Knowledge management and the Australian Public Service: some lessons learned

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Abstract: This study of knowledge management in the Australian Public Service sought evidence of lessons learned in what reportedly is a mature field of endeavour, having been prominent since the last decade of the previous century. Two web-based surveys and a series of follow-up interviews provided the basis for a number of lessons learned. To some extent what was learned was a reinforcement of conventional wisdom, reiterating the importance of both organisational context and local perceptions of the nature of knowledge management. In other respects, unexpected lessons emerged in relation to the need for compliance with various regulatory and legislative demands. Ten lessons were learned from the project. On the evidence of this project there is little room for complacency about either the current or future states of knowledge management in the Australian Public Service.

Keywords: knowledge management; public sector; Australia; federal government; lessons learned; case study.

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1 Introduction

One notable feature of the current knowledge management landscape is reports of the interest being shown by governments and international agencies in the subject. Among possible explanations for this upsurge of interest could be that knowledge management practice has had at least a decade now in which to mature. Other reasons could include recognition of the links between intangible value and business and service outcomes, and the perceived contribution of knowledge management to the success of larger initiatives in, for example, e-business or e-government. This paper reports on a recent search for
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lessons learned from the implementation of knowledge management within departments and agencies of the Australian Federal government. The assessment was made on the basis of data collected from Australian government departments and agencies located in the Federal Capital, Canberra and in Sydney.

There is a dearth of publicly available information on the nature and scale of knowledge management practices within the Australian Public Service. An earlier study revealed that knowledge management was a feature in little more than a dozen Federal government agencies and that few agencies had a real strategic perspective on knowledge management or recognised it as a key driver for the achievement of corporate objectives. Possible explanations for the slow take up of knowledge management included confusion over the nature of the subject, including a tendency to equate it with developments in Information technology, and cultural resistance to the concept (Stephens, 2000) More recently, a call for case studies in knowledge management in the Federal government produced a total of five cases (NOIE, 2003). It is not clear if this relatively modest response indicated either a limited involvement in knowledge management or a lack of interest in reporting such involvement.

The Australian experience is manifest in other countries, where governments have struggled to come to terms with knowledge management. Common problems include constitutional and legal barriers to the improvement of processes, obstacles to the learning process in public organisations, and the need for new or improved governance arrangements to account for concerns ranging from privacy to the Digital Divide (OECD, 2000). A survey conducted by the OECD, while reporting that knowledge management was high on government agendas and that necessary cultural changes were underway, reported the absence of deep organisational change (OECD, 2003). Australia was not named among the countries for which responses to the survey were recorded. However, a suspicion that a gap might exist between rhetoric and reality in the uptake of knowledge management in Australian federal government circles led to the research conducted for this paper.

2 Methodology

The methodology included online surveys and the conduct of case studies. The Online Directory of the Australian Government lists a total of 16 government departments, each of which contains a variety of portfolio agencies (Australian Government, 2004). The first of two web-based surveys was targeted at specific senior policy makers in each of the departments. It sought to elicit perceptions of knowledge-based change and their implications for policy and resources, including the allocation of resources to knowledge management. The 16 senior recipients had job titles ranging from Assistant Secretary to Chief Executive Officer. The second survey sought to collect information from managers responsible for or engaged in the conduct of knowledge management initiatives including the capture, creation, and retention of corporate knowledge and its embodiment in products, services, and systems. This was distributed to 32 targeted recipients at CIO or equivalent level in departments and relevant portfolio agencies. As it happened none of the organisations that responded had anyone in a Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO) position. The selection of individuals for participation in these surveys was based on their official position and on nominations from within the APS and the local knowledge management community. This and the relatively small numbers involved meant that no
statistical significance could be attributed to the findings. However, it did result in focused survey groups adequate for the identification of broad trends and perceptions that would lay the foundations for the follow-up interviews. The major element of the research project was the interviews.

