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Edited by
Dr Ettore Bolisani
Dr Eleonora Di Maria
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Inter-Project Knowledge Sharing in Public Organizations in Poland and Norway

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Abstract: Projects provide opportunities for combining various types of knowledge bases and expertise. Sharing knowledge and best practices through projects can improve an organization's ability to make the learning organizational, and become a learning organization. Earlier research studies show that, though the positive effects of knowledge sharing are recognized, it is still challenging to implement inter-project knowledge sharing and harvest the desired benefits from it. There is increasing focus on leveraging learning and reusing knowledge across projects. The need to focus on learning and knowledge sharing is important for organizations in the public sector too. Several researchers indicate that progression of projectification of public policies, public organizations, and individuals working in public sphere has an impact on actions undertaken for delivery of public services. As social, economic, political and technological changes happen in a faster pace, there is a need for public sector organizations to become more effective and efficient in order to deal successfully with the changes and address the emerging challenges timely. The focus of this paper is on inter-project learning processes in public organizations. This paper is based on a brief literature study and a case study of two public organizations, concerning public sector project management and project knowledge management. The research question that we ask is: What characterizes processes of inter-project knowledge sharing in public organizations? The research is of preliminary character. It is our first attempt to address the issue of inter-project learning in public organizations in our collaborative endeavor – collaboration between researchers from Poland and Norway. Therefore, we illustrate our deliberations with limited data – a case study of two public organizations: Trondheim Municipality (Norway) and Municipality of Kraków (Poland).

Keywords: projectification, inter-project learning, public organizations, knowledge sharing

1. Introduction

Project management has permanently permeated activities of public organizations worldwide. Several researchers indicate that progression of projectification of public policies, public organizations, and individuals working in public sphere has an impact on actions undertaken for delivery of public services. It seems that projectification process cannot be stopped, there is no alternative for it, even though the research indicates that it brings a lot of "side effects" in delivery of public goals. Under public pressure, governments deliver more and more projects, trying to fulfil the promise of effective, flexible, and result-oriented services and products (Jałocha & Prawelska-Skrzypek, 2017).

The focus of this paper is on inter-project learning processes in public organizations. Our paper is based on a brief literature study and a case study of two public organizations, concerning public sector project management and project knowledge management. The research question that we ask is:

What characterizes processes of inter-project knowledge sharing in public organizations?

This research is a product of an ongoing collaboration between researchers from Poland and Norway. The research is of preliminary character. It is our first attempt to address the issue of inter project learning in public organizations in our collaborative endeavor. Therefore, we illustrate our deliberations with limited data – a case study of two public organizations: Trondheim Municipality (Norway) and Municipality of Kraków (Poland). The research institutions involved in the ongoing collaboration are located in these two cities. These two municipalities agreed to establish friendship in 2012. This is the reason for choosing them as a case study.

As the European Social Survey indicates, there are huge differences between European countries in terms of level of social trust towards public organizations and other people. Post-communist countries, like Poland, are characterized by distrust. At the other extreme are the Scandinavian countries, such as Norway, where the level of trust in public organizations and to other people is extremely high. At the same, research (e.g. Wiewióra et al, 2014) indicates that higher level of trust has a positive effect on knowledge sharing (especially tacit) and

learning. It is therefore interesting to study and compare the practices of project knowledge sharing in public organizations located in two very different countries.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1 Project management in public sector organizations

The extremely fast development of project management in the public sector in recent decades is undoubtedly related to New Public Management (NPM) processes (Osborne & Gaebler, 1992) and global crises, which force public sector to drive solutions that are more likely to bring immediate and tangible effects. Another catalyst for this process is the growing expectations of citizens. They demand quick, efficient solving of problems: both small and simple, as well as large, complex social problems. In the face of changes taking place and strong social pressure, public sector uses project management as one of the main tools of management, what results in widespread projectification (Midler, 1995) of the public sector.

Although it may seem that the public sector just adapted business project management practices to its needs on the wave of the NPM, it is not completely true. As the history of project management development shows, the public sector has developed a number of tools that have entered the project management toolbox in all sectors. For example, principles of systematic project management, project maturity models, project techniques were all firstly developed in the public sector (Gasik, 2017).

