Knowledge management practices in Malawi

Raphael T Mpofu

University of South Africa, School of Management Sciences, P. O. Box 392, Pretoria, 0003, South Africa.
E-mail: mpofurt@unisa.ac.za. Tel: +27-12-429-4497.

Accepted 11 February, 2011

In the 21st century, knowledge management has become as important as information technology and has therefore, led to significant gains in productivity and profitability. However, few organisations in Malawi have implemented formal knowledge management systems. The question arises as to whether such organisations do not have knowledge management practices in place at all, or whether such practices are more informal. This article reports the results of a study that looked at the extent to which Malawi organisations have knowledge management practices in place. A survey was done using questionnaire to establish how widely knowledge management practices were used by 40 organisations in different sectors in Malawi. Overall, 15- knowledge management practices were identified as the most important practices. The main findings was that although, most Malawi organisations may not have a formal knowledge management system, knowledge management practices are in place and that they benefit employees. Respondents accept that organisations in the future will be forced to introduce formal knowledge management practices by endogenous and exogenous factors.

Key words: Knowledge management, knowledge management practices, tacit knowledge, KM, Malawi.

INTRODUCTION

Despite knowledge management (KM) being the fastest growing field after information technology (Davenport and Prusack, 1998), it is generally believed that there is limited application of KM practices at the organisational level in developing countries (Okunoye et al., 2002). A number of studies in developed countries have shown a huge surge in companies implementing various forms of KM practices (Skyrme, 1997). There are also studies that indicate that a number of software companies have developed KM systems and software used for implementing KM practices. When evaluating the success of KM, one has to ensure that the evaluation is specific; it should either evaluate the use of KM systems, which typically include software and formal KM structures within the organisation, or the use of KM practices in the organisation, which are sometimes difficult to identify as these practices are often informal. This study looked at KM as a managerial practice, similar to any other management function, e.g. marketing, human resource management or accounting, and sought to identify the extent to which Malawian organisations have adopted KM practices.

Studies show that in the 21st century, certain trends of society will affect companies’ ability to implement KM systems for competitive advantage, survival and financial profitability (Drucker, 1995). The knowledge economy has become an engine for global economic growth and an essential factor for developing an individual’s future life, employability and promotion prospects, as well as the competitiveness of a company and the economic growth of a nation (Nonaka, 1994; Spender and Grant, 1996). The traditional economy emphasised land, equipment and human resources but the knowledge economy emphasises knowledge-based economic development. One who owns knowledge will create and possess wealth and KM has become one of the main study trends in the field of management (Drucker, 1995).

Knowledge always resides in individuals and can only be tested and verified when applied (Skyrme, 2002). Polanyi (1966) states, “personal or tacit knowledge is extremely important for human cognition, because people acquire knowledge by the active creation and organisation of their own experience”. This distinction is important if organisations are to implement KM practices successfully, because tacit knowledge is personal and specific to a situation (Allee, 1997) and it is difficult to share. Without putting in place a proper strategy for knowledge sharing, the organisation loses its competitive edge, especially
in high employee-turnover situations. Unlike engineering and medical companies, service organisations or those companies with aging employees are affected the most (Nonaka, 1994).

In managing their companies, executives are now focusing their efforts on creating learning organisations and implementing KM (Rollo, 2002). While this trend is currently prevalent in western countries, it is not yet widely implemented in many developing economies, particularly in Africa. This is strange, firstly because for many decades, knowledge in families of African people had been passed on to children, who have in turn passed it on to later generations (Atteh, 1989). Some of the knowledge areas critical for economic development in these countries are: “Transfer of knowledge on indigenous soil taxonomies, indigenous knowledge for potential use of local plants and forest products, animal behaviour and acquired hunting skills, local knowledge of important tree species for agroforestry, firewood, integrated pest management, the control of soil erosion and soil fertility, fodder management, indigenous agronomic practices such as terracing, fallowing, organic fertilizer application, crop-rotation and multi-cropping” (Atteh, 1989).

