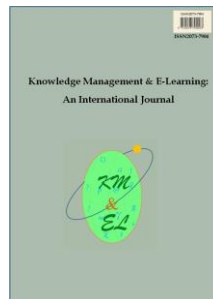

Knowledge management as a strategic asset for customer service delivery at a contact centre in South Africa

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Knowledge management as a strategic asset for customer service delivery at a contact centre in South Africa

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Abstract: Knowledge Management (KM) is often touted as a panacea for organisations aiming to be efficient and competitive. While the world today has undoubtedly entered an information era, how organisations convert information to usable knowledge has become of significant importance. Furthermore, the growing emphasis on managing and utilizing knowledge to improve organisational functioning, efficiency and competitiveness has reintroduced KM as a possible strategic asset for organisations. To explore this idea, empirical work was conducted on a contact centre making use of KM practices as a means to enhance the transmission of knowledge to their employees and in turn, to their clients. Further objectives of this research were to identify how KM was understood in this organisation, the benefits and challenges it presented, how it manifested in relation to the idea of leadership and ultimately, if it could be considered a strategic asset for organisations of this nature.

Keywords: Knowledge management; Knowledge; Strategic asset; Contact centre; Customer service; Technology

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1. Introduction

This paper presents a case study conducted in a contact centre which was established in February 2003 in a metropolitan district of Durban in the country of South Africa. The main function of this contact centre involves the rendering of services to clients via telephonic channels by providing answers to ad-hoc queries of a financial nature. Furthermore, the contact centre is committed to creating knowledgeable staff and managers. The contact centre has striven to achieve this objective through the use of KM practices. Thus, this contact centre has utilised the notion of KM as a strategic asset to assist management and staff with their daily operational needs in order to enhance quality, save cost and improve service delivery. Furthermore, it is used as a mechanism for educating its clients and employees, and in ensuring that the compliance obligations of the institution are met (South African Revenue Service, 2016). The contact centre has created an online workspace which serves as a platform to share updates, process enhancements and new developments. With the use of KM, the contact centre renders a client-focused approach to their clients. Services are thus designed around the needs and expectations of clients, as resolving queries quickly and efficiently is pivotal to the service delivery aspirations of the organisation.

The aim of this study was to examine how KM was implemented in this contact centre and whether it provided any strategic benefits. A case study was employed in order to enable the researchers to gain a deeper understanding of how KM was employed and the benefits and challenges thereof. As Strydom and Bezuidenhout (2014) assert, case studies facilitate a deep investigation within the participants' natural context and thus allows a full and thorough understanding of the unique and lived experiences of the participants. The objectives of the study include the following:

- To understand how KM was being perceived by staff in this particular contact centre.
- To explore the benefits of utilising KM in the contact centre.

- To recognise the challenges of implementing KM in the contact centre, and
- To ascertain whether leadership plays a role in the implementation of KM in the contact centre.

Contact centres focus mainly on interacting with clients on a daily basis in order to resolve their queries, thus knowledge has to be transmitted to employees as efficiently as possible so that they can pass this on to their clients. It is a knowledge intensive industry; therefore, KM is of significant strategic importance to it. Thus, this study sought to explore how employees in this contact centre understood the concept of KM, what benefits and barriers it presented to them in their daily practices and the extent to which leadership influenced their KM practices. It is hoped that this study will lay the foundation for the recognition of the importance of utilising KM as a strategic asset in customer-focused and knowledge intensive organisations, as well as broadening the discourse on the application of KM in organisations in Africa generally, and South Africa specifically.

Existing empirical studies on KM are vast and can be categorised according to the human, technological, organisational and management related aspects of KM that they investigate (Inkinen, 2016). Examples of studies in the Human-oriented category includes the manifestation of KM in relation to team leader characteristics (Sarin & McDermott, 2003), human resource management (Lin & Kuo, 2007; Khalifa, Yu, & Shen, 2008; Lee, Ho, & Chiu, 2008), transformational leadership (Birasnav, 2014; Cohen & Olsen, 2015), knowledge-based human resource management practices (Inkinen, Kianto, & Vanhala, 2015), etc. Migdadi (2009), Kim and Hancer (2010), Kamhawi (2012) and Harvey, Cohendet, Simon, and Borzillo (2015) engaged in studies focusing on the information technology side of KM, whilst Kamhawi (2012), Birasnav (2014), Harvey et al. (2015) and Inkinen et al. (2015; 2016) also examined organisational factors related to KM such as delegated organizations, special units in charge of KM and the decentralization of power. Finally, issues such as the link of strategy and leadership to KM and the strategic management of knowledge was investigated by Lee et al. (2008), Theriou, Maditinos, and Theriou (2011), Kamhawi (2012), and Inkinen et al. (2015; 2016), amongst others. More recent works on KM (from the years 2015 to 2020) can be found throughout the literature review, discussion, and recommendations sections of this paper and in the interest of space constraints, will not be repeated here. There appears to be a lack of studies that explore the human, technological, organisational and management related aspects of KM in an integrated and holistic manner and it is hoped that this study will contribute to filling this gap.

This paper begins by exploring the existing literature relating to defining knowledge, the relationship between knowledge and organisational strategy, the factors contributing to and affecting the implementation of KM and the relationship between leadership and KM. It then sheds light on the methodology applied to conduct this study and then goes on to present the study findings and a discussion thereof. It concludes by positing some recommendations and by indicating the relevance and contributions of this study.