Despite the long history of involvement of the public sector in projects, a huge number of projects still fail. There are many reasons why public projects fail. Some of the reasons relate to all types of projects (e.g. lack of resources, not proper project planning, poor risk analysis, lack of experienced project manager), and some are specific to public projects only (lose budget authorization, failure to satisfy oversight agencies etc.). However, one of the identified major problems that causes lack of success in public sector project management is that public organizations do not identify lessons learned from prior projects (Wirick, 2009). Therefore, it is very important to focus on project knowledge management processes.

2.2 Project knowledge management

We consider the following description of knowledge in connection with this paper:

We use a categorization presented by Spender (2008) that looks at knowledge in three major categories:

- Knowledge-as-data: The category tends to suggest that knowledge is considered as an object, and to point out the explicit and objective characteristics of knowledge
- Knowledge-as-meaning: This category deals with reflection and sense-making
- Knowledge-as-practice: This category views knowledge beyond the cognitive spectrum – beyond the sense-making aspect. It incorporates tacit characteristics of knowledge

In addition, we also consider the following definition, given by Davenport and Prusak (1998, page 5):

> *"Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms".*

In our opinion, the above definition reflects and summarizes the categorization given by Spender (2008).

2.3 Inter-project knowledge sharing processes

With regard to the structural and cultural aspects of knowledge sharing between projects, we would like to present a model called a refined systemic lessons learned knowledge (refined Syllk) model developed by Duffield & Whitty (2015). Lessons learned systems contribute notably to share knowledge between projects in organizations. Referring to other previous studies, Gemünden et al. (2018, page 155)) say that "among the structures and processes established for knowledge management in project contexts “lessons learned” systems are the most widely spread. The refined Syllk model presents a set of organizational elements that affect both application and dissemination of lessons learned practices (see Figure 1).

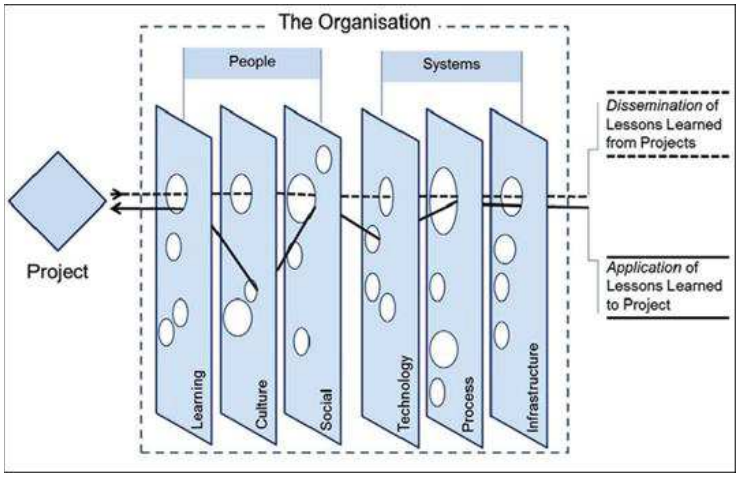

Figure 1: Refined Syllk model (Duffield & Whitty, 2015, page 318)

The elements are: Learning, culture, social, technology, process, and infrastructure. The authors categorize the first three elements as people and the last three elements as systems. These two categories represent cultural and structural approaches / perspectives (that we have mentioned earlier) respectively. As Figure 1 presents, if there are more and larger holes in each of the six elements, then there will be effective knowledge sharing between projects in the organization.

One can distinguish between a structural and a cultural approach to knowledge sharing. The structural approach typically focuses on knowledge-as-data. A common approach is to create knowledge repositories of knowledge items. The cultural approach focuses on human interaction, communication, reflection, sense-making (knowledge-as-meaning), and practice based issues (knowledge-as-practice). This approach includes, among other things, communities of practice (CoP), storytelling and ad-hoc experience transfer (around the watercooler or coffee machine, etc.).