Economic development in Africa has been modelled on western civilisation with specific craftsmen programmes, apprenticeship programmes, on-the-job training programmes, exchange programmes and expatriate programmes driven by knowledge sharing and transfer (Fluitman, 1992). One would expect KM practices to be fully formalised and that KM practices would play a major role in shaping organisational strategy in most African countries. Therefore, the aim of the study on which the article is based was to determine the extent to which these practices are implemented given this expectation just stated.

LITERATURE REVIEW

One of the challenges and major sources of confusion around KM is the multiple definitions. KM covers a broad range of issues that can lead to misinterpretation by organisations (Harris et al., 1998). There is some consensus that KM is based on individual and organisational learning (Davenport and Prusak, 1998; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), but varieties of elements are included in the definitions of KM.

O’Dell et al. (1999) define KM as “a conscious strategy of getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time and helping people to share and put information into action in ways that will strive to improve organisational performance”. Beckman (1997) refers to KM as a way of formalising and gaining access to experience, knowledge and expertise that leads to superior performance, innovation and enhances customer experience. Newman (1991) identifies intellectual assets as being critical for knowledge retention and can be exploited by the organisation to gain competitive advantage. Corporate culture and structure are seen as enablers of knowledge flow (Armbrecht et al., 2001) while Quinn and Snyder (1997) suggests that human resources and information technology are core to a successful KM strategy. Culture (Leonard, 1995; Szulanski, 1996), technology and leadership (Anderson, 1996), organisational adjustments and employee motivation (Szulanski, 1996) are identified as critical factors in successfully introducing and using KM practices. Skyrme (1998) identifies knowledge leadership, knowledge creation and a culture of sharing, continuous learning and a systematic organisational knowledge process. Skyrme (1997) defines KM as “the explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge and its associated processes of creating, gathering, organising, diffusion, use and exploitation. It requires turning personal knowledge into corporate knowledge that can be widely shared throughout an organisation and applied”. He further argues that formalising KM activities in an organisation may help create consistency of methods and the transfer of best practices. Furthermore, knowledge should add value to the organisation. Given a myriad of changes and challenges facing organisations due to globalisation, KM is a viable strategy of creating and utilising knowledge in the organisation to gain competitive advantage.

The goal of KM is to leverage the available knowledge within the organisation in order to gain competitive advantage. Implementing KM strategies will extend the knowledge base, used to adapt or change organisational operations that will lead to a more efficient and knowledge sharing organisation (Jantz, 2001). KM also aims to draw out the tacit knowledge people have (Kim, 2005).

The fragmented and informal approach to implement KM practices leads to knowledge loss (Orange et al., 2003). Given the highly knowledge-intensive nature of most organisations in this globalised, high-technology environment, organisations should formally manage their KM practices (Payne and Sheehan, 2004). The need to innovate and improve business performance also requires formalised KM practices (Kamara et al., 2002; Salisbury, 2003).

Senior managers should accept the role of KM as a strategic tool (Davies, 2000), and support effective incentives to encourage employees with expertise to share their knowledge (Strouse, 2001) without fear of job losses, promotion or loss of income. Organisations develop and encourage the transfer and retention of knowledge of their workers (Baird et al., 2000; Cross and Israeilt, 2000; Dixon, 2000). Brelade and Harman (2001) suggest that human resource managers play an important role in knowledge management, which adds to an organisation’s competitive advantage and excellence (Brelade and Harman, 2001).

Having defined KM and its goal, an investigation of the cycle of KM implementation in the organisation is necessary. According to Skyrme (1998), the cycle of KM
implementation can be classified as follows:

1. Knowledge creation;
2. Knowledge capturing and acquisition, and
3. Knowledge sharing.

**Knowledge creation**

The success of an organisation is measured according to the key objectives set by shareholders, directors or specific board arrangements, depending on whether it is a profit organisation or not. In the case of profit organisation, the main objectives are usually maximisation of shareholder value, profits or market share. Sometimes the objectives could be the minimisation of costs or improvements. At this stage, the knowledge that had to be managed is knowledge of the organisation’s operation, suppliers, customers, processes, as well as legislation governing the industry and its operations. The creation of this knowledge requires participation of all employees in the organisation and a specific process is required to allow for the collaborative arrangements (Newell et al., 2002).