1.1. Knowledge in an organisational context

Knowledge is a broad concept but when viewed within an organisational context, it can be understood as what the employees in the organisation know about “their products, policies, environment, markets, users, values, processes, errors, and successes” (Jabeen, 2020, p.1). Knowledge, when successfully managed, can contribute to organisational

learning, and can encourage successful processes in organisations (Al-Aama, 2014). According to Obermayer, Gaal, Szabo, and Csepregi (2020), knowledge can be seen as a crucial strategic asset in an organisation as it brings together people, employees, and technology to create sustainable value for the organisation. Davenport, De Long, and Beers (1998) defined knowledge as information combined with experience, context, interpretation, reflection, and perspective that adds a new level of insight, whilst Omotayo (2015) defined knowledge as the insights, understandings, and practical know-how that people possess, adding that knowledge is the fundamental resource that allows people to function intelligently.

Sandrock (2008) confirmed that organisations that have successfully managed knowledge have created their own definition of it in this process and thus their definition cannot be transposed to other organisations. He further mentioned that KM definitions do not come from a dictionary, but rather that they evolve from an organisation's KM strategy. Al-Aama (2014) confirmed that knowledge is gathered through researching, reading, communicating and experiencing. He further added that KM is considered an asset to businesses in general, thus pointing to its strategic significance. This notion was further supported by Gloet and Samson (2020) who asserted that it is not only innovation, but also the ability to effectively manage the various types of knowledge being increasingly and continuously produced that will give organisations a sustainable competitive advantage.

1.2. Knowledge and strategy

According to Coakes, Amar, and Luisa Granados (2010), the management of knowledge depends on the strategy selected. An organisation's strategy is usually a high-level plan that is aligned towards the needs of the business. Organisations tend to utilise knowledge management (KM) strategies that are aligned with the organisation's primary focus, its behaviour, its overall culture and the organisation's competencies (Wiig, 1997). KM arose in the private sector as a strategic asset to give private organisations a competitive edge against one another, but its many merits quickly made it a tool for more efficient functioning amongst public organisations as well (Ismyrlis, 2020). Modern day organisations tend to experience immense amounts of competition and have thus begun to use knowledge and the management thereof to secure advantages in the long term (Manesh, Pellegrini, Marzi, & Dabic, 2020). Greiner, Böhmman, and Krcmar (2007) describe two KM strategies, namely the codification strategy and the personalisation strategy. The objective of the codification strategy includes gathering knowledge which is then housed in a database after collection and later made available in a codified form. Greiner et al. (2007) further explained the contrast of the codification strategy, which is known as the personalisation strategy. The objective of the personalisation strategy is to transfer and move knowledge with the use of information technology and meetings.

Service orientated organisations like contact centres need to always keep in mind that KM alone will not be successful without it being strategically linked to service delivery measures, controlled costs and the dynamics of the workforce. Hansen, Nohria, and Tierney (1999) confirmed that KM is not arbitrary, since an organisation's strategy is dependent on the manner in which the organisation renders services to their clients, the manner in which business is undertaken and the recruitment and placement of the correct people in the correct roles.

Abraham (2005) posited in order to be strategic, organisations must find different ways to conduct business from its competitors. This type of thinking may contribute to the organisation experiencing enhanced quality, enhanced processes, improved

performance, increased efficiency, speed, simplicity, etc. Gao, Li, and Clarke (2008) stated that organisations must set out clear goals and strategies for KM to exist in the business. The management of existing knowledge and the deployment of personal knowledge should be effective and efficient, ultimately achieving organisational objectives as embedded in the strategic plan of the institution. Consequently, there will be an increase in employee competency levels since the organisation will communicate and innovate in order to keep their services and/or products relevant and their employees up to date with the latest developments. Abraham (2005) postulated that if the strategic plan is carried out appropriately, the strategy can enhance an organisation's image and secure client loyalty, ultimately contributing to efficiency and the achievement of strategic goals. Greiner et al. (2007) stated that the organisation's strategic path in turn should inform KM strategies, thus creating a feedback loop between the two in which organisational strategy and KM strategies continually influence one another.

1.3. KM success factors

Employees become effective when they have the required knowledge in usable form at their fingertips (Al-Aama, 2014). According to Hasanali (2002), the success of KM in an organisation depends on many factors; namely, leadership, culture, organisational structure, roles and responsibilities, IT infrastructure, employee dynamics, etc. Greiner et al. (2007) suggested that KM goals and strategies need to correspond with the organisation's objectives and strategies and should be applied to create a lasting strategic effect. Al-Aama (2014) supported this notion by asserting that often KM is aligned to an organisation's objectives and business needs to be of strategic importance to the organisation.

Wong (2005) and various other authors posited that many factors are involved in determining whether KM strategies that are applied in an organisation will be successful. Some of the factors influencing the success of KM are described below.

Leadership Commitment and Support: Leaders can showcase their commitment and support by driving the importance of KM to individuals within the organisation, including uplifting employee morale, promoting a knowledge creation and sharing culture, as well as steering the change that comes with KM (Wong, 2005). Management commitment and organisational support can encourage knowledge sharing behaviors (Shateri & Hayat, 2020) and can thus be a key factor in influencing the success of KM strategies (Horak, 2001).

Business Culture: Goh (2002) suggested that business culture is important since it allows for collaboration of knowledge between employees. Business culture plays an important role in the success of KM since it defines values, beliefs and norms that direct the behaviour of employees in an organisation (Wong, 2005).

Knowledge Technology: When KM systems are being developed it is important to consider that they should be kept simple for ease of use and should cater to the needs of the user/s. The information should be relevant and consistent (Wong, 2005).

Strategic Purpose: Wong (2005) stated that the strategic purpose of KM must be clearly outlined for all employees. An organisation's strategic purpose needs to be supported since this practice will secure employee buy-in and commitment, ultimately securing KM success.

Organisational Set-Up: Wong (2005) posited that implementing KM necessitates the development of a suitable organisational set-up. Davenport et al. (1998) added that a

suitable organisational culture implies creating a set of roles and responsibilities for teams to perform tasks related to KM.

Organisational Measures: According to Arora (2002) and Ahmed et al. (1999), it is vital for the management of knowledge to be measured since this will ensure that objectives and goals are achieved as per the organisation's vision.