3. Methodology

This research relied on several sources of evidence. First we conducted a literature review, to understand the background of the research problem. The literature analysis was followed by empirical, qualitative research. Data that included a review of formal documents and semi-structured interviews were gathered in Kraków and Trondheim. We revived documents such as official websites of both offices, organizational charts, and available project management instructions. We also examined some projects implemented by municipalities (e.g. the "Production Kitchen" project). The interviews were conducted by one of the authors personally with representatives of two offices. The interviewees were chosen purposefully – we were looking for persons who might have knowledge about project management processes in whole organization. Both interviewees were holding managerial positions – one was the director of the department, second was a manager of a unit that performs role of Project Management Office in the municipality. Both interviews lasted around one hour each, were recorded and then transcribed and analysed in NVivo software. Interviews captured data about project management processes and procedures, organizational units responsible for project management support, ways of project knowledge collecting and sharing in organizations.

4. The two cases

4.1 Municipality of Kraków

Krakow is a city with over 750,000 inhabitants. It is the second most populous city in Poland and the administrative capital of the Małopolskie voivodship. Central public administration office of Kraków is Municipality of Krakow. The office employs over 2200 public servants, working in different organizational units.

The conclusions stemming from the experience in obtaining and implementing projects co-financed from EU funds in the pre-accession period and in the first programming period in 2004-2006 led to structural changes in the Municipality of Kraków and the creation of the European Funds Office (EFO). EFO is an independent organizational unit whose primary objective is to ensure effective coordination of the process of obtaining and managing EU funds for the implementation of the city's projects (https://www.bip.krakow.pl/?mmi=79).

4.2 Trondheim municipality (Trondheim Kommune)

Trondheim is a city and municipality (Trondheim Kommune) in Sør-Trøndelag county situated by the Trondheim fjord. With a population of over 170 000 it is the third most populous municipality and city in the country.

Trondheim municipality is a very large workplace with approximately 13,000 employees. All city residents are considered as recipients of the service provided by the Trondheim municipality. The staff of the municipal executive staff and the internal services contribute to ensure efficient operation and to provide good administrative support services to the service units (https://www.trondheim.kommune.no/organisasjon/).

The major tasks for the municipality director for the organization includes realizing the municipality's employer-policy, developing the organization's leadership, structure, system and culture, and developing the municipality's reputation-policy (https://www.trondheim.kommune.no/kommdirorg/).

5. Results

5.1 Projects within the organizational structures

The researched organizations differ from each other in terms of organizational structure, however the differences are not major. Trondheim municipality is characterized by a more flat organizational structure, with empowered leaders of the units, and Krakow City Council is a typical hierarchical public organization. At the same time, to be able to implement projects, both organizations have developed mechanisms that make project management procedures easier – they adapted to the projectification processes. Although they are not project-based organizations, they often organize their activities on a matrix basis. Because projects are implemented within and between hierarchically dependent departments, the relationship between employees changes:

> *“Suddenly, it turns out that employees who had equal position in the department, differ in terms of their tasks perforemed in the project. For example, someone becomes the project manager and someone becomes his subordinate.” (Manager 2)*

Adaptation to projectification processes took some time. Kraków’s office began to carry out first formalized projects at the beginning of the 21st century, when the City Hall received from the EU pre-accession programs funding for 7 projects. After Poland's accession to the EU structures, the office's projectification has gained momentum. Subsequently, in years 2004-2006 the office executed 38 projects, 2007-2013 – 164 projects and currently it is planned to implement another 93 projects by the end of 2020. In total, in just over a decade, the City Hall of Kraków has completed 300 projects - both infrastructural as well as projects not related to the construction of urban infrastructure. The total value of projects implemented so far amounts to approximately PLN 8,3 billion (or EUR 2 billion). Our interlocutor emphasized that projects registered by the project office are not all projects that are carried out by institutions subject to the municipality:

> *"I didn’t add to these numbers "project plankton". "Project plankton"- very small projects - are important, but we don’t follow them, don’t register them in our system. These are e.g. projects that are done by public schools in Kraków, but the municipality is not engaged in their implementation."(Manager 2)*