In conducting the interviews two things had to be borne in mind: first, the need to acknowledge the variation that existed in both the perception and practice of knowledge management across the 12 departments and agencies that agreed to participate in follow-up interviews, and second, the issues around attempts to delimit these agencies and departments in terms of unit of analysis, of boundaries and the likelihood that particular case units might be embedded in larger entities (Stake, 1995). In the event, and bearing in mind that the primary purpose of the project was to look for lessons learned, departments and agencies were assessed both on an individual basis and then as a body that comprised in effect a single case study. In each instance the case study approach was employed as a means of yielding rich insights in social contexts (Galliers, 1991; Yin, 1994; Walsham, 1995), specifically the organisational environments of the departments and agencies involved. As far as possible, the process adhered to established protocols for qualitative research. As almost all participants in these interviews requested anonymity, neither departments, agents, nor individuals are named in this paper.

3 Some pointers from the surveys

Although only five of the 16 Chief Executives contacted responded to the survey, the resulting data served as a broad indication of the perceptions of senior management. All five stated that knowledge management was a major concern for their department and that as Chief Executives they had a direct responsibility for the promotion of knowledge management within the organisation. In the case of the CIO survey, where 14 of the targeted 32 people replied, almost 60% of respondents asked to opt for one of four definitions of knowledge management, preferred one that emphasised cultivation of the right environment for the creation, sharing, and leveraging of knowledge. Less than 15% of respondents opted for definitions that involved knowledge capture in repositories or the wider deployment of IT systems for knowledge codification and sharing. As has been seen before, however, respondents have been known to espouse the broader dimension in responses to surveys but in practice resort to technology-based solutions (KPMG, 2000). The validity of such concerns is reflected to some extent in Tables 1 and 2, which give prominence to the I.T. perspective.

Table 1  Knowledge management initiatives in the APS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Nature of initiative</th>
<th>% response</th>
</tr>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Building an intranet</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a learning organisation</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Creating a knowledge management team</td>
<td>46</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Building knowledge repositories</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forming communities of practice</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Conducting knowledge management audits</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>


Table 2  Locus of responsibility for knowledge management within the department/agency

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Locus of responsibility</th>
<th>% response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IT Department</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Library</td>
<td>38</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Corporate services</td>
<td>30</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other (KM Department, Specific business units)</td>
<td>15</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The message in the foregoing tables would seem to be that knowledge management initiatives within the APS still strongly reflect the influence of a technological perspective.

The survey data also provided a broad basis for comparison between specific aspects of the conventional wisdom on knowledge management as reflected in the literature and perceptions emerging from within the APS. In most cases there was considerable similarity in perception with problems of knowledge loss and hoarding, of a lack of senior management commitment to knowledge management and of organisational cultures that were inhospitable to knowledge management seemingly as common in the APS as elsewhere. In a less positive sense, many of the customary enablers to knowledge management reported in the literature were either missing from the survey data or were somewhat underrepresented. For example, only 15% of respondents said respectively that their department or agency exhibited a knowledge-management culture, or that there was general alignment between knowledge-management strategy and business strategy. However, 46% of respondents said that there was general support for knowledge management from senior management and 38% said that they had a knowledge-management strategy. On the basis of such feedback, a range of potential knowledge-management issues was assembled for discussion at the follow-up interviews.

4 Knowledge management issues discussed in the interviews

Table 3 contains a list of issues for discussion that emerged from the web-based surveys. In the event, the subsequent interviews failed to produce sufficient data on six of these: approaches to knowledge management; its location within the organisation; frameworks, links to core business; metrics; the presence of champions; and inter-departmental networks. In particular, no lessons learned emerged around these issues, apart from the generally negative lesson that the issues were not being addressed. Consequently these issues do not feature in the lessons learned section, but they are discussed in the conclusions at the end of the paper.
Table 3  Range of knowledge management issues raised during interviews

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perceptions of knowledge management</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Approaches to knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Drivers of knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Links to core business</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obstacles to knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Enablers of knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The place of knowledge management in the organisational structure</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frameworks for knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The use of metrics for knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The presence of champions for knowledge management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Inter-departmental or agency links for knowledge management</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5  Key issues and lessons learned

Attention now shifts to those issues from which lessons emerged, namely: perceptions of knowledge management, drivers of knowledge management, obstacles to knowledge management, and enablers to knowledge management.

