

Exploiting the potential of personal networks to support knowledge management

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Abstract:

Personal networks can help build capabilities for effective knowledge management and organizations can leverage personal networks to manage employees' knowledge effectively. Analysis of knowledge management practices in a public sector organization in Kuwait revealed the knowledge workers made heavy use of social networking and digital tools to build personal networks and tried to stay in touch with them on regular basis. They gave preference to communication with people from the same unit, team, organisation, and specialisation. While social media was used heavily, the use of professional networking sites such as LinkedIn was comparatively on the lower side. The study found that comments on blogs and editing of wikis were less frequent. These activities would have been helpful to take full advantage of personal networks.

Keywords: *Personal networks; contacts management; social networking tools; personal knowledge management.*

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM), in this paper, refers to creation, sharing, and use of knowledge in a wider context, while personal knowledge management (PKM) focuses on individual employees in the context of their work. In this context, steps for learning with flexibility and professional development are also considered within the scope of knowledge management. Knowledge worker is used for employees with graduate degrees and professional assignments in their areas of specializations. Their work produces information and knowledge as a by-product. Similarly, Personal network refers to contacts known to an individual with whom one would expect to interact in order to support a given set of activities.

There appears to be an increasing realization that knowledge is in the network as opposed to documents and archives, and that access to the context of knowledge is through personal connections (Anklam, 2009). Social media applications including blogging, wikis, and social networking services are becoming very crucial in sharing and building knowledge. There is more emphasis on enabling social networks as a primary focus for KM work. Knowledge workers ought to be able to make sense of the plethora of social media tools, social networking sites, and web applications for building and maintaining personal networks for successful collaboration.

Developing and maintaining a personal network is often an invisible activity (Efimova, 2005). Some components of knowledge work are beyond organisational control and knowledge worker productivity is a shared responsibility between the individuals and the organisation. Employees bring their expertise in and take responsibility for their learning and skills. A powerful way to promote connectivity in an organisation is to work through the personal networks of employees. Knowledge workers tend to be more successful in greatly diverse entrepreneurial networks. Providing employees with a means of planning their personal network development is an effective way to promote connectivity (Cross, 2005).

Boh (2007) suggests that an open and warm climate has a positive influence on individuals' preference to use personal networks. They tend to have a positive opinion of the usefulness of institutionalised routines such as meetings and dialogues. Christakis and Fowler (2008) highlight that interactions become stronger by people's comments on blogs or revisions made to wikis. *Following* and *re-tweeting* people on Twitter and other networking sites allow knowledge workers to reflect and enhance knowledge. It is important to turn attention to links and topics that knowledge workers find interesting and people they enjoy reading or following. Knowledge workers should know about their colleagues' areas of expertise – their hot buttons and styles. When a number of people tweet the same news or re-tweet the same things, it helps to strengthen the bonding of the community around a shared meme. Inkpen and Tsang (2005) asserted that network relationships and the knowledge dimension of networks are strongly related to competitive success in organizations. Edward (2009) has rightly asserted that it is people and their relationships that make the difference for the competitive edge.

Current social media and networks have the ability to allow knowledge workers greatly expand their connections and engage in whole range of activities online. Conversing with people on Twitter, seeing people on Facebook and sharing resources on social network sites all provide a more faceted picture of people around and provide an entirely different experience. Razmerita, Kirchner, and Sudzina (2009) draw attention to another important aspect. They highlight that personal networks would reconcile the conflicting interests of managing organisational knowledge with personal objectives. KM tools enable a more effective way of sharing and managing knowledge at the personal level. Social software plays a multifaceted role in communicating, collaborating, sharing, and managing knowledge. Knowledge workers will gain a better understanding of the potential role of social media tools for harnessing and managing personal knowledge.

Chati (2012) presented a model suggesting that PKN can be better adapted to the demands of the new knowledge environments. The PKN model represents a knowledge ecological approach to KM. The tools that are used for blogging and tweeting help generate and consume content in multiple ways and allow share ideas, activities, events, and interests within the personal networks Smedely (2009) pointed out that with the use of more informal

approaches in workplace communication through modern technologies, success is often determined by the individual knowledge management (KM) of the employees themselves indirectly providing organisational benefits. Smedley (2009) proposed a model for PKM, relating traditional organisational KM theory to individual knowledge acquisition and management processes and the influences of peer and hierarchical communities to PKM. Ismail and Ahmad (2012) and Jarcho (2012) pointed out that network learning is a continuous process of seeking, sensing, and sharing. Seeking is finding things out and keeping them up to date. Networks can therefore provide a good source of support for the strengthening of knowledge management.