Interaction and communication lead to the development of new skills, new products, better ideas and efficient processes (Probst et al., 2000). The ability to create knowledge leads to useful ideas and solutions (Bhatt, 2001). Organisations that know their needs, value and prioritise that knowledge, and develop systems for leveraging and sharing usually gain a strong competitive advantage (Huseman and Goodman, 1999).

Once the knowledge is created, it has to be captured and acquired. This process entails extracting tacit knowledge from individuals in order for KM to be stored and later shared amongst employees.

**Knowledge capturing and acquisition**

Redundancies, retirement and death usually lead to loss of knowledge value (Probst et al., 2000) because the knowledge is held in people’s heads and not captured. It is for this reason that organisations should put in place systems for knowledge capturing, for example employee profiles and regular updates on organisational processes. Huseman and Goodman (1999) warn of the dangers of not capturing knowledge because often organisations may fail to respond quickly to market needs or other challenges they face due to a knowledge or skills shortage. Sometimes, the consequences to the organisation in failing to capture knowledge are cancelled orders, loss of customers to other suppliers or additional expenses incurred in outsourcing (Probst et al., 2000). Shanhong (2000) suggests that knowledge in organisations can be acquired by putting in place the following practices:

1. Establishing knowledge links or networking with other organisations and with institutions of all kinds;
2. Attending training programmes, conferences, seminars and workshops;
3. Subscribing to online or virtual communities of practice; and
4. Buying knowledge products or resources in the form of manuals, blueprints and research reports.

**Knowledge sharing**

Expertise that exists in people is mostly tacit rather than explicit (Branin, 2003). It therefore makes this knowledge difficult to be shared unless organisations deliberately set up systems and create opportunities for knowledge sharing. While there is agreement that knowledge is shared in most organisations, a lot of knowledge sharing is entirely uncoordinated (Webb, 1998). More emphasis should be placed on formalizing knowledge sharing practices (Jantz, 2001).

Although, knowledge creation, capturing and sharing are difficult to implement formally for most organisations, Nonaka (1994) emphasises the need for organisations to create forums to look at their KM strategies and create a culture of KM creation, capturing and sharing. In a study conducted to determine KM practices in Canada, Earl (2001) identified and confirmed several of these KM practices for knowledge creation, capturing and acquisition and sharing.

The knowledge creation practices, capturing, acquisition practices, and sharing practices formed the basis of this study and will be discussed in materials and method of this study.

**MATERIALS AND METHODS**

The purpose of the study on which this article is based, was to explore KM practices that have been put in place by Malawian organisations. This study looked at KM practices used by 40 Malawian organisations in 2008 covering the following sectors: Transportation, banking, manufacturing and non-governmental organisations (NGOs). The organisations were selected using purposive sampling based on the first 40 companies to be willing to do a structured interview. The goal of purposeful sampling is to allow the researcher to “learn a great deal about issues of central importance to the purpose of the research” (Patton, 1990) rather than “to make generalised statements about the experiences of all participants” (Patton, 1990). The survey instrument used was a questionnaire that was completed by the researcher during the interviews. The questionnaire was adapted from a similar study carried out by Earl (2001) where knowledge management practices in Canada were investigated.