In the Trondheim municipality, projects are developed to deal with different issues. They are diverse also in terms of stakeholders involved in the process of their execution: they are organized on city to city level, local and international level. Some of the types of projects that are carried out by the Trondheim municipality are, EU projects, projects that are associated with the Research Counsel of Norway, public PhD-projects, national / regional development projects (for example, "Helseplattformen" – The health platform will acquire and introduce a new, common patient record at hospitals and municipalities throughout Central Norway), own development projects (for example, "Helhetlig ledelse" – Holistic / comprehensive management), construction projects, IT projects and public procurement projects. There is no central unit that has an overview of total number of projects that the Trondheim municipality conducts or involved in.

In Kraków the EFO may be called a project knowledge hub. The growing number of projects led to its creation in 2007. The office is composed of two divisions. One of them is responsible for the implementation of infrastructure projects, and the other - so-called "soft" projects (mostly regarding culture and social issues). The EFO delivers a lot of project–related services for the organization and is a kind of organization’s Project

Management Office (PMO). However, this department does not implement projects by itself. It is a supporting unit for other departments of the office:

> *"In fact, we always cooperate with other departments in the implementation of projects. (…) They know how to best organize e.g. a festival, and we know how to best write a proposal for funding, and then how to manage a project during implementation. " (Manager 2)*

In the Trondheim municipality, there are several experts who are responsible for / support project management processes and project managers. They are scattered around the organization. As a representative from the Trondheim municipality said:

> *"There is no overall, one central formal unit for providing support for both project management processes and experience-sharing processes."*

5.2 Strategies and tools for capturing and managing knowledge

In surveyed offices there are some principles of project knowledge sharing. In both cases it was emphasized that learning is not only based on the successful projects, but also on project failures. Learning from project mistakes was considered particularly important in Trondheim municipality:

> *"It's not any problem here, talking about failures. I think that if we really should learn something, it's not from success. The failed project was a big eye opener. If I should make any efforts to establish such project again I will be much careful, much more concerned about getting dedicated persons in the project. (...)" (Manager 1)*

The interlocutors also highlighted that planning "perfect project" actually is impossible, no matter what project management "gurus" write in the books:

> *"There are always problems in projects. I do not know any project that would be implemented in a manner totally consistent with the initial project application form. There are always some deviations from the original plan." (Manager 2)*

This confirms that one of the most important skills in the project management process is the ability to learn from failures and to respond to changes and manage them.

In the offices we researched, there are multiple tools that allow to acquire and manage project knowledge. It seems that due to the large number of projects financed externally (from EU funds), this "project knowledge toolbox" is better developed in the case of Kraków City Council. Although a large part of these tools is highly formalized, the respondents emphasized the importance of informal knowledge sharing between people and projects:

> *"You can make a project report, but how many people really read this report?" (Manager 1)*

Among the solutions used in the project knowledge management process, we can distinguish the following:

- Project Methodologies: In Kraków there is a customized project methodology, based on Prince2, that must be followed by every project implemented by the office. The methodology, which is called "Project Management Process" is available online and covers whole project life cycle (http://www.bip.krakow.pl/?dok_id=20521).
- IT systems: Kraków's EFO uses a system that is a customized version of MS Enterprise Project Management. Access to the system has dozens of project managers and clerks who are involved in the project work. Every project manager must upload and maintain project information in the system.
- In Project Office in Kraków, the team uses also internal electronic database, which is customized version of MS Excel. In this database information is gathered by project office employees (17 people). Information is very detailed and it covers not only project pan and activities, but also funding procedures and all correspondence with the external funding bodies.
- Meetings: In both offices there are regular meetings organized, during which project best practices are shared. In Trondheim such meetings are held every month, in Kraków they are organized once in three months. In Kraków the meeting is called "Project Managers' forum" and it gathers over 50 people – project managers, project office employees, but also executive managers and decision makers. Every project must be presented at the beginning and after it is completed. It helps to share project experiences between divisions and levels of management.

There are also separate meeting in the project office (once a week), during which the team discusses most urgent project issues.