Studies reviewed above helped develop an understanding about the role of personal networks in knowledge management. This is portrayed in the conceptual framework shown in Figure 1. This framework guided the study of personal knowledge management practices on which this paper is based.

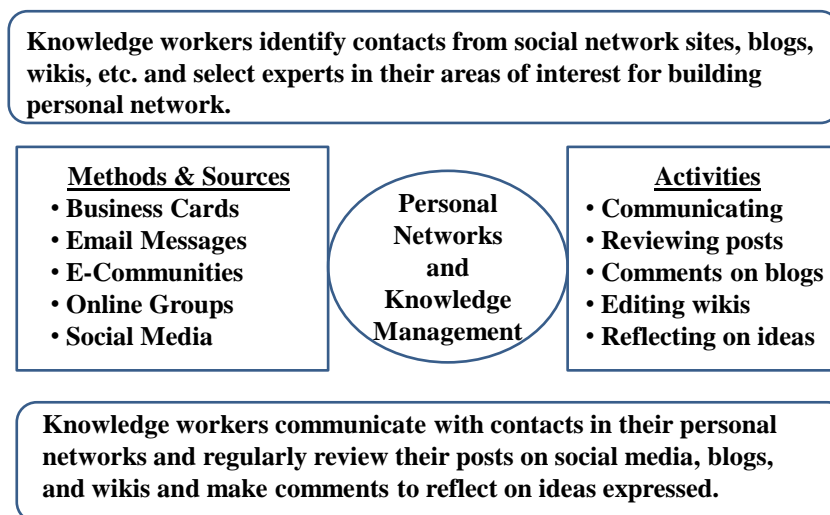


Figure 1: Conceptual Framework for Using Personal Networks for KM

The conceptual framework shown in Figure 1 provides a context to discuss the personal knowledge management practices of knowledge workers in the public sector institutions drawing an example from a ministry in Kuwait. In this paper, the PKM practices are discussed with an emphasis on the potential of personal networks to support knowledge management.

BACKGROUND AND CONTEXT

This author conducted a study of personal knowledge management practices of officers in a ministry in Kuwait (name of the ministry is not revealed on request of the participants of the study). The findings were reported **in two papers** (Chaudhry, 2013; 2014). While the same set of data is used for this paper, this paper is an enhanced write-up with a different orientation. New references have been added to the studies that focused more on personal networks. In addition, the presentation of information is more in a conversational style and no tables and numbers have been included.

Seventy-four officers provided information about their personal networks and related activities. A majority of them held bachelor's degree; had up to five years of work experience; and were 30 years or under. These officers reported as part of their PKM practices that they gave importance to identifying contacts for future interaction and kept record of these contacts using different methods. In addition to the traditional method of preparing lists from business cards, they made use of online discussion groups and communities of practice to identify new contacts. Some officers indicated email as a source of identification of personal contacts. While the two articles referred to above focused on description of personal knowledge management practices in detail, this paper covers only two aspects: building and maintaining of personal networks and using these networks for enhancing learning and knowledge.

BUILDING PERSONAL NETWORKS

Identification of relevant contacts not only allows knowledge workers to obtain information but also pushes that information to them from trusted sources (Jarche, 2012). Various email clients provide excellent features to capture information about contacts and turn them into personal networks. For example, *Google Contacts* is a way to store and organise contact information about the people with whom knowledge workers communicate. This feature of Gmail helps capture basic information and allows users to add extended information. In addition, this feature helps integrate with other applications, such as documents and calendars, through its auto-complete function. Users can also synchronise contacts between *GoogleApps* and a mobile device in order to see their contacts outside of a browser. Similar capabilities are available in email clients used by different enterprises, such as *Outlook, Exchange, Lotus*.

Most officers at the ministry used smart phones, which have excellent features to integrate email and provide assistance in identifying contacts and converting these into personal networks. While these were in wide use for personal purposes among the participants of the study, not much enthusiasm appeared among them to exploit these in an organisational context.