The questionnaire for this study tested 75 variables that measured the response to various KM practices. Each of the variables was measured on a dichotomous scale (that is, 0 to 1). As a way of reducing the number of variables and making sense of the results of the study, composite variables were calculated from a number of similar variables. These 15 composite variables were then grouped into two categories, namely, (a) policies, strategies and
leadership and, (b) knowledge capturing and acquisition. According to Rowe (2002), "such composites have been computed as factor scores or as simple, unit-weighted, additive indices of their indicators, regardless of the measurement or distributional properties of the constituent indicators, or their relative contribution to the composite "score". In this study, a unit-weighted approach was followed assuming that all variables contributed equally to the index or composite variable. As was previously discussed, it was observed that there were three phases in the KM cycle, namely knowledge creation, knowledge capture and acquisition and knowledge sharing. The focus in this study was mainly on knowledge capturing and acquisition to investigate how this part of the cycle influences or is influenced by organisational policies, strategy and leadership. A number of researchers, as was previously discussed under the literature review, have attested to the importance of having in place appropriate organisational policies, strategy and influential leadership to ensure a successful KM strategy implementation. The two proposed KM management practices model is presented as Figure 1. Table 1 shows the list of composite variables under the category policies and strategies. Most of these composite variables measured responses that demonstrated that the implementation of KM practices was positive to organisational performance and success. It should be noted that while most respondents were positive about how KM influenced the organisation, there were certain portfolios within the organisation that resisted the introduction of KM practices. Table 2 shows the list of composite variables under knowledge capture and acquisition. Most of the composite variables measured responses that positively influenced the implementation of KM practices. However, the last composite variable was included to allow the researcher to determine those factors that would prevent or negatively influence the implementation of KM practices.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Of the 40 companies interviewed, 60% were based in the Malawi capital city of Lilongwe, while the remainder was based in the industrial city of Blantyre. Of the respondents, 60% had more than 100 employees while 50% of the respondents had a turnover of more than MK100 million (about US $ 2 million). The findings show that 32 out of 40 (80%) organisations did not have a formal KM practices strategy. Given that so few organisations have a formal policy in place; it would seem that Malawi organisations did not have in place any KM practices.

The Table 3 presents a summary of variables, adapted from the Earl (2001) questionnaire, that were tested. The table shows the calculated Pearson’s chi square and the significance of the variables. Out of the 75 variables that were tested, only 15 variables are listed in the table based on their significance levels being less than or
equal to 0.05.

The Earl (2001) study showed that the adoption of new business strategies, such as implementing KM systems depended a great deal on employee size, turnover, location or type of sector. In this study, a cross-tabulation of the 15 significant variables was done against employee size, turnover, location and type of sector, but the results of this analysis showed that none of these variables had a significant impact on KM practice implementation. The p-values of the Pearson’s chi-square were insignificant at the 0.05 interval.

Fifteen KM practices were found to be in place in promoting organisational strategy implementation and competitiveness. From Table 3, it was observed that while the Earl (2001) study found that organisational leadership, policies and strategy played a major role in influencing KM practices, this study found that the majority of organisations did not view this category of KM practices as critical for the achievement of strategic goals of the organisation. Most of the composite variables that were significant fall in the category of knowledge capture and acquisition. This could also explain why only 8 out of 40 organisations had a formal KM strategy in place.

The study found that on average, 24 out of 40 organisations interviewed used at least three of the KM practices linked to organisational strategy. The Earl (2001) study also found that large organisations, as measured by employee size, tended to have in place organisation strategies linked to KM practices. A cross-tabulation test of KM practices linked to leadership, strategy and policies that were done in the Malawian study against a variable measuring the number of employees showed that there was no significant relationship between an organisation’s use of KM practices and the number of employee or organisation size.

In 26 of the organisations, KM practices were a responsibility of non-management workers while, in 24 of the 40 organisations, KM practices were a responsibility of managers and executives. In addition, it was also observed that 22 organisations agreed that workers shared knowledge or information by preparing written documentation, such as lessons learned, training manuals, good work practices, while 20 organisations stated that their organisation had a values system or culture, intended to promote knowledge sharing.

It was also observed that the organisations in the study did not include KM implementation as part of performance measurement, and that they did not utilise knowledge officers. Twenty-eight out of 40 organisations indicated that information was passed around the organisation without any barriers while 26 organisations agreed that employees were encouraged to openly share their knowledge. It was also noted that 22 respondents indicated that their managers openly shared knowledge with them. This seems to be in contrast with an earlier observation that managers in organisations did not