5.1  Perceptions of the knowledge management concept in the APS

Within the 12 organisations that participated in follow-up interviews it is possible to distinguish between those for whom knowledge management is a meaningless term and those who find the concept helpful. Within the latter groups there is a further division in terms of organisational perceptions of knowledge management. These perceptions can be categorised as follows.

5.1.1  Departments/agencies viewing the concept as unhelpful

Three major departments preferred not to use the term knowledge management, finding it less than meaningful to their operations. One of these Departments had previously employed the term in the late 1990s, but abandoned it owing to an inability to convert the general knowledge management concept into contextually relevant activities. A second department had fundamental reservations as to the practicality of trying to manage something, that is, knowledge, which inherently resides in people rather than in systems. The third was much more focused on the process of converting Intellectual Capital into Intellectual Property. In all three of these departments, however, there remained recognition of the need to guard against knowledge loss, and that in this regard the basic distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge can be useful. They were all engaged in nurturing and operating Communities of Practice.
5.1.2 Departments/agencies viewing the concept as meaningful only in a particular context

In this case, a major portfolio agency, one of the most powerful arms of government, was comfortable with using the term knowledge management, but only where a distinctive interpretation of the concept was involved. This entailed the search for and maintenance of certain organisational capabilities and personal competencies in the area of what they term Integrated Administrative Design. The focus is on knowledge capture, creation, and management for the purpose of continual improvement of process and product design. Knowledge is present throughout the cycle from acquisition and creation to dissemination and leveraging in processes and products.

5.1.3 Departments/agencies that see the concept as meaningful

The remainder of the 12 departments and agencies interviewed all recognised the need for and value in knowledge management, although some were evidently more committed to the concept than were others. In at least two cases (one department and one agency), involvement in knowledge management is premised on the understanding that it will enable them to do more work with less resources. Although not unreasonable in itself, this attitude is reflected in the practice of capture and codification initiatives based on technology platforms, with little evident understanding of the softer dimensions to knowledge management. In the remaining departments and agencies, however, the implementation of knowledge management practices displays much more of an understanding of those underlying principles of openness, sharing, and collaboration. On the other hand, one of the most powerful departments of state and a portfolio agency of similar levels of influence, recognise that most of their staff are, in fact, knowledge workers and that the key to success in knowledge management lies in getting the cultural and behavioural dimensions right. Other departments and agencies take a more pragmatic view. They realise that in order to combat the loss of knowledge, not least through retirements in what is a greying APS, as well as to respond to an increasingly complex working environment, they need to take an increasingly knowledge-based approach to what they do.

Lesson learned 1

The first lesson learned from investigation of this issue was that as shown in the literature time and again, knowledge management is a concept that resides very much in the eye of the beholder, that it is highly contextual and subjective in nature.

5.2 Drivers of knowledge management

Although the 12 case study organisations differed quite markedly in their areas of interest and responsibility, all experienced a combination of pressures towards the adoption and implementation of some form of knowledge management. In some cases these influences were common enough to be regarded as generic in nature, emanating from changes within the Australian Public Service; in others they were more specific to particular organisations. These drivers of knowledge management are now considered in turn.
5.2.1 Generic drivers of knowledge management

In planning the interviews, it was assumed that most organisations that embarked on knowledge management would, to some extent, be driven by pressure from the top, by comparisons with peers, and the availability of new technologies and more effective delivery platforms. Other drivers expected were the need to improve services to clients and to impose some kind of control on information flows. All of these things turned out to be true, but the most significant drivers of knowledge management in the APS were the need for compliance with legislation and government regulations, and also to respond to formal questions from either Ministers or Parliamentary committees. Pressure from Parliamentary and in particular from ministerial sources is a fact of life for government agencies and provided it does not result in a skewing of direction, it can be seen as a welcome source of pressure for the implementation of knowledge management.

