Does Knowledge Management Work in NGOs? - a Longitudinal Study

Running Header: Knowledge Management in NGOs?

Dr Alison Corfield, Independent Researcher[1]

Email: sacorfield@hotmail.com

Professor Rob Paton,

and

Dr Stephen Little

The Open University Business School,

Walton Hall

MILTON KEYNES MK7 6AA

[1] Corresponding author

Does Knowledge Management Work in NGOs? - a Longitudinal Study

Abstract:

The study reported here tracked over an extended period the fortunes of knowledge management programmes introduced into three medium-sized international development charities. The programmes were quite different, each carefully tailored to their contexts, and each a 'cut-back' version of knowledge management. In these forms they withstood significant changes in their staffing, structural location and rationales. They came to be valued by staff even if tangible evidence of their benefits was in short supply. For those in non-commercial organizational contexts contemplating the use of knowledge management, the implication is to take it seriously, but use it selectively.

Introduction

The question in the title of this paper invites a series of other questions: how would we *know* if Knowledge Management (KM) worked? If it does work, in what ways does it contribute? To what extent and at what cost? What are the pitfalls? - and so on. Such questions are of interest to the KM community both professionals and interested academics, and to those involved in Non-Governmental Organization, NGO management and governance.

The questions also have a wider significance in that KM is a body of management thinking and practice that developed in the private sector to serve the purposes of large corporations. How well do ideas originating in the private sector transfer into the non-profit and public administration sectors? Does a 'for-profit' motive make such a transfer problematic or even inimical to the fundamental aims of these sectors?

In this article, we first consider why KM has become popular in non-commercial sectors, what can be characterised as 'KM', and what key issues form the theoretical framework for this article. Second, we introduce the research that forms the basis of the article: a recent study focused on KM within the NGO sector, specifically looking at independent agencies involved in international development. The research involved three case studies that were tracked for up to eight years, to provide a rich seam of data to look for answers to the questions outlined above. The research methods are described.

Third, we report on the main findings – what form the KM took in each case and what could be put forward as success or the contrary. Unsurprisingly, the study did not provide simple answers to these questions, given the complex social realities involved, but it did throw light on the actual translation of KM ideas from the commercial sector to this very different organizational population. Fourth, we then discuss what can be learnt from this for the introduction and spread of KM beyond its commercial origins. Fifth, we discuss the significance of these observations and the light they throw on the wider debates about the transfer of management practices between different contexts.

Section 1. Establishing the Conceptual Framework

New management tools

It has been widely held that the public and voluntary sectors would benefit from adopting what are considered more advanced ideas and techniques from the private sector. All organizations need to optimise the use of their resources and this no different for the NGO sector, where they have little control over the demand for their services and so this demand is generally much greater than they can provide. The constant pressure to make better use of scarce resources is even more relevant in a time of government cut backs and economic down turn, which affect them as much as public organizations and other not-for-profits.

The push for more use of management practices originating from the private sector has been visible for two decades, through the period that has been characterised as an era of market triumphalism (Frank, 2002). Indeed, there have been initiatives that encourage the spread of private sector management within the public sector, for example the 'Public Management Reform' (Pollitt and Bouckaert, 2011) and within the voluntary sector (see Paton and Mordaunt, 2001).

For those authors who agree with Frank, this has been an important means of modernisation. Others have held that these new management techniques are inappropriate

because they conflict with the values of public bodies and voluntary agencies, (Clarke and Newman, 1997; Marobela, 2008).

Most discussions of this issue soon go beyond a simplistic celebration or denunciation of private sector practices (Paton 2003; Stacey and Griffin, 2006; Luke et al., 2011). In these more measured discussions the stark polarities dissolve in the face of various conditions and contingencies. Above all, what matters is how the practice is enacted; the question is not what a technique does – techniques, as such, do not do anything - but how managers and others use private sector practises. These considerations point to a range of conceptual and methodological issues that mean the straightforward starting question – does it work? – cannot afford a simple, categorical answer. And that is as it should be: as experienced public managers know, the messy realities of management – in whatever sector – cannot be constructively addressed by the eager application of textbook formulae or consultants' recipes.

KM has been gaining popularity in the public and NGO sectors since the 1990s as part of this pressure to modernise management. In the case of the NGO community – our present concern – major global funders have publically embraced KM, providing incentive for NGOs to show they are using KM. On the less positive side, however, KM includes the idea of capturing intellectual capital, which has the potential to lead to organizations 'privatising' knowledge to enhance their own assets. This is an example of how one strand within the KM tapestry could potentially be in stark opposition to the view that knowledge

in the public arena should be a common resource shared for maximum humanitarian benefit.

Arguably, the challenge with KM, as with other recent developments in management, is one of finding promising connections between felt issues in one's own organization and the new concepts, practices and approaches that seem to have been productive elsewhere; and then introducing them in ways that mean they can be embraced, adapted and aligned with the central purposes of that new setting.

Defining 'knowledge management' and 'knowledge'

KM is an area where the conceptual issues can