Knowledge Activities: Johannsen (2000) stated that in order to ensure that knowledge activities are addressed in a structured and methodical manner, applicable tools and interventions are required.

Incentive Aids: Effective KM implementation requires employee incentives and motivation, which will enhance and secure positive employee attitudes and behaviours towards KM (Wong, 2005).

Development: Wong (2005) suggested that employees should be trained, educated and developed in using the KM concept, including the use of knowledge-related systems and knowledge-related tools that will assist with managing the concept.

Human Capital: To improve and enhance employees' confidence and value, human resources need to intervene since people are the designers of knowledge. Therefore, without people, KM cannot work, as people are required for the initial production of knowledge and to maintain it (Davenport & Volpel, 2001).

1.4. KM barriers

Oliva (2014) suggested that knowledge is an essential asset of organisations and that if managed in an effective manner, it can elevate an organisation to achieve its strategic goals and objectives. He further mentioned that understanding the barriers that compromise KM will afford organisations an opportunity to create plans to overcome these barriers. He posited that there were five main barriers that could impede the implementation of KM, namely absence of interest from employees, ineffective interaction and communication, little or no interest in the culture of information sharing, poor intellectual competence of employees, and lack of motivation, rewards and recognition.

According to Oliva (2014), all stages of the KM process are affected by these barriers in an unfavourable manner. These barriers affect the distribution of knowledge and the assessment and gathering of knowledge. In addition, the existing literature identifies several other barriers to KM as explored below.

Poor Performance Measures: KM becomes complicated when trying to evaluate its effects, especially its monetary significance, due to its intangible nature (Ahn & Chang, 2004). Due to the fact that the value created from KM is indirect, assessing this concept proves to be very difficult (Carlucci, Marr, & Schiuma, 2004). According to Wu, Du, Li, and Li (2010), performance indicators are vital for management to continue believing in and developing the concept. Heaidari, Moghimi, and Khanifar (2011) suggested that a successful KM measurement tool could be improved organisational and/or employee performance.

Poor Leadership and Management: Inadequate leadership and management support and a lack of management responsibility is a factor for failure (Weber, 2007; Pettersson, 2009). Chua and Lam (2005) stated that KM is likely to fail if there is an absence of relevant skills and in order to sustain effective KM, the right business and technical skills must be sustained. Wu et al. (2010) suggested that skills can be sustained

and enhanced through training interventions and KM should be implemented with concise, measurable, and clear goals.

Lack of Accountability, Responsibility and Ownership: An organisation may end up with no control over knowledge without the proper enforcement of leadership accountability and responsibility (Weber, 2007). According to Hasanali (2002), arranged and structured responsibility is an element that has an effect on accountability, and vice versa. The lack of interest in assuming responsibility is classified as a knowledge barrier and is largely dependent on organisational culture (Singh & Kant, 2008).

Poor Implementation: Singh and Kant (2008) confirmed that there are three general problems that an organisation may encounter when implementing KM. These generic problems are:

- Poor performance outputs: Issues related to KM performance outputs include poor practical arrangements, poor knowledge representation and poor use of knowledge systems.
- Poor organisational processes and culture fit: Weber (2007) posited those organisational goals and processes are dependent on one another. Therefore, failure will take place if the KM concept is not integrated into these processes, especially with regard to information technology which should be compatible with the organisational model and its KM strategies (Benassi, Bouquet, & Cuel, 2002).
- Over-dependence on technology: Chua and Lam (2005) stated that with the over-emphasis on KM systems, negligence of tacit knowledge was evident. Botha, Kourie, and Snyman (2008) commented that tacit knowledge is best transmitted from one individual to another, and while IT is an enabler, it is not sufficient by itself.

1.5. KM leadership

Anantamula (2008) stated that the roles of managers and leaders are equally important at different stages of the KM process. Leadership plays a crucial role in creating and implementing knowledge initiatives, whilst managers assume a greater role in maintaining and assessing it. However, Bounfour (2003) and Anantamula (2008) asserted that leaders play a critical role in both the development and management of KM systems. While research in the field of KM has focused on diverse topics, little research has considered the important relationship between leadership and KM (Analoui, Doloriert, and Sambrook, 2012).

The leadership skills required for KM are no different from other leadership skills in general (Verma, 1996). Liu and Fang (2006) viewed leadership as possessing the ability of influencing others to align themselves with the leader's goals and objectives. Prabhakar (2005) shared a similar view by stating that leaders should be confident enough to inspire the same in their interaction with employees. Rihel (2007) indicated that leaders employ different types of leadership styles when interacting with individuals or teams, as they are regarded as role models. Leaders should be able to create a vision of the organisation's goals, supply a persuasive reason to reach defined goals, create timelines for achievement of such goals and be able to convince the team to get the job done. Furthermore, Helm and Remington (2005) stated that managers should also demonstrate certain unique qualities like the capability to simplify links and connections, to be politically alert and to be supportive of employees' collective vision.

Gehring (2007) stated that managers' character traits, which are applicable to leadership, have alluded to contributing towards KM success. The concept of leadership according to Pearce and Conger (2003) originally presumed only command and control responsibilities, similar to the leadership described by Sveiby (2010) which he suggested existed amongst primitive hunter-gatherers. Thus, even though the concept of leadership has been in existence since ancient times, interest in the concept was only scientifically evident after the Industrial Revolution and its significance to KM is still not clearly defined.

The review of the literature above on defining knowledge, understanding its place in organisational strategy and leadership, as well as the barriers impeding and factors contributing to the success of KM has laid the foundation for a theoretical understanding of KM. It also contributed to the purpose of this study, which was to understand and examine how KM was implemented in this contact centre and whether it provided any strategic benefits. The methodology employed to achieve the research objectives explained earlier, shall be briefly discussed below.

