become a key factor in achieving and sustaining competitive advantage. In fact, the level of firm’s knowledge, how effectively firm uses that knowledge and how fast firm gain the knowledge, create sustainable competitive advantage. (Davenport, Prusak, 2000, p. 15) Modern organization, in the era of knowledge, is the one, which learns, memorizes and acts on the basis of the available information and knowledge on the best possible way.

Knowledge management represents adoption of collective knowledge in order to achieve company’s business goals. In brief, knowledge management is a systematic effort to enable information and knowledge to grow, flow and create value (O’Dell & Hubert, 2011, p. 2.) and has a role to ensure that people have right knowledge at the right place at the right time.

The widest approach towards this concept is that the knowledge management is unity of three components: people, processes and technology. Knowledge management (KM) also passes through the stages: knowledge creation, knowledge capture, knowledge storing, sharing of knowledge with the other people and knowledge application, forming on that way its own life cycle (Macintosh, 1995, p. 139).

Among the definitions of knowledge management, one is particularly important. Y. Malhotra (Malhotra, 1997) defines knowledge management as: “Knowledge management includes the most important critical question of organizational adaptation, survival and competencies due to growing changes in business environment. Basically, knowledge management presents organizational processes that strive to interaction and combination of data and information,

which for a result has the capacity increase of information technologies and creation and innovation of human capacities. The most important thing is that knowledge is effectively used during decision-making. Knowledge management concept presents“ the ability to acquire necessary information in short term, which will provide that everyone can bring the best decision about conditions on the market, product, service, planning activities of the competition or any other actions which are important for the company’s success. (Shockley, 2000, p. 57) In summary, knowledge management is process through which organization generates values of its intellectual assets based on knowledge (Santosus et al, 2008).

Organizations, in general, with the use of knowledge management concepts in practice, aim to achieve two goals: first, creation of the new knowledge for the innovation acceleration and gaining of competitive advantage on the market and second, sharing of existing knowledge for increase of company’s effectiveness. The major business drivers behind today’s increased interest and application of knowledge management lie in four key areas: 1. Globalization of business, 2. Leaner organizations - we are doing more and we are doing it faster, but we also need to work smarter as knowledge workers, 3. Corporate amnesia - we are mobile as a workforce, which creates problems of knowledge continuity for the organization, 4. Technological advances – we are more connected: information technology advances have made connectivity (Dalkir, 2011, p. 23).

Question of knowledge management is question of survival in the contemporary business world, in the world of severe competition, world that challenges traditional ways of solving problems and in which focus is not in finding right answers, but asking right questions. Something, that was successful yesterday, may or may not be successful tomorrow. The production of goods or the delivery of services is no longer of paramount importance. That place has been taken by the development, management and deployment of new knowledge. Kasper and Haltmeyer indicate that: “ Not only management theorists but also growing number of executives and consultants have proclaimed in recent years that the new knowledge provides the basis for organizational renewal and constitutes the mayor source of sustainable competitive advantage for organization” (Kasper & Haltmeyer, 2002). The organizations of the future are those organizations that are able to valorize their knowledge in the quickest and most efficient way (Heghe, 2011).

Authors Prahalad and Hamel (Hamel & Prahalad, 1996) emphasized the importance of knowledge, skills, people and competencies in company values. They indicated that in informational era, knowledge is the central component. In the new economy, the most successful companies are those ones rich with intangible assets, not ones rich with traditional raw materials, that are becoming less important. That kind of organization is known as “ all brains, no body” and it is completely different from traditional organization known as “ small brain, large body”, organization of industrial period. (Tissen et al, 1998, p. 120) In this organization, only “brain” creates added value for the organization and because of this organizations should be devoted to further development of this part. All indicated, shows how significant knowledge management is in the knowledge economy.

### **3. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT VS. LEARNING ORGANIZATION**

In his book *The Fifth Discipline*, Peter Senge (Senge, 2003) considers that the most thriving companies will be those, which have features of learning organizations and have the ability to learn quicker than their competitors and in this way achieve and sustain competitive

advantage. Authors Drucker, Davenport, Prusak and Stewart think the same about the ways on which companies gain competitive advantage.

The eight most significant forces that have changed the business world and necessitate company – wide learning in the twenty – first century are: 1. Globalization and the global economy, 2. Technology and the Internet, 3. Radical transformation of the work world, 4. Increased customer power, 5. Emergence of knowledge and learning as major organizational assets, 6. Changing roles and expectations of workers, 7. Workplace diversity and mobility, 8. Rapidly escalating change and chaos. Each of these forces must be understood and harnessed before the transformation to a learning organizations is possible (Marquardt, 2011, p. 20.).