- Study visits: Meetings in the form of visits are also means for sharing knowledge in the Trondheim municipality. In this regard, we will present the following description that of a project called "Production Kitchen" that the Trondheim municipality was involved in (Ekambaram, 2008). "Production Kitchen" delivered food to the municipality's institutions and private institutions; nursing homes and house-dwelling users are the primary receivers of the food.

One of the key project members who worked in the Trondheim municipality happened to know a kitchen-chef at a facility similar to the "Production Kitchen" that had been built in Odense in Denmark. This project member decided to contact the kitchen-chef in Denmark with the project's architect, in order to get some understanding about the facility in Denmark; especially, to obtain knowledge about functions and layout of the facility. The architect described the traveling to Denmark was highly worthy, since he had not had any idea in the very beginning of the project about his possible contribution to building the "Production Kitchen". As he puts it, he was blank at that time, and the visit made him to gain knowledge on working with the construction of the "Production Kitchen". During the visit to Denmark, these two individuals from Norway observed and looked at the facility in Denmark, and talked to the kitchen-chef and other workers there, regarding the characteristics and functions of the facility. They noted down the valuable information from the observation and discussion. They, then, tried to form sketches about a possible layout of the "Production Kitchen" in Trondheim. Here, personal contacts gave the opportunity for the project participants to know possible knowledge sources. Their visit to Denmark provided them the knowledge that could help them to move on to the next stages of the project.

6. Analysis and discussion

The aim of this study was to understand what characterizes processes of inter-project knowledge sharing in public organizations. Our work was of preliminary character, which can be considered as the first step that would lead to more extensive research on the chosen topic in the future. We based our work on literature review and two case studies. The literature review indicated that there are some specific conditions that support processes of inter-project knowledge sharing in general. Also, public organizations can create strategies of inter-project knowledge capturing, maintaining and sharing. Below, we will refer the results of our research to the theoretical framework that we presented in the literature review.

6.1 Formal and informal approaches to inter-project knowledge sharing – impact of the organizational structure

Findings of our analysis indicate that there is a link between the organizational structure of the public organization and its willingness to formalize and centralize project knowledge management processes. In case of Municipality of Kraków, an organization with very hierarchical organizational structure, project knowledge processes are highly formalized and centralized. There is one main unit responsible for processes related to project knowledge. At the central level, it plays the role of a hub of project knowledge, supporting other departments with its know-how. In Trondheim municipality, which is characterized by a flatter organizational structure, activities related to project knowledge are decentralized. Knowledge is gathered in a less formal way in all units that implement projects. Both organizations replicate therefore their structure in knowledge management processes. It can therefore be assumed that in public organizations, the processes of sharing project knowledge between projects will be strongly dependent on their organizational structure, which is connected with organizational culture in general. This indicates the relevance of adopting a model (the refined Syllk model (Duffield & Whitty, 2015)) that takes into account structural and cultural aspects of project management and knowledge management processes.

6.2 Strategies for capturing and sharing inter-project knowledge

Strategies for acquiring and sharing knowledge between projects result from hierarchization and centralization of processes related to project knowledge management that organization develops. When the office's project management procedures are hierarchized and centralized (Municipality of Kraków), the methods of project knowledge gathering and sharing are more formal (e.g. databases). Furthermore, we mentioned earlier that work roles change between the employees in the Krakow city council. This means that there is some extent of job-rotation in the organization that provides opportunities for learning, knowledge sharing and competence

development. The degree of formalization in the Municipality of Krakow suggests that there is more focus on the structural perspective when devising strategies for knowledge sharing in the organization.

When it comes to the Trondheim municipality, more flexible, less formalized ways of distributing project knowledge among employees were main approaches towards inter-project knowledge sharing in the organization. This would indicate that the degree of flexibility is higher in the organization.