2. Method

KM is a vital concept for service-based types of organisations (such as contact centres) as it provides a means of organising and transmitting the knowledge that employees require to enact their organisational roles and responsibilities in an efficient manner. Gao et al. (2008) confirmed that the constant utilisation of knowledge plays an essential role in contemporary organisations, especially the manner in which knowledge is acquired and transmitted as it can provide an organisation with a competitive edge and improve organisational functioning. Thus, KM in itself can be a strategic asset.

This study adopted a qualitative research methodology because the intention was to bring about clarity concerning the vague dynamics associated with KM and its implementation in this particular contact centre. Therefore, the primary focus of this study was to elicit the opinions of the management and staff of the contact centre, regarding the implementation of the KM concept in their workplace. The primary tool for data collection was thus interviews as it was determined to be an effective tool for the elicitation of information from respondents. According to Van Maanen (1998), people regularly utilise qualitative research as a conceptual scheme to aid in making sense of reality by indicating specific procedures for Management research.

Furthermore, a purposive sampling method was employed involving twenty participants. Participants were chosen based on their experience, engagement and interaction with the implementation of the KM concept, including employees at different levels of management at the contact centre in Durban. Kumar (2014) stated that in purposive sampling, a research practitioner usually approaches individuals whom they believe may have the necessary information and who would be willing to share such information. The researcher thus selects respondents/participants who will be advantageous to understanding the issue being researched; with the added advantage that such a method of selecting participants is often more convenient, cost effective and time saving (Welman, Kruger, & Mitchell, 2005). Welman et al. (2005) added that purposive sampling is dependent on the choice of the researcher, while Koerber and McMichael (2008) stated that respondents ought to possess a certain character trait as a requirement for purposive sampling.

Table 1 gives a clearer description of the respondents included in the purposive sample, including their designation, age and gender, which were all integrated to provide

a comprehensive understanding of the respondents’ profile. The respondents offered a detailed understanding of the issue being researched since they possessed the necessary experience and knowledge. Collection of this information from such respondents was the primary source of data collection. Boyce (2002) defined primary data as data that is non-existent, and which originates as a research study progresses.

Table 1
List of Respondents involved in the study and their characteristics

Respondents	Designation	Age Range	Gender
R1	Contact centre Manager	40-49	Male
R2	Contact centre Manager	40-49	Female
R3	Consultant	20-29	Male
R4	Team Member	30-39	Female
R5	Team Member	50+	Female
R6	Team Member	40-49	Male
R7	Team Member	30-39	Female
R8	Team Member	20-29	Male
R9	Consultant	40-49	Female
R10	Consultant	30-39	Female
R11	Knowledge Analyst	30-39	Male
R12	Operations Manager	40-49	Female
R13	Resource Planner	30-39	Male
R14	Contact centre Manager	40-49	Male
R15	Specialist	30-39	Male
R16	Operations Manager	30-39	Female
R17	Specialists	30-39	Male
R18	Business Support Specialists	30-39	Female
R19	Contact Centre Manager	40-49	Male
R20	Contact Centre Executive	40-49	Male

This study utilised a semi-structured interview process whereby participants were questioned based on a fixed set of questions, whilst still allowing them the freedom to talk about matters beyond the scope of the questions asked. The interviews were conducted face-to-face at the convenience of the participants and lasted on average around twenty minutes each. Such face-to-face interaction with the participants allowed for appreciation of non-verbal cues as they were responding to the interview questions. Maseko (2011) mentions that this process assists in revealing deeper issues embedded in the data which may have been communicated without the use of words. According to Creswell (2009), the semi-structured interview process is the most suitable of all interview types as it allows for an easy flow of communication between the interviewer and interviewees.

Secondary sources of data according to Kumar (2014) refers to data that was previously collected. Jennings (2010) posited that secondary data is data produced by an individual for their primary use, but which can also be used by other research practitioners. Secondary data is made up of journals, articles, newspapers, reports from organisations, previous research and books. For the purposes of this study, a variety of

journals were explored for the purpose of providing past and present perspectives on the issue being researched. In addition, reports from the contact centre division, and information from the institution's website, were used to provide further secondary data.

Thematic analysis was used to analyse the data collected from the interviews after it had been transcribed. This process of thematic analysis was utilised to organise the data and to identify overarching themes from the primary and secondary data. According to Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014), thematic coding is referred to as conceptual coding and this process of thematic/conceptual coding was used to reduce data and recognise themes. The data was analysed to allow the results and findings of the research to emerge. Du Plooy-Cilliers et al. (2014) describe the changing of raw data into significant logic that offers a resolution to the objectives of a research study, as data analysis.

To ensure that research ethics were central to this study, ethical clearance was applied for and granted by the University of KwaZulu-Natal's Humanities and Social Sciences Research Ethics Committee before commencement of the fieldwork. Interviews were then scheduled according to the participants' convenience and an informed consent letter was given to respondents before they could partake in any interview process. These forms enabled the respondents to agree to or decline to partake in the interviews without coercion or the threat of intimidation. In addition, both the names of the respondents and the institution of which this contact centre was a part of, were omitted upon request, as employees and the institution asked for confidentiality to be maintained in the dissemination of the study findings.

3. Findings and discussion

The outcome of the above research methodology was organised data that could then be analysed and explored to assist in understanding KM in this contact centre. Such an exploration contributed to the discussion that will now be presented. Quotes from respondents were interspersed throughout the discussion in order to allow the voice and direct opinions of the respondents to be heard in line with the qualitative research framework which guided this study. In addition, literature from the international field of KM was included in the discussion in order to either support or provide a compelling alternative line of thought to that which was espoused by the respondents.