Understanding and connection of learning process with the knowledge is in the focus of theoreticians and practitioners for a long time. From the companies' aspect, there is a question how concept of organizational learning and collective knowledge can improve performances of the enterprises. During the nineties, concepts of organizational learning and learning organization gain on significance, not only in theory but also in management practice. Strategic learning aims to generate learning in support of future strategic initiatives that will, in turn, foster knowledge asymmetries that can lead to differences in organizational performance (Thomas et al, 2001). At the same time, knowledge management appears as the foundation for the creation of the sustainable competitive advantage. Therefore, companies on the one hand have to learn faster and better than others, and on the other hand have to manage knowledge on more effective way.

Peter Senge believes that in the time when the world becomes more and more connected and jobs become more and more complicated and complex, it is not enough that organization has only one mayor strategic thinker. It means, it is not enough that company has only one person who will learn for all the others and whose decisions will be crucial. The key of knowledge management concept is not how much individuals learn in the organization, but how much their knowledge is transferred to the organization as whole and do the other workers have the possibility to gain knowledge necessary for the effective and efficient goal achieving. Consequently, learning organization is the organization where employees develop their skills to achieve desirable results, thrive new patterns of behavior and learn how they together can gain new knowledge. Dimensions, which differentiate learning and traditional organizations, are: systematic thinking, personal development, mental models, common vision and team learning. Organizational learning is a vital process because of the rapid pace of change affecting organizations. (Jones, 2004, p. 376).

There is no unique attitude in the literature about connection of these two concepts. Is the knowledge management component of the organizational learning, which contributes to development of the corporative memory and changes necessary for the successful function of the organization in turbulent environment? Is there a process in the learning organization, which helps the employees to create collective knowledge and knowledge management discipline, which makes organization learning stronger? If the literature, which in its focus has organizational learning and learning organization, preceded by the knowledge management concept, does it mean that knowledge management is continuity of this way of thinking? No matter what the answers are one is for certain, most themes are common for the “knowledge management” and “learning organization” concepts.

The need that organization becomes the “learning organization” is increasingly present. If company wants to become learning organization knowledge management is necessity, which

means that knowledge management depends on “learning organization”. That is like the story about the chicken and the egg (Aggestam, 2006). It is impossible to tell which concept came first, but we know that they are connected and that success of one depends on the success of the other concept. If organization wants the adjective of “learning organization” it has to pay attention on both concepts, which requires both understanding similarities and differences of these concepts.

“Learning organization” concept is focused on process of acquiring information, data interpretation, knowledge development and obtaining of learning process. It is crucial for the organization to achieve the success in managing the knowledge. Knowledge management is concentrate on activities such as creation, adoption, storage, sharing and use of knowledge on the way that will guarantee the increase of the company’s value.

“Learning organization” has the culture, which supports learning and innovation, on the individual and organizational level. The fundamental basis of establishing a learning culture is the requirement to enhance learning within the organization (Chinowsky, Carillo, 2007, p.123). Learning process has to be inseparable part of organizational culture. In creation of that kind of organization, crucial role has the leader, who has a vision about learning organization. We need organizational leaders who genuinely value learning and support wise managerial interventions and organizational policies that foster social, work and practice-based learning (Prusak, 2006, p. 55). Leader, in the learning organization, has to inspire the individual to learn on all organizational levels, share knowledge with their coworkers and separate time for learning, but time spent in learning should be looked as real work from the organizational aspect. Every learning process starts on the individual level, but it does not necessary mean that it will provoke changes in the organizational knowledge. Therefore, “learning organization” is dependent of the level of collective knowledge. Dess, Lumpkin and Eisner (Dess, Lumpkin & Eisner, 2007, p. 153) indicate the importance of collective knowledge and “group thinking” in strengthening social capital and point to vital role of social capital and systemized knowledge in achievement of competitive advantage.

“Learning organizations” support and develop learning. Learning implies changes in the knowledge. Organizational learning demands inquisitiveness and openness- a willingness by managers to challenge assumptions and tackle conventional wisdom. Otherwise, behavior will continue to be ruled by habit, and the status quo will remain undisturbed. In the presence of routines, the wonder of organizational learning is that it occurs at all. To ensure it does, managers first need to develop a better understanding of the learning process- the stages through which learning unfolds, the biases and disabilities that so often stand in the way, and the enablers and supporting conditions that allow new idea to flourish. Only then will they be able to combat ingrained routines and actively cultivate learning (Garvin, 2000, p. 19,20).

In the learning organization, individual knowledge has to have form, which will give the other members of the organization the possibility to use that knowledge. Knowledge management is concentrated on chance that all the employees get the possibility for practical access and use of the organizational knowledge. Therefore, “learning organization” requires effective managing of the knowledge. Effective knowledge management program tries to fulfill this demand. Hence, “learning organization,” demands knowledge management and knowledge management demands “learning organization”. To sum up, we can say, that knowledge management and learning organization concepts depend on each other.