All departments and agencies interviewed instanced the pressures of compliance. In the Commonwealth of Australia, this is facilitated through a suite of programmes developed by the National Archives under the banner of e-permanence to promote the better management of government information. A central product in this suite is DIRKS (Developing, Implementing Record Keeping Systems), a strategic approach to managing business information system designed to enforce disciplined naming conventions for records and files throughout the Commonwealth. There are three parts to this system. Part A is the keyword triple-A Index, a common set of definitions employed across the Commonwealth for corporate services functions. Part B is the Business Classification Scheme (BCS), which is organisation-specific and can take up to two years to develop. Part C is an identification of record keeping requirements, including the requirement to retain or dispose of records.

Lesson learned 2

Among the generic drivers of knowledge management in the APS, a primary one is the need for compliance with legislative and Parliamentary demands.

5.2.2 Specific drivers of knowledge management

Specific drivers include attempts by agencies to respond more effectively to the perceived needs of their client base. In the case of the Agency mentioned at 1.2 above this derived from an initiative called Listening to the Community, which was aimed at achieving a much more user-centric approach to the work of the agency, including that element which required compliance from citizens with demands imposed by the Agency. This initiative included the holding of public events at which citizens could interact with agency staff, with the resulting information feeding back directly into an Agency change programme. A similar initiative at another major department was entitled Open for Business. The objective there was to demonstrate to clients and to government that the Department recognised the need to embrace wider principles of openness and accountability, and in the process engage with the public and other stakeholders in the design of policies, products, and services.

Although these drivers to comply can be tedious and challenging, they also offer the benefit of providing managers with ammunition in support of business cases and especially of requests for resources to implement changes which are after all a statutory requirement.
Lesson learned 3

Successful knowledge management requires a willingness to listen to and engage with the client base and other stakeholders.

5.3 Obstacles to knowledge management

Most of the obstacles identified to the dissemination or success of knowledge management were the familiar ones of technological determinism; lack of resources; the inability of people, particularly those in authority, to see the point; internal politics; and cultural issues. Although a lack of resources may well be an organisational fact-of-life for many people, there is probably a link between success in gaining resources and the ability to demonstrate the value of knowledge management to sceptical paymasters. Even in government departments and agencies, where profit is not an issue, frequently there are sets of numbers to be attained, for example numbers of new clients, increased sales achieved by these clients, and so on. Unless the promoters of knowledge management are able to convince the people concerned that knowledge initiatives can help meet such targets (not least through saving on resources) they will continue to fight an uphill battle. A similar challenge in government circles applies to the ability to comply with demands from various Ministers, often linked to timelines for project delivery. Although, like scarce resources, this is a fact of life in the public service, there can be a risk that Departments focus on this to the exclusion of most other things and, hence, are not open to new ideas such as knowledge management.

Lesson learned 4

The ability to link knowledge management initiatives to specific outcomes or benefits is critical to its reception in senior management circles in the APS.

At times, adverse effects of an inappropriate use of technology continue to be a major feature of the wider knowledge management landscape. Within the APS, the quest for technological solutions, while understandable in terms of accountability and the control of information and records, has not always been accompanied by necessary changes in management and culture. In cultural terms in particular, this includes all those collaborative and sharing behaviours deemed essential to successful knowledge management and not least, inculcation of the idea that it is actually acceptable to talk to colleagues and to share information and knowledge with them. In this regard, the familiar barriers presented by the operation both of the not-invented-here syndrome and inter-organisational silos continue to play a role. In some departments, in particular, it emerged that relationships that involved learning and sharing from other sections were regarded as being far from natural.

Lesson learned 5

The most significant barriers to progress in implementing knowledge management in the APS are comprised of softer elements including those of attitudes, behaviours, and organisational cultures.