3.1. The knowledge management concept

Respondents alluded to the fact that the management and staff in the contact centre had a basic understanding of the KM concept and its importance. There was consensus around the significance of the concept and its value as a tool that could assist with achieving organisational objectives, enhance skills and intellect, as well as provide the organisation with an added strategic advantage. Knowledge was transmitted via regular morning meetings known as 'buzz meetings/sessions', as well as through electronic means (e-mails) known as 'Business Communications'. The respondents shared a common understanding of the KM concept and mentioned that it was very helpful and assisted with providing more efficient service to clients, as described by one respondent:

"I think it is important, we've got a lot of things that we do here in the contact centre to ensure that we keep the knowledge alive. We have our daily buzz sessions; we have business communications that are sent out so any new things that come about we put into a briefing because nobody got time to sit and read that whole internal communication. So, we just put it into a briefing and send it out and then

on a monthly basis we actually test the agent on whether they retained any of that knowledge. So, I think that knowledge management is very important in the contact centre, without knowledge they can't actually assist the client.”
(Respondent 2/R2)

Management and staff were of the opinion that “knowledge is powerful” since it empowers them in providing services efficiently. This was in line with Serenko and Bontis (2004) who added that since its growth over the past few years, KM is now recognised as an important and relevant module in local and international tertiary academic programmes, especially business-focused programmes; thus, indicating that KM can be a strategic asset for businesses and individuals. Indications were that the concept is indeed a powerful one since it enhances processes and service delivery in the contact centre, as well as the clients’ experience with the contact centre employees.

3.2. Service delivery

According to Lin and Lin (2011), service providers who practice the art of displaying positive emotions and positive behaviours can promote positive behaviour and attitudes amongst their clients. The respondents mentioned that they believe KM can encourage personal development in their current job roles, as well as in their personal lives. They believed that if they are well informed with regards to policies and procedures as well as new developments, they would be more confident and competent in assisting clients:

“It is very effective because to answer like a certain question that we are required to when helping our clients we require knowledge and it is a very important aspect of our job, I think without it we wouldn't be able to assist as many people as we are currently assisting.” (R3)

This then increases their clients’ satisfaction levels which then increases their faith in the institution as a whole, thus attracting more clients to the contact centre, as well as to the institution. Thus, KM and its use in the contact centre can be a vital strategic tool for the betterment of the institution and for encouraging good public perceptions of it. This is especially relevant since the institution is involved in the collection of taxes and citizens do not always approach such an institution with a positive attitude generally. Positive perceptions of such an institution can thus encourage tax compliance amongst citizens, which will then benefit the institution and even the State.

The respondents believed that organisations should focus on clients by aligning information with business processes, since employees manage information whether it is for the client, about the client and sometimes from the client. Study findings differ from Bontis, Richards, and Serenko (2011) who mentioned that good service delivery goes beyond the focus on clients. The alignment of employee conduct and their commitment to clients are also an important requirement.

“My views, on knowledge management, are that it is essential in the contact centre environment, especially because we need to provide standard responses or similar responses to all types of queries. We have had people giving different variations of the same particular answer; if there is one knowledge management tool that we use, we will all give the same answer.” (R15)

In addition, one of the respondents mentioned that KM is very effective to knowledge teams supporting the contact centre. He added that the knowledge teams render support to the contact centre in terms of technical matters, system problems, complex queries and escalations. He confirmed that it was imperative to have a

knowledge team to render assistance and support operations as it creates a more efficient client service experience. Clearly then, KM is not only a valuable asset to client facing employees, but also to those that offer them technical and administrative support, which together ultimately contributes to efficient and effective service delivery. Since this is the focus of good service delivery, it is an important priority for the contact centre and they noted that their KM practices have already contributed to such, as explained below:

“Well I can say that it has improved our handling time of our queries that means we can now answer more calls than we previously did; we are abandoning less calls and we have improved on our service levels”. (R15)

“It definitely reduces the handling time per client query which then improves your availability of staff which in turn allows you to answer more calls and your turnaround times.” (R17)

3.3. Training and development

Respondents confirmed that the contact centre invests in training and developing their staff so that they are better equipped to assist their clients. The more they are updated and trained, the more they are able to provide efficient and effective service delivery. The findings from Al-Aama (2014), who drew on Singh (2010), stated that in organisations where people are continuously learning, the two concepts that stand out with regards to KM were the usage and sustainability of knowledge. Furthermore, an organisation’s performance is reliant on the knowledge that is shared by the employees, who are also responsible for creating and managing knowledge that adds value to the organisation (Al-Aama, 2014). This dynamic creates a positive reinforcing loop whereby the promotion of KM through training and development initiatives in the organisation can create employees who are capable of innovating with regard to their daily roles and duties, thus improving organisational functioning and promoting organisational success. The staff at the contact centre saw KM as a concept that upskills them. They saw improvements in communications and processes as a positive means to self-develop, and a tool that enabled them to render efficient service to their clients:

“... you are upskilling yourself. You are making yourself do your job better, you are helping the clients, you are more efficient at your job... so it is definitely a benefit.” (R9)

“Where you have a more satisfied customer; you have more confident staff.” (R17)

It is at the nexus between training and development and KM that knowledge in an organisation and how it is leveraged can begin to take shape as being of strategic value. As Inkinen, Kianto, and Vanhala (2015) explain: “Strategic KM is about assessing current knowledge and the need for future knowledge. Then, KM strategy is formulated to bridge the gap between what there already is and what there should be.” In this way, KM practices and KM training and development initiatives should not only be aimed at simply upskilling employees, but should also consider the kind of knowledge that can be inculcated into employees in order to make them strategic assets who can then actively contribute to the optimal functioning of the overall organisation.

3.4. Technology

Knowledge repositories consist of knowledge that is stored systematically, usually online, or on specially designed storage hardware possessed by the organisation if the

information is of a sensitive nature. This repository is organised in a manner that allows one to search and retrieve information when required. The contact centre currently has a repository that contains all the standard operating procedures, policies and process enhancements of the institution.