## 4. EMPIRICAL RESEARCH

The research results that will be shown in this paper have the goal to illustrate the significance of knowledge management concepts in organizations in Serbia and also the status that this concept has in modern business. Research is conducted on the sample of 131 respondents, from top, middle and operative management from 10 organizations on the territory of the Republic of Serbia. (Djordjevic-Boljanovic, 2009) Selection of companies was based on their high level of development and use of modern information technologies. Therefore, most companies that were included in research provide services in telecommunication, postal services, information technologies and software and all these business use high technologies. Due to low level of development of knowledge management in companies in Serbia, initial idea of the research is that further development of knowledge management and knowledge sharing will be firstly connected with implementation and development of information technologies. We chose a sampling strategy that would capture perceptions from different groups of managers. No sampling frame was available. We used purposive sampling, trying to have participants from private and public sector, from national and international organizations, from Belgrade and the rest of Serbia, both men and women. We used a quantitative approach based on Internet-mediated self-administered questionnaires. We chose purposive sampling in order to capture perceptions of managers from different hierarchical levels.

Regarding their structure, analyzed by the activities of the organizations and the main business orientation, the highest percentage of respondents (55 %) work in the organizations that provide postal services (PTT "Serbia"), 27 % work in telecommunications (Serbian broadband - SBB, EUNET , Telekom and Algotech). The study also involved participant that work in consulting (Trizma – 8 %), transport and shipping services (Tranšped – 5 %) and IT / software (Commutel, Microsoft and EnelPS – 5 %).

About the structure of respondents by gender, age, level of education and position in the organization, we note that in survey participated 56 % male and 44 % female respondents. Most of the respondents are in the age group from 41 to 50 years (38 %) and 36 % in the group from 31 to 40 years. Most respondents (70 %) have a university degree, 13% of respondents are secondary school graduates and 11 % higher. Of all respondents, 53 % are in the first-line management, 38 % in the middle management level, and 9 % of respondents are in the top management.

As we indicated earlier the sustainable competitive advantage would be determined by how much companies know, how effectively use that knowledge and how fast acquire and use new knowledge. (Davenport et al, 2000) Creation and sharing of knowledge becomes key factor in achieving sustainable competitive advantage. The basic question is does the organization recognize the knowledge as crucial factor in modern business. Exactly this formulation we used in research for the detailed analysis of organizations' relation to knowledge as a basis for competitive advantage.

*Recognition of knowledge as the key issues of modern business.* Considering the topic of this research, we found an encouraging fact that managers in Serbia, according to the results of our study show a great interest in knowledge and recognize it as a key issue of modern business. Specifically, 63 % of respondents to this question answered with 'yes', only 5 % with "no", with 27 % "to a small extent" and 5 % "do not know."

*Under-utilization of knowledge leads to losses in business.* Following the example of researches done in the world, we have asked Serbian managers if they believed that use of existing knowledge in their organizations, leads to losses and failures in their business and if they appreciate the benefits of existing knowledge. Our findings show that managers in Serbia are aware that knowledge has value in modern business, and of the fact that it is underutilized in the companies. To this question, 64 % of managers responded with positive remarks.

*The possession of knowledge management programs.* Although the survey results indicate that 67 % of respondents do not have a formal knowledge management program, or formal knowledge management strategy, encouraging is to note that of those 67 % one quarter of respondents in their organization identified some elements of knowledge management in small scale.

*Knowledge management and knowledge sharing, as support in doing business.* The following research findings refer to the problem of sharing knowledge in organizations in Serbia. While the respondents were allowed to opt for the multiple-choice questions, most respondents opted for the informal exchange of knowledge with colleagues (31 %) and sharing of knowledge within the organization with experts in the same area (31 %). Only 16 % of respondents opted for visiting seminars, conferences and workshops and the formal forms of learning – 15 %. When level of knowledge sharing in organizations is concerned, 56% of respondents estimated sharing of knowledge in their organizations at a high level, while 42 % believed that sharing of knowledge was represented in a small scale. The question of awarding the formal sharing of knowledge, however, resulted with negative replies from 46 % of respondents.

*The use of knowledge in problem solving in organizations.* Majority of the respondents (60 %) replied that in need of knowledge to solve problems in their work, they would appeal to the nearest colleague. In the second place (25 %) is seeking solutions in their wider area, and then search for solutions from the external source (15 %). Regardless of what solution they have chosen, respondents commonly seek speed, reliability, simplicity and accuracy in solving these problems.

*Key factors that influence effectiveness of knowledge management.* One issue, that is the backbone of our research, analyses the main factors that influence the effectiveness of knowledge management. Respondents in our survey were given the opportunity to circle all answers that were in their opinion accurate. The largest percentage of respondents (30 %) answered that the key factor affecting knowledge management was only organizational culture. Technology as the important factor was recognized by 22 % of respondents, managing human resources by 21 %, control of business processes by 14 %, and leadership by 13 % of respondents.