---

**Table 1. Composite variables: Policies and strategies.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composite variable</th>
<th>Sub-category</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KM practices are in place and they benefit employees</td>
<td>Policies category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM practices are in place and they enhance strategy</td>
<td>Policies category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion of KM practices within the organisation are for the benefit of employees</td>
<td>Policies category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promoting KM practices benefit employees within the organisation</td>
<td>Policies category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM practices promote the strategic position of the organisation externally</td>
<td>Strategy category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM practices promote the strategic position of the organisation internally</td>
<td>Strategy category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a portfolio that triggered KM practices</td>
<td>Strategy category</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a portfolio that resisted KM practices</td>
<td>Strategy category</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**Table 2. Composite variables: Knowledge capture and acquisition.**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composite variable</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Some portfolios in the organisation are responsible for KM practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation promotes sharing of KM practices</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation believes that there are benefits of KM for employees</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation believes that there are benefits of KM to the organisation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The organisation believes that there are benefits of KM for external stakeholders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain events will trigger the introduction of KM in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisations will provide financial resources for KM in the future</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>There is a portfolio that resisted KM practices</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Table 3. Key KM practices and Pearson’s chi-square and significance of variables.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Variable</th>
<th>No. of observation</th>
<th>$X^2$</th>
<th>Significance (P-value) value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Organisation uses formal mentoring practices, including apprenticeships</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Difficulty in capturing workers’ undocumented knowledge (know-how) will motivate us to implement KM</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Use of KM tools or practices by competitors will motivate us to implement KM</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>19.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation encourages workers to continue their education by reimbursing tuition fees for successfully completed work-related courses</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation regularly encourages workers to participate in project teams with external experts</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>0.01</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information is passed around the organisation without barriers</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>6.40</td>
<td>0.02</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation provides formal training related to KM practices</td>
<td>20</td>
<td>10.00</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation encourages experienced workers to transfer their knowledge to new or less experienced workers</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>0.04</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Loss of key personnel and their knowledge will motivate us to implement KM</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>8.10</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Organisation has informal meetings for discussion: tea breaks/club house/canteen</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Within the organisation KM practices are a responsibility of non-management workers</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>I am encouraged to openly share my knowledge</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM practices identify and/or protect strategic knowledge present in your firm or organisation</td>
<td>24</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.05</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Information overload problems within the firm or organisation will motivate us to implement KM</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In the next 24 months, KM practices will have a dedicated budget</td>
<td>26</td>
<td>3.60</td>
<td>0.00</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Promote KM practices. It could however, explain the fact that KM sharing or implementation of a KM strategy was still very informal within these organisations. Twenty-four out of 40 organisations believed that there were definite benefits for employees when KM practices are in place. The main benefits cited were the organisation’s ability to retain workers, the improvement of employee skills and the acceptance of innovations by employees when organisations implement KM practices. Eight KM practices were identified by at least 20 of the 40 organisations as having a direct benefit to the organisation in terms of strategic advantage. However, the most beneficial practice that was indicated by 26 of the organisations focused on the role of KM practices in protecting strategic knowledge. By so doing, organisations are able to develop, transfer and retain the knowledge of their workers and this contributes to the achievement of organisational competitive advantage and service excellence as put forward by Brelade and Harman (2001). Other practices of note were knowledge sharing vertically in the organisation, efficiency gains, improvement of organisational competitive advantage, knowledge integration and being able to add new products and innovations in a KM environment.

The majority of respondents agreed that there were direct benefits for the organisation as a result of having KM practices in place by promoting a strong strategic position of the organisation externally amongst its customers. KM practices benefited the organisation in being able to leverage on knowledge sources outside the organisation, adapt its products according to client needs, knowledge transfer from customers, strategic partners, and using KM practices to improve client or customer relations.

The study observed that 20 organisations agreed that non-management workers triggered the implementation of KM practices while 12 organisations indicated that management triggered the use of KM practices. All respondents indicated that no other external stakeholders triggered them to put KM practices in place. Although, most organisations agreed that there were some triggers for KM practices, they unanimously agreed that there was no resistance to KM practices implementation. The lack of any KM practice must therefore, be explained by a lack of formal implementation of KM practices, or a lack of...
awareness of the need for KM as each organisation could have introduced a variety of KM practices to benefit the organisation.

The study also showed that 34 out of 40 organisations agreed that loss of key personnel and loss of undocumented knowledge in employee’s heads would force them to adopt a formal KM system. At least 23 of the organisations agreed that the use of KM practices by competitors, loss of key personnel and their knowledge, information overload problems, challenges of incorporating complicated external knowledge into production and loss of market share would push them to introduce formal KM strategy. However, to accomplish this, resources would be required. In response to the resource question, 26 of the 40 organisations stated that they were going to have dedicated KM budgets by 2010 and would increase budget allocations towards implementation of KM practices.