Knowledge workers in the public sector in Kuwait were selective in maintaining their contacts. They gave importance to proximity with the identified contacts. They preferred to communicate with people from the same unit, team, organisation, and area of specialisation. As one's network grows, it is difficult to remember everything about everyone (O'Hara (2009). Anyone would benefit from contact management systems if contact information is spread across multiple devices, files, sticky notes, and drawers. This has become particularly important with social networking sites such as LinkedIn, Facebook, and Twitter. These online social networks allow users to maintain contacts and converse within that network. By using third-party tools, knowledge workers can have the flexibility to manage communications from a variety of sources.

A majority of officers who participated in my study of personal knowledge management tried to stay in touch on a regular basis with the contacts that they had identified. Telephone and email were the most preferred means of communication with their personal contacts. Only a small number considered it important to record the physical location of their contacts. This might reflect that face-to-face interaction with contacts may not be a priority for these officers. Similarly, the positions and ranks of contacts do not reflect the frequency or selection of method. It is somewhat odd that there was a lower

preference for follow-up activities, such as keeping notes about the areas of interest, hot buttons, and styles of relevant contacts. The work culture in the ministry showed a priority prevalent among officers to smart phones as a way to communicate with colleagues within and outside the ministry. For matters that required formal communication, there was still a preference for formal printed letters and communication through fax. Email has not gained popularity for communication in professional and official matters.

The need for and importance of personal networks to strengthen knowledge has been emphasised in the professional literature. Cliff and Rhine (2002) suggested turning conversations into a rich source using the untapped knowledge of the employees of an enterprise and developing this into an effective knowledge network through peer-to-peer interactive communities. Brogan (2010) advised keeping abreast of the news of people in the network through Facebook, LinkedIn, and Twitter, e.g., congratulating them on their success. Connecting with one's contacts in personal networks when attending various seminars, meetings, etc. helps deepen relationships. Flood (2012) declared that building a powerful personal network is the key to success for any professional and advised diversification of personal networks and their immersion in learning. Activities performed for building and maintaining contacts by knowledge workers in Kuwait are given in Figure 2.

Save phone numbers and send messages or email once a while for continuity of contact.
Determine the proximity of personal contacts (team, unit, organization, etc.).
Study the frequency of interaction of personal contacts
Maintain an updated list of contacts through email or a database with relevant details.
Record the physical location of important contacts (office, organization, etc.).
Examine the level of contacts with regards to the rank and position.
Keep notes about the areas of interest, hot buttons, and styles of relevant contacts.
Keep track of attendance at conferences to collaborate with.

Figure 2: Activities to Build Networks

It was reported that there was a lower frequency of activities such as taking notes, paying attention to posting by contacts, and tracking of contacts in conferences. This might be a reflection on the perceptions of officers about the importance of networking. There is a need to emphasise that participation in personal networks and time spent on networking activities are an investment in professional and personal development. Impact of these activities desired to be further investigated.

Officers at the ministry used a variety of social media tools for building networks and communication. *Twitter* was the most heavily used social networking tool. As expected, Facebook turned out to be the participants' second choice. It was interesting to note that the professional networking tool LinkedIn yielded low mean score. In another study we found that knowledge workers in the corporate sector preferred the use of *LinkedIn* (Chaudhry, Rehman, and Al-Sughair, 2015). This might be because of the nature of the participants' jobs. They carry out their responsibilities within the policy framework of the ministry, requiring less interaction with outside professionals. Officers at the Ministry also frequently used *Instagram* and *WhatsApp*. Use of *Twitter* indicated the frequency at a higher level, whereas Facebook yielded a lower frequency of use. It is also interesting to note that a majority of the knowledge workers reported the use of LinkedIn at a lower level. Overall, use of social

networking sites (*Twitter* and *Facebook*) and social software (wikis and blogs) was quite frequent.

Professional literature suggests that PKM is not just about using Twitter, Facebook, or other tools. To realise their real potential, deep immersion in social media is necessary (Pisani, 2009; Jarche, 2012). In my opinion, knowledge workers in the future will need more social and self-managed approaches to learning within their organisation. Gurteen (2009) has highlighted three key benefits of using Twitter: it lowers resistance to sharing information, makes it easy to tap into a global mind-set, and provides quick recognition and feedback for what one thinks and knows. I feel that with the widespread popularity of Twitter, it can become one of the most powerful knowledge sharing and relationship building tools in public sector organisations.

Knowledge workers at the ministry used a variety of digital tools to create personalized learning environments that helped build meaningful connections with large networks. They browsed the networking sites to gain knowledge by engaging in discussions with contacts. There appears a potential of use of these networks for professional development and learning.