Halawi, McCarthy, and Aronson (2007) confirmed that an organisation can indeed possess competitive advantage with the proper management of knowledge resources. KM, according to Bontis and Fitz-enz (2002), encompasses the active collection and creation of an organisational knowledge base which builds and enhances the organisations intellect, thus assisting it to achieve its objectives. Participants indicated that technology and knowledge go together, and that technology makes the sourcing of information very simple – which is a vital element in organisational success. One respondent mentioned that in the past, knowledge was kept in files and sourcing this information was an operational nightmare. Currently, the information is housed electronically, and information can be sourced at any time and from anywhere, making the sourcing of information a simple and efficient process.

“...currently we have our assessments online and all the information (is available) if you are on a telephone call and if you are with a client, everything is on the system, we have things on our website and online portals which you can access if you need to find certain things, so we are highly reliant on technology right now.”
(R18)

According to respondents, the online knowledge repository in the contact centre is regarded as a benefit. They agreed that this repository enables them to provide the clients with better service as they are able to access information quickly and easily and pass it on to the clients without delay.

“The benefits are that we are getting information instantly...” (R6)

“The benefits of technological knowledge management are that it creates a single repository for all queries, accessible by everyone, at any time, (allowing us to provide) standard answers to clients so that they are satisfied they are not being given conflicting information.” (R15)

3.5. Competitive advantage

There was an understanding amongst the respondents that should one possess more knowledge than their competitors, one will indeed have a competitive advantage. Respondents confirmed this institution is in competition with other departments since there are regularly reviewed and given increased targets that need to be met. According to respondents, KM assisted greatly with achieving set targets and overall organisational objectives.

“Knowledge is power so if you do have knowledge and if you are managing it, definitely you will be competitive.” (R16)

Bontis, Richards, and Serenko (2011) who drew on Grant’s (1996) work, mentioned that operational knowledge sharing supports the handover of tangible and intangible knowledge from one person to the entire collective within the organisation, resulting in increased capabilities and eventually increased strategic advantage. According to Allio (2015), competitive advantage is gained through strategic management when clients are happy with services rendered, when the competition makes a costly mistake and/or when the economic environment is favourable. Knowledge (and

how it is used and managed) is integral to the innovation capacity in an organisation and thus pivotal in creating sustained competitive advantage (Oyemomi et al., 2019; Mahdi, Nassar, & Almsafir, 2019). As Mahdi, Nassar, and Almsafir (2019) encourage: "...the resources of an organization must include knowledge, which should always be cared for and developed upon."

Participants indicated that KM is valuable because it enhances the organisation's reputation. The contact centre and the institution of which it is a part of has had to ensure that it maintains a positive reputation in order to attract clients. Respondents confirmed that KM practices have improved the institution's reputation and client confidence in the contact centre. This in turn gives it a competitive edge over other institutions offering similar services, as well as over other departments in the same institution.

"Our reputation will always be high up there if we make sure that we have the right knowledge, as well as clients will have confidence and know exactly what value they are getting for what they are paying for." (R16)

In addition, there was an understanding that the creation of well-informed knowledge teams can improve processes and thus aid in assisting employees and clients. Respondents mentioned that processes might be made of, and executed by, humans, machines, or a combination of the two, and added that KM enhanced organisational processes; thereby increasing the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation and making it more competitive in the long run. Bontis et al. (2011) confirmed this finding by stating that managing knowledge, although not the only way to achieve customer satisfaction, is necessary when interacting with clients daily. Bontis (2002) and Huang (2020) postulated that the alignment of KM systems, learning processes and operational processes can lead to efficient outcomes that increase an organisation's performance level. The case for KM as means of competitive advantage is further supported by Ullah et al. (2019, p.543) who conclude that "knowledge is a precious asset for organizations hoping to attain advanced innovation and sustainable competitive advantage."

3.6. Communication

It was unanimously indicated that communication was the driving force behind the introduction of the KM concept in the contact centre. Respondents confirmed that through continuous communication, they were able to render enhanced efficient services to their clients. They affirmed that they received communication verbally during their morning meetings and electronically via e-mails and electronic newsletters. The findings in this study were in line with those of Nando (2007) who confirmed that communication is a critical success factor. He further added that communication is important since it is a medium that is used internally (between employees in an organisation), as well as externally (with outside clients and stakeholders) and that most organisations successes are due to the effective management of these two types of communications. Respondents strongly believed that processes were kept updated through regular communication and the testing of employees' knowledge levels. When knowledge is managed it relies heavily on communication. New concepts and improvements require managers or leaders to play the role of collaborator, since they have to identify what information to communicate and to ensure that it is communicated effectively and on time.

"It will affect us a lot like if we don't communicate correctly; if we don't give the right knowledge to our team members, it will affect us as well as it will also affect the team members and the clients because obviously they will communicate something that is not as per required standards." (R16)

Respondents were of the opinion that KM in the contact centre appeared to be improving on an annual basis.

3.7. Knowledge management and leadership

Respondents were of the opinion that KM should make the task of leadership easier and influence leaders in a positive way. Some made mention of how knowledgeable leaders would be better equipped to steer the business in the right direction. There were other respondents who said that a knowledgeable workforce was an empowered workforce. They further indicated that this would ultimately make a big difference because it would build employee confidence in their own abilities, thus lessening the need for authoritative forms of leadership, as employees would be more autonomous in their functioning. Some respondents believed that since managers did not often deal with calls from clients, if they were required to intervene or render assistance, they would be able to access the information they needed from the system which had been organised due to effective KM practices, thus improving their ability to deliver services to the clients.