So far, the discussion has been on descriptive statistics of single variables. Here, the study looked at whether there was indeed a preference for the variable being tested. The null hypothesis was that Malawian organisations do not have any KM practices in place. Had the respondents been chosen at random, the study should have expected about 20 in each category. That is, the theoretical or expected distribution of the tallies would be uniform. The observed frequencies on the other hand had a distribution that is far from uniform. Pearson’s chi-square test was used to test the goodness-of-fit of the expected distribution to the observed distribution (Howell, 2007).

The results of the Pearson chi square are shown in Table 3. While the observed descriptive statistics showed that KM practices by Malawian organisations were in place, and thereby disproved the null hypothesis, the Pearson chi-square showed that in some KM practices, this relationship was not significant. However, 15 of these variables had a statistically significant relationship with p-values of 0.05 or less as shown in Table 3.

Table 4 shows that the majority of organisations in Malawi had in place KM practices that fall in the knowledge capture and acquisition category.

There were 10 significant variables in the category of knowledge capture and acquisition (KCA) while only 5 variables were in the strategy and policies category (SP). This finding differs from that of Earl, where there was almost an equal distribution of variables across these categories. However, it should be noted that the Earl study did find that smaller companies as measured by employee size showed similar characteristics as depicted in this study, although in the Malawian study there was an insignificant relationship between knowledge capture and acquisition and organisation (employee) size.

The survey questionnaire presented 75 KM practices grouped under 15 composite variables and divided into two categories, as discussed under the composite variables section. Composite variables were then used to determine the extent to which organisations have KM practices in place. KM practices that would seem to benefit employees in terms of their skills were in place in 29 of the 40 organisations.

Although, six KM composite variables came out as very important, the most important aspect related to practices was that KM practices are in place and that they benefit employees. This finding supports earlier research findings where the majority of organisations that have implemented KM practices tend to focus on employee-related practices (Allee, 1997; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Some of these practices that were tested in the study, confirmed by the literature (Allee, 1997; Fluitman, 1992; Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Rollo, 2002) are:

1. The use of formal mentoring practices, including apprenticeships;
2. The need to capture workers’ undocumented knowledge (know-how);
3. Encouraging workers to continue their education;
4. Encouraging workers to participate in project teams with external experts; providing formal training related to KM practices;
5. Encouraging experienced workers to transfer their knowledge to new or less experienced workers using on-the-job training techniques;
6. Fear of loss of key personnel leading to formal KM

Table 4. Key KM practices composite variables used by Malawian organisations.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Composite variable</th>
<th>Category</th>
<th>No. of significant variables</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>KM practices are in place and they benefit employees</td>
<td>KCA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Certain events will trigger the introduction of KM as an organisational strategy in the future</td>
<td>KCA</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Promotion of KM practices within the organisation is for the benefit of employees and the organisation</td>
<td>KCA</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM practices are in place and they enhance strategy</td>
<td>SP</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>KM practices promote the strategic position of the organisation externally</td>
<td>SP</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Our organisation will provide financial resources to formally implement KM in the future</td>
<td>SP</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

* KCA represents knowledge capture and acquisition and SP represents strategy and policies.
practices being implemented; and
7. Having informal KM meetings during tea breaks, clubhouse or canteen.

Although, there is confirmation of some KM practices being in place in Malawi organisations, they are not sufficient for organisations to benefit from KM influences on attainment of competitive advantage and service excellence, unless these KM practices are formalised. The fragmented and informal approach to implement KM practices has led to knowledge loss in many organisations compared to when KM is formalised (Orange et al., 2003). Given the highly knowledge-intensive nature of most organisations in the globalised, high-technology environment, organisations now need to formally manage their KM practices in order to meet current and future challenges (Payne and Sheehan, 2004). The ever-increasing need to innovate and improve business performance requires that KM practices are formalised as a means of addressing these challenges (Kamara et al., 2002; Salisbury, 2003).