6.3 Informal inter-project knowledge sharing

Now, we will look at the visit from the Trondheim municipality to Denmark in connection with the project "Production Kitchen" that we mentioned earlier: It is obvious that the participants of “Production Kitchen” made use of information on potential knowledge sources and thus carried out their visits. Obtaining this information seems accidental and is through personal contacts. Personal contacts can facilitate sharing of valuable information in many ways including in an accidental manner. Social networking seems, in this regard, an important means to facilitate creating an arena for sharing information on sources of existing knowledge.

Organizational members can gain or update their information on knowledge sources through many ways and at any time. This information cannot always be made available to other potential knowledge seekers through formal systems. There can be several reasons for this. One reason can be that the individuals who know information on knowledge resources (or who have recently become known to information on knowledge sources) may think that this information is not important enough to distribute through formal systems. Schindler et al. (2003) points out this kind of behavior as wrong modesty. Informal atmosphere in communication and social networks can facilitate sharing of information, which has been considered as trivial. Another aspect in informal communications / systems is the possibility of having a high degree of openness between knowledge seekers and knowledge providers. Through informal communication, these individuals can be comfortable enough to open up themselves to say what sort of problem they have and what sort of knowledge that they need. Social networking and informal communication can therefore foster sharing of information on knowledge sources (Fernie et al., 2003). This informal nature reflects the cultural perspective that we mentioned earlier. We will look closer into it now. When two sets of people (people from Norway and from Denmark) who can have different sets of assumptions, beliefs, and attitudes as well as varying degree of understanding of a concept (the concept of “Production Kitchen”) meet and discuss about the concept at the place where the concept is materialized as a tangible exhibit, then the meeting tends to create some positive effects.

Mental models of the two sets of the people can be communicated and exchanged effectively, since the tangible exhibit (the facility similar to the “Production Kitchen”) is situated in front of them as a source of reference and knowledge. In addition, the cultural aspects (assumptions, beliefs and expectations as well as corresponding preparation, etc.) that influenced the construction and functioning of the facility can be conveyed and understood as these people observed the facility and its operation. By looking at the facility and discussing about it directly, can lead the involved individuals to create a shared system of meaning. This shared system of meaning can facilitate knowledge sharing, including the tacit elements attached to it (Bresnen et al., 2003). The perceptions, assumptions and values that the knowledge providers attached to their understanding of the facility and its functions can be shared with the help of the shared system of meaning. The above description also reflects the notion of knowledge-as-meaning that we presented earlier.

7. Concluding remarks

Based on our understanding on our case studies, we believe that the Municipality of Krakow is focusing comparatively more on the structural perspective (and its corresponding strategies, tools, etc.) than the cultural perspectives, when it comes to knowledge sharing between its projects. The Trondheim municipality is less formalized, and hence suggesting that it has comparatively more focus on the cultural perspective (and its corresponding knowledge sharing strategies, tools, etc.). We believe that both the structural and cultural perspectives are important for knowledge sharing between projects, and we chose to utilize the refined Syllk model (Duffield & Whitty, 2015) in this regard.

Furthermore, we also see that both organizations that we studied are interested in harvesting the benefits of knowledge sharing between projects; for example, Trondheim municipality is involved in starting a research and development project with academia to address knowledge sharing and learning issues in the organization. Our

paper can therefore contribute to knowledge sharing initiatives that these two organizations take – for instance, pointing out the relevance of applying both the structural and the cultural perspectives in this regard.

Based on our preliminary research, we identify areas that will require further studies: (1) The accidental nature of obtaining information on relevant knowledge sources triggers a question: Can this accidental nature be structured, at least to a certain extent, so as to ensure the availability of as much information on knowledge sources as possible? To what extent can knowledge mapping help in this regard? (2) The influence of organizational culture of public organizations on their inter-project learning processes. In our study, we observed that project knowledge management processes mimic the organizational structures. (3) Issues related to the influence of national culture on the level of trust in public organizations, and thus on knowledge sharing processes (4) Since this paper is based on a preliminary study of an ongoing research collaboration, we acknowledge a need to explore the two public organizations more and proportionately – specially, Trondheim municipality.

There is an urgent need in the world of projectified public organizations to use the knowledge that projects produce. Therefore, focusing on learning and knowledge sharing between projects can contribute to development of public sector in general.

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