“How it affects them? It should make their jobs easier. I mean I’ve been in an acting position so I know if you don’t know something you know where to find it, that’s why I am saying that it should make their jobs easier.” (R9)

“The managers and leaders don’t always take calls so they are not always up to date with the information, so if they do have to answer a query there is a site that you can always access, and they can get the information they need”. (R15)

Respondents suggested that managers and leaders set an example for their subordinates. There exists a strong leader-follower dynamic in most organisations (Singh & Bodhanya, 2013) and followers can find their confidence levels increase around leaders whose behaviour can be imitated (Allio, 2015). As Inkinen, Kianto, and Vanhala (2015) assert, leaders have “a direct impact on how the rest of the company deals with key KM activities, as they act as natural example-setters for the others.” Managers and leaders steer the organisation in the direction that is most strategic to its performance and thus they need to have access to knowledge repositories that can enable them to do this. Leaders should also appreciate the knowledge and intellectual qualities already possessed and demonstrated by their employees, in addition to being actively involved in ensuring that such a knowledge base contributes to the organisation’s strategic goals (Inkinen, 2016). Respondents outlined in their responses that their managers continuously communicated and updated them with the necessary knowledge to perform their organisational roles and responsibilities effectively. Furthermore, the managers themselves were tested on a monthly basis to ensure that they are able to support the knowledge needs of their staff.

“Yes, it affects them in a positive way because I mean if you as a Manager, you are knowledgeable and your team is knowledgeable that makes things easy, it makes the centre able to achieve its objectives and goals.” (R13)

The responses from the participants suggested that the leaders and managers in the contact centre adopted a transformational leadership style. According to Birasnav, Rangnekar, and Dalpati (2011), transformational leaders inspire their employees to improve their intellectual abilities by providing them with vision and direction. Yin et al. (2019) further support this notion of transformational leadership as being imperative for effective knowledge sharing to occur, especially if such leaders are able to encourage team efficacy and make followers feel psychologically safe.

The organisation of which this contact centre is a part of, developed its own unique KM strategy to assist management and staff with their daily operational needs, to enhance the transmission of knowledge within the organisation, and to improve overall customer service delivery. Since it is a contact centre, its primary function is to ensure that all queries received from its customers are resolved quickly and efficiently. Employees have to be knowledgeable and they have to keep abreast of developments in the products and procedures of the organisation, thus its strategy towards KM has considered these unique demands and inculcated them into their KM practices and initiatives.

4. Recommendations

This study allowed us to learn about how KM was perceived, managed and enacted in this knowledge intensive contact centre. In order to encourage improvement in its KM practices, the following initiatives were recommended:

4.1. Organised and controlled communication

Updates and enhancements were regularly shared in the contact centre. However, the moment a new update or enhancement is communicated, the next one is ready to be shared. Communication of this nature needs to be released in a more streamlined fashion so as not to overwhelm employees. There should be days or dates when set timelines for updates and enhancements are released and communicated. This will eliminate confusion, and thus improve the quality of customer service.

Nando (2007) stated that effective communication is an important concept for the entire organisation, as well as stakeholders from outside of the organisation, such as partners, clients, regulatory bodies, etc. At times, information intended for management and staff finds its way to the public first. Respondents indicated that in such a scenario, staff members find themselves at a loss for words since they are now being schooled by the clients, instead of the other way around. It would be best to ensure that knowledge should be shared during set timelines. In this way, there will be no surprises for management and staff and employees will be well-informed through the organised and systematic transmission of knowledge throughout the organisation. Mechanisms should also be put into place to ensure that the relevant knowledge is effectively communicated and disseminated throughout the organisation to enable all employees, managers and leaders to work toward a common goal (Inkinen, Kianto, & Vanhala, 2015) and ensure uniform service delivery, which is especially relevant in an intensively client-facing organisation such as this contact centre.

4.2. Keeping it simple

Communication needs to be kept simple since the contact centre is made up of a diverse workforce. There are people of different genders, ages, religions and race groups. They comprehend spoken and written work in different ways. To avoid new knowledge being open to misinterpretation and processes being compromised, information should be kept as simple as possible. It should cater to the needs of all, since some learn better through graphics, whilst some prefer the written word for example. Knowledge may be generic but the manner in which it is perceived, assimilated and organised conceptually is unique to each individual, thus KM in this organisation needs to be more cognisant of this.

In addition, another suggestion was to create more opportunities for the sharing of knowledge amongst employees in an informal and relaxed manner, as it is often in such settings that conversation and thus knowledge and learnings from training sessions can be transmitted amongst employees and assimilated more easily. Collaboration of this nature can aid in the evolution and transmission of both tacit and explicit knowledge and thus enhance employees' professional development (Ayanbode & Nwagwu, 2021), as well as encourage innovation and teamwork (Aghaegbuna & Ukoha, 2020). Furthermore, such can also enhance organisational citizenship behaviours, or behaviours exhibited naturally by employees and which is not formally rewarded by the organisation, but which nonetheless contributes to more collaborative team performance in the workplace (Organ, 1988; Kang et al., 2020). Punniyamoorthy and Asumptha (2019) suggest creating formal forums in the workplace and/or the establishment of "knowledge spaces" to foster effective knowledge sharing of this nature.

4.3. Training and assessments

Processes were constantly changing and were updated quite regularly in the contact centre. Respondents stated that KM assessments were predominantly made up of "knowledge reviews" which were taken on a monthly basis during which employees were assessed to ascertain the knowledge they had absorbed from trainings and repositories. Such reviews were just one aspect of KM in the organisation.

Learning styles need to be addressed since people learn and absorb knowledge differently. One respondent mentioned that perhaps surveys should be introduced to find out the employees' learning styles and then implement training sessions appropriately. An interactive training style should be introduced and should be made available to management and staff. This would improve the quality of work amongst employees and client queries would be attended to more efficiently.