*Improvements from the use of knowledge management program.* When asked what improvements would be expected from the use of knowledge management program, 16 % of respondents considered that the main benefit from the knowledge management program would be advancement of knowledge and skills of employees, 14 % of respondents answered that it would lead to easier and faster decisions, 14 % better utilization of human resources and 14 % increased productivity, while in the opinion of 13 % of respondents the main benefit of knowledge management program in organization would be increased customers



satisfaction, 11 % of respondents considered finding new ways of doing business, 9 % increased innovations and 9 % cost reductions.

*Major limitations for the implementation of effective knowledge management program.* In response to a question which circumstances could be limitations for the introduction of knowledge management, the highest percentage (19 %) of respondents considered insufficient training, 18 % unwillingness of employees to share knowledge with other employees, 16 % too complex system, 14 % failure to recognize personal benefits that employees would have of sharing and managing knowledge. Additionally, 12 % of respondents felt that lack of trust among employees could be the major limitation for the introduction of knowledge management programs.

*Key drivers of knowledge management.* When asked what would they consider as the main driver of knowledge management in organizations in which they work (noting that the participants were given multiple choices), 52 % of respondents thought it would be a centralized decision, 26 % technology innovation, and 22 % of respondents voted for the initiative of employees. Concerning the areas of business which could be improved with the effective application of knowledge management, results of our survey show that 14% of respondents considered relations with customers, 13 % quality of service (product), 13 % research and development, 10 % marketing, 9 % communication, 9 % human resource management, also 9 % information technology, and 8 % control. When asked what areas should have special attention in order to improve knowledge management skills, 24 % of respondents opted for the knowledge management training of employees and managers, 17% of respondents believed that the solution would be to introduce knowledge management as a part of everyday activities and explain the benefits that would be obtained by using knowledge management, 15 % felt that the support of top management would be most important, 14 % considered it essential to insist on the need to share knowledge among employees, and 13 % indicated that it would be critical to define the need for knowledge.

## **5. CONCLUDING OBSERVATIONS**

Knowledge and continuous learning are the key elements of success in the new economy. The transition from an industrial society into a knowledge society makes the effective benefits of knowledge and learning as vital elements of competitiveness, and knowledge management, as a process through which an organization generates the value of its knowledge-based assets, an imperative of modern business. Companies that want to be successful and gain sustainable competitive advantage, need to focus more on permanent increase of value with the knowledge they possess. The knowledge management concept is one of the fundamental ways to translate the challenges and dangers of a modern, unpredictable business environment into an opportunity for successful performance and a cornerstone of competitive advantage.

Based on the performed theoretical analysis, as well as practical research on a given topic conducted on a sample of 131 managers in Serbia, we determined the relevant issues and problems that most organizations today are likely facing regarding the knowledge and learning programs. These problems are often represented in duplication of work, the inability of employees to learn from other experiences, lack of use of information and knowledge gained from the customer in order to improve business processes, slower or disabled transfer of significant conclusions from completed projects into other projects, and lost knowledge.

Given the results of our research, showing that 64 % of the respondents feel that insufficient use of knowledge in their organizations leads to losses and wasting many business opportunities. On the other hand, encouraging fact is that 63 % of respondents recognize knowledge as a key issue of modern business. It is also necessary to underline that 56 % of respondents estimated sharing of knowledge in their organization is at a high level, while 42 % that sharing of knowledge was represented in a small scale. Respondents from the survey consider that the mayor improvements from the use of knowledge management program will be advancement of knowledge and skills of employees, they also think that it would lead to easier and faster decision making, better utilization of human resources and increased customer satisfaction. Concerning the areas of business which could be improved with the effective application of knowledge management, results of our survey show that 14 % of respondents considered relations with customers, 13 % quality of service (product), 13 % research and development, 10 % marketing, 9 % communication, 9 % human resource management, also 9 % information technology, and 8 % control. From these answer it can be concluded that implementation of knowledge management in moder organizations would bring great results and improvements in organizations' performance.

We can conclude that managers in companies in Serbia recognize knowledge as the basis of competitive advantage in today's economy, and knowledge management programme as a way to achieve this competitive advantage.

The results of this study offer interesting opportunities for future research. While this particular study utilized a group of 131 managers limited to Serbia, it could be replicated on a sample that would represent a wider region. Further research could probably explore a more diverse array of companies and industrial sectors. Another research stream might explore more factors determining knowledge management and continuous learning program implementation.

The necessity for introducing and effective use of knowledge management in organizations is today's reality, confirmed by the results of our research which indicate that hindering or even preventing the sharing and managing of knowledge in organizations, significantly slows the flow of daily work processes.

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