Some authors acknowledge that KM is still an abstract concept in many organisations (Cheng, 2000), and that many organisations have had informal KM practices in place for many years. It is expected that it can be difficult for organisations to accept these new KM challenges that require them to change their work practices. This finding begs the question: Should senior management be the first group to believe that KM could bring benefits to the organisation? Previous researchers have suggested that before expecting others to change, a leader must be willing and prepared to accept the need for change and to accept responsibility for that change to take place. Without senior management, buying into KM being an important driver for organisational success, it can be a barrier to successful formalisation of KM practices (Quinn and Snyder, 1999; Buckman, 2004; Stewart, 1997, 2001).

All senior managers should reach consensus on formalising KM practices and this can be done via strategic planning sessions, attending KM conferences and openly encouraging debates on the role of a formalised KM strategy within the organisation. According to Davies (2000), the challenge for organisations is to support knowledge communities and make them effective. The organisation can also look at introducing effective incentives to encourage employees with expertise to share their knowledge (Strouse, 2001) without fear of job losses, promotion or loss of income.

As a starting point, employees can be encouraged to share their knowledge informally, while gradually introducing recording of processes and procedures. This could then be followed by introducing a formal KM system once employees have understood the tangible benefits of KM sharing. Once the whole organisation understands the concept of KM, KM practices, and how it links up with organisational success and competitiveness, a formal KM system can be developed and implemented gradually from previous KM studies; larger organisations tended to be better willing and equipped to formalise KM practices. However, an analysis of descriptive statistics in this study shows that while there is some indication that there could be a tendency for larger organisations to be more formalised than smaller organisations, this finding was not statistically significant.

Finally, organisations do realise the importance of putting in place strategies that will enhance their strategic position in terms of keeping knowledge within the organisation. There seems to be a desire by organisations to implement formal KM systems. The key composite variables that were identified as being significant for the study were:

1. The realisation that there are exogenous events that will trigger the introduction of KM as an organisational strategy in the future;
2. The role of KM in shaping organisational strategy, and
3. That KM practices promote the strategic position of the organisation externally and that as part of formalising KM practices within the organisation, financial resources will have to be dedicated to KM in the future.

For most organisations, the threat of losing market share and the loss of key personnel and skills may force them to put in place mechanisms to control knowledge loss and therefore to protect themselves. It also corresponds with the results from the Earl (2001) study, where they observed possible loss in competitive advantage due to the organisation not formally implementing KM practices. These findings suggest that keeping knowledge within the firm is an overwhelming incentive to use knowledge management practices for all practitioners and hence their preparedness to make KM budgets available. Organisations do acknowledge that formalising KM practices is costly but, if implemented incrementally, advantages may outweigh the costs.

CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Having reviewed the relevant literature on KM and indicating the extent to which Malawi organisation have put in place KM practices, the results of the study show that 15 KM practices were viewed by Malawian organisations as representing the most important practices for attaining competitive advantage and service excellence. The study findings were that Malawian organisations regard knowledge capturing and acquisition highly and yet, very few of these organisations had introduced formal KM systems as management tools. The study showed that managers of these organisations did not drive the KM strategy, and instead, organisations focused on knowledge sharing, formal training, mentoring and documentation of work processes. In most organisations, such practices are part and parcel of managing
work processes in the work place.

In the study, the exploration of the extent to which KM practices were in place in Malawi organisations indicated that Malawi organisations captured and shared knowledge but that these benefited mostly employee knowledge sharing with limited benefit for the organisation. It is evident that the Malawian organisations studied, regardless of size, turnover, location or type of sector, had in place some KM practices, but that these were implemented informally.

The conclusion is that Malawi organisations do have some KM practices in place, although KM is not formalised. However, to attempt to convince these organisations to adopt formal KM without taking cognisance of the reasons why they have not done so yet, might lead to short-term formalised KM practices with no guarantee for either sustainability or increased competitive advantage.

It is therefore, recommended that a further study should be undertaken to look at the reasons why Malawi organisations did not invest in formalised KM systems, given the already entrenched use of informal KM practices.

REFERENCES