STRENGTHENING KM THROUGH PERSONAL NETWORKS

Building a network of colleagues is helpful in seeking and finding knowledge. Personal networks allow to gather information from trusted sources. Therefore, knowledge workers need to take time to reflect upon what they have learnt. Blog and online communities are powerful means for building and strengthening knowledge. But to take advantage of the potential of personal networks, knowledge workers ought to be active participants in these networks through regular browsing, responding to communication, and commenting on posts for enhancing knowledge.

Figure 3 lists the main activities that were performed by knowledge workers to take advantage of their personal networks for enhancing knowledge.

Communicated regularly with contacts in the network that have similar expertise.
Followed people whose work they admired.
Tried to gain access to the networks of of their contacts.
Followed people that their contacts enjoyed reading or following.
Followed and re-tweeted and browsed their tags on networking sites.
Shared information on social network sites like LinkedIn and Facebook.
Responded to their comments on blogs or edits made to wikis.
Subscribed to and commented on blogs of selected contacts.

Figure 3: Activities on Personal Networks

Officers gave the highest priority to regular communication with contacts that have expertise in their area of responsibility. A large number of knowledge workers considered it very important to follow up with contacts whose work they admired. The importance attached to activities (following the networks of their contacts) showed that officers at the ministry appreciated these activities. Officers considered activities of focusing on contacts' networks very important for strengthening PKM. Christakis and Fowler (2008) pointed out that

professionals tied to the behaviours and sources of knowledge of those with whom they interacted. These interactions include *subscribing* to and *commenting* on others' blogs *information* on social network sites such as LinkedIn and Facebook. In these areas, the officers at the Kuwaiti ministry were not very active. They did not indicate these as priority areas.

Social bookmarking is important for capturing information in relevant areas and leveraging collaborative learning. These activities also yielded comparatively lower scores at the ministry. It was unexpected to see a lower mean score for activities involving making comments on blogs and editing wikis. These activities are very important in PKM. Spiglanin (2012) stated that various social platforms provided short-form blogging, threaded discussions, link sharing, and a number of other social media services. These social platforms offer different types of relationships (friends on Facebook, followers on Twitter, etc.). These may serve as nodes on several social and workplace networks. There is a great potential in these services to create awareness about the role of these activities in supporting PKM in public sector institutions. Building a network of colleagues is helpful in seeking and finding knowledge. Personal networks not only allow us to gather information but also push information to us from trusted sources. Therefore, knowledge workers need to take time to reflect upon what they have learnt. Blogs and other online self-publishing tools are powerful means for this purpose. There is a need that steps are taken to create more awareness about the importance of these activities on personal networks to enhance personal knowledge management.

Jarche (2012) pointed out that sensing is how we personalise information and use it. Sensing also includes reflection and applying what we have learned. Sharing includes exchanging resources, ideas, and experiences with our networks and collaborating with our colleagues. The critical part of PKM is in personalising information and adding value through filtering, validation, synthesis, presentation, and customisation. Knowledge workers should take time to reflect upon what they have learned and do something with it. Blogs and other online self-publishing tools are powerful tools for reflection. Reflecting by writing is a start, but we then need to integrate new ways of thinking and doing into our lives. This is a good beginning: reflection, followed by making our thoughts explicit and public.

LESSONS LEARNT

Review of PKM practices in the public sector in Kuwait helped learn the following:

- Knowledge in the new environment is greater within networks and access to the context of knowledge in a network is through personal connections.
- While there is a trend to use networking tools, knowledge workers in the public sector in Kuwait still give preference to traditional methods for personal contact identification. They also used online discussion groups and communities of practices to identify contacts.
- Knowledge workers try to stay in touch with their personal contacts on a regular basis using email and telephone communications. They give preference to communicate with people from the same unit, team, organisation, and specialisation.
- Knowledge workers in the public sector frequently use social networking tools and services such as Twitter, Facebook, blogs, and wikis while use of LinkedIn was comparatively on the lower side.

- Knowledge workers in the public sector in Kuwait made a good use of digital tools to build networks but did not take advantage of these networks to increase learning. Knowledge workers considered it important to follow up with contacts whose work they admired but did not show much practice of making comments on blogs and editing wikis. These activities are crucial for reflecting and learning.
- Threads of comments help knowledge workers to transform their personal networks into learning networks.
- Strong personal learning networks strengthen personal knowledge management and will eventually support organizational knowledge management.
- Organizations should create awareness that networks are becoming an integral part of building knowledge and skills and managing personal knowledge.

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