A constant obstacle to the spread of knowledge management ideas remains the unflattering light in which the concept is seen in many circles. This was no less true
within the APS, where one of the more positive observations in this regard was that, as the rewards for knowledge management are unlikely to go to the people who made the effort, knowledge management is an implausible concept.

Lesson learned 6
Knowledge Management as a term continues to deter many people, including some who are engaged in activities that elsewhere would be described as knowledge management.

5.4 Enablers for knowledge management

As with the obstacles identified to knowledge management, most of the enablers that emerged from the interviews were familiar ones. This included recognition of the value of Communities of Practices (COPs) which, although initially an alien presence in some departments, are now widely regarded as useful, both in helping to spread ideas and in getting real work done. In several of the Departments interviewed it emerged that the practice of knowledge sharing was initially somewhat of an issue. Although a number of departmental Secretaries actually took a lead in spreading the message, in no case was an attempt made to enforce the practice.

Lesson learned 7
The old adage about knowledge having to be volunteered and not conscripted is borne out in the APS, where in a number of departments and agencies, encouragement and persuasion has been found to be more effective than attempts at coercion. In at least one department this was achieved by finding ways to make people who shared their knowledge feel good about themselves, as opposed to embarrassing them by naming them as noncontributors.

Several of the departments and agencies interviewed were making use of experienced people to act as advisors or mentors to new or newly promoted colleagues. This practice varied between formally timetabled sessions to informal meetings both in and out of the office. Clearly a classic case of tacit knowledge transfer, in one leading agency the practice was both formal, that is linked to appraisal and extra-organisational in nature, involving the use of mentors from similar organisations in other countries.

Lesson learned 8
The use of mentors drawn from both inside and outside government can greatly assist not only the spread of knowledge management concepts and ideas but also the finding of solutions to real workplace problems.

All the departments and agencies interviewed recognised that their case for increased government recognition and resources would be greatly strengthened through the intervention of powerful allies, usually the Departmental Secretary, as the most senior civil servant involved. In most cases, departments were successful in enlisting such support although not always. One agency within the APS, which does not in fact have a Departmental Secretary, has nonetheless succeeded in winning champions from other departments and thus enjoys sponsorship on a whole-of-government basis.
Lesson learned 9

The presence of high-level knowledge management champions within a department or agency can enormously facilitate both the image and the implementation of knowledge management. Perhaps because they were government departments and agencies operating in the most political environment in the country, none of the case subjects needed reminding of the importance of cultivating a facility in organisational and intra-organisational politics. This entailed not only developing relationships with potential champions but also ensuring that as many people as possible knew what the knowledge management team was trying to do. At the lead knowledge management unit in one major department, where at one stage survival of the unit itself was an issue, considerable success has been achieved through an established culture of what they call strategic conversations. All staff are encouraged to talk to each other and to other stakeholders, especially on return from a conference or training event, and to document where practical for wider dissemination.

Lesson learned 10

If knowledge management is to become a reality in organisations then in the jargon of modern management, knowledge managers must talk the talk and walk the walk by constantly promoting and advocating for its implementation.

6 Conclusion

The major conclusion to emerge from this research project is that questions of context and perception continue to dominate the course of knowledge management. This is as true for the APS as for any other organisation. In each of the participating departments and agencies, the course of knowledge management has depended on circumstances, individuals, and particular contexts, all of which makes it difficult to arrive at reliable generalisations. As was appreciated before the start of the project, knowledge management is indeed a very broad-based church. It would be unfair as well as dangerous to ascribe the knowledge management label to what one department was doing rather than to the activities of another; we are back to the context and perception point. Nor in attempting to categorise what has happened in various departments within the APS is one implying either comparison or judgement. This said, the data collection and analysis suggest that in broad terms, those APS departments interviewed fall into the following categories insofar as their implementation of knowledge management is concerned:

- relatively advanced
- competent and established
- developing
- no particular commitment to knowledge management.
Although response to the two web-based surveys was disappointing, the 12 departments and agencies that participated in voluntary follow-up interviews included most of the major policy-making entities in the Australian Federal Government. These interviews were wide-ranging in nature and although as explained, several of the issues raised did not generate much in the way of actionable data, this was balanced by the wealth of rich data emerging in response to other questions. As mentioned above, the relatively less productive issues were those of organisational structure, frameworks for knowledge management, links to core business, metrics, and involvement with other government departments. Some concluding remarks, rather than firm conclusions, on these issues follow:

- Approaches to knowledge management in the APS vary between the disinterested, the pragmatic, and the idealistic. In the first case, agencies have either tried and discarded the practice or have refused to contemplate it in the first place. In the second, the approaches range from capture and codification for knowledge reuse and general risk avoidance purposes, to recognition of the practical value of say Communities of Practice. In the third and minority cases, several departments and agencies are motivated by recognition of the knowledge-based nature both of their work and that of their staff and of the APS and the wide environment in which it operates. These are the organisations that have enthusiastic champions, employ metrics and engage in networking with other like-minded bodies.

- In structural terms, in most departments responsibility for the knowledge management function is located either within the Information Technology department, the Library or Corporate Services. Reporting lines tended to be through either a CIO or Director of Corporate Services to Assistant Secretary level within the department. The common exception to this is that of portfolio agencies where the chain of command runs from an internal Directorate via a Director General and on to the Minister. It remains a matter for concern that the structural location for knowledge management is either within Information technology units or directly influenced by the availability of technology platforms.

- Not all organisations were able to relate the practice of knowledge management specifically to their core business activities. In those that could the links tended to come indirectly through the acquisition of capabilities and competencies, or in the form of ability to comply with statutory requirements. In most cases, however, there remains much to be done before organisations can get to the point where knowledge management is accepted by most people as a necessity rather than simply as something that it might be nice to have.

- Only two of the organisations interviewed had frameworks for knowledge management. These were mainly information management frameworks, expanded to take account of the knowledge dimension and, in particular, of the need to account for differences between tacit and explicit knowledge. Although several departments and agencies acknowledged the influence of people such as Karl-Erik Sveiby, there was little sign anywhere of the conscious application of those formal knowledge management frameworks popularised by people such as Wiig (1997) or more recently Holsapple and Joshi (2002).
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- Interdepartmental and agency links in the main, tended to occur through formal gatherings such as CIOC (The Chief Information Officers Council) and the CIO Forum, as well as unofficially through the auspices of a very active local interest group, the ACT Knowledge Management Forum. The one formal inter-departmental link that emerged was a knowledge sharing partnership between a major department and a number of Emergency Services agencies. This lack of formal interdepartmental knowledge networks is a matter of concern and would indicate that no overarching whole-of-government approach to knowledge management exists within the Australian Public Service.

- Very few of the departments or agencies interviewed employed any form of metrics for knowledge management. There was general agreement that this was an important issue but a widespread reluctance to embark on the application of unproven methods for valuing and accounting for knowledge projects. Although not quite the same thing, there was a growing interest in the application of some kind of metrics to reward contributions to knowledge or desired knowledge-sharing behaviours. In general, Human Resources Departments have been reluctant to embody such arrangements into formal work agreements. However, in a number of departments and agencies, supervisors are now being required to ensure that staff reporting to them comply with these behavioural requirements.

A final conclusion would be that in some cases knowledge management has gone the way of total quality management. It is now accepted to the point where it is beginning to be taken for granted. In other cases, knowledge management is still to some extent on trial. It is in the position of being treated on its merits, with the corollary that if it fails to generate or demonstrate value, it could be discarded. More commonly, however, knowledge management remains an ambiguous concept, seen simultaneously as buzzword and panacea, and often in danger of being misunderstood and misapplied. To finish as one began, according to the literature, knowledge management has emerged as a high priority in government circles. In light of the findings of this project, not least the absence of evidence for any genuine whole-of-government approach to knowledge management, such assessments could be more than a little optimistic.

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