In addition, management and staff in the contact centre complete a Personal Development Plan (PDP). In the PDP, employees can mention the types of training they feel they require to perform more effectively, and the PDP can be updated regularly. There should be a mechanism that informs the training division of the most requested training needs to the least requested, which should then be organised accordingly. Furthermore, these training interventions should be incentivised; for example, with promises of moving up the organisational hierarchy and/or salary increases, in order to promote trainees' commitment and willingness to learn. In addition, there should be greater emphasis on rewarding knowledge sharing (through Human Resource or management policies for example) as it promotes collegial support and the creative use (and re-use) of knowledge in the workplace (Kim, 2020). Bueren, Schierholz, Kolbe, and Brenner (2004) suggest the use of a skill management system in which the skills of employees are recorded according to a corporate skill tree which allows management to be aware of the skills and knowledge available to the organisation. This enables the organisation to locate required skill sets (and the employees that possess them), in a more efficient and effective manner at any given time, contributing to better and faster service to customers. Furthermore, a corporate skill tree will quickly reveal shortcomings in employees' knowledge and understandings, allowing training interventions to be developed that specifically target such shortcomings. This will contribute to customers being more satisfied, organisational resources being used more effectively and eventually more revenue for the organisation (Bueren et al., 2004).

4.4. *Integration of knowledge from training interventions*

Respondents mentioned that there was a gap which they found evident when employees returned from training in that they found it difficult to integrate the knowledge acquired in the training sessions with their daily organisational processes. Thus, it would be beneficial for managers to interact with employees who have been on trainings to ascertain if such training was worthwhile and if it assisted them with their performance and service delivery. One method of assessing if the employee was able to garner any knowledge from a training session is by way of a test that is known as a Knowledge Review. This review is an open book test that has a set timer to a maximum of sixty minutes and the scores from this test are recorded on a scorecard since it is regarded as a Key Performance Indicator (KPI). Along with the knowledge reviews, there should be other ways of measuring knowledge levels such as creating a knowledge index that is based on the knowledge reviews, scores from the training academy and the communication of process enhancements. This index should be a measurement that should remain on the scorecard as a KPI. However, if employees' personal goals in the workplace are not linked to the organisation's overall goal of creating and sharing knowledge, they may fail to appreciate the importance of training interventions and may thus struggle to integrate and share such knowledge in the workplace (Okyere-Kwakye & Nor, 2020). There was much emphasis from respondents on ensuring that the knowledge acquired through departmental training interventions were integrated into the daily operations of the organisation. However, this seems to indicate that respondents may possess too simplistic a notion of KM by failing to realise that KM systems, according to Castagna et al. (2020, p.10), "are a combination of knowledge management tools, namely specific IT-based systems supporting KM processes, and KM practices, which are defined as methods or techniques to support the organisational processes of knowledge management."

4.5. *Knowledge workers, social media management and technology*

Knowledge workers should be available to assist management and staff at all times. These knowledge workers should be able to aid the contact centre with complicated queries, as well as unusual queries. Once these queries are resolved, the knowledge workers need to update the electronic repository, should similar queries of this nature arise, and staff can then source this information from the repository. This speaks to the idea of Customer Knowledge Management (CKM) which is the creation, accumulation and transfer of knowledge pertaining to the customer base (Alegre, Sengupta, & Lapiedra, 2013; Gil-Gomez, Guerola-Navarro, Oltra-Badenes, & Lozano-Quilis, 2020). In this way, the contact centre can use information pertaining to their customers to design more specific training interventions for employees, to create more innovative marketing campaigns directed at the public, and to customize the kind of information and knowledge that is stored in their repositories to be more customer-centred.

The relationship between social media and KM (and the benefits thereof), is fast becoming an area of growing interest (Agostini et al., 2020). Data emanating from the avenue of social media has led to an exponential growth in global data (Meneghello et al., 2020), especially in the information age. Therefore, to remain competitive, knowledge workers should touch base with the division that deals with social media and communications to gather information that could be beneficial in increasing the efficiency and knowledge base of the organisation. This information could be based on complaints, compliments and suggestions that are received through social media and the internet, such as those from Facebook, Twitter, Hello Peter and the organisation's

website. Floreddu and Cabiddu (2016) stated that social media permits new methods of communication that may contribute to the enhancement of client interaction and should thus be utilised to improve service delivery, especially in a context such as the contact centre that regularly interacts with clients. In addition, it is important for organisations existing in the information age, and those that claim to be ‘learning organisations’, to create a synergy between social media and their KM processes (Chugh & Joshi, 2020) in order to further enhance KM’s ability to function as a strategic asset.

Technology played a huge role in the contact centre and they were already in possession of a technologically advanced knowledge repository which was used on a daily basis by the management and staff. However, according to respondents, this repository needed to be more user friendly and the information housed in the repository needed to be updated more regularly, as the management and distribution of knowledge in an organisation can better be facilitated by effective technological systems. Thus, the organisation should seek to source the necessary technological infrastructure to further support its existing KM practices, as well as to enhance them.

5. Conclusion

Schiama et al. (2012) confirmed that in order for organisations in the public or private domain to gain a competitive advantage, it is essential for them to convert their knowledge into products and services that can secure profits and re-energise the organisation’s capabilities. The findings of this study confirmed that in order for KM in the contact centre to function as a strategic asset, it has to be regarded as such. This means that more attention has to be given to improving the shortfalls the contact centre encounters in their daily KM practices and with their KM systems. A number of recommendations were posited in this regard. Furthermore, what is even more important than the management of knowledge, is how this knowledge is applied in the organisation. This differentiates KM as a tool, from KM as a strategic asset. If knowledge is efficiently and effectively managed, then its full potential is realised through the aligning of knowledge processes with the organisation’s overall strategy, thus making it a veritable strategic asset. As Waddell and Stewart (2008, p.43) aptly put it: “Knowledge management provides benefits for all types of organisations, however managers within these organisations must be able to determine what information is relevant given a specific situation and what approach to apply in order to adapt knowledge successfully into their organisation.” In addition, the study highlighted and explored human, technological, organisational and management aspects related to KM in this organisation, and thus contributed to a more integrated and holistic approach to KM than exists in the current ocean of academic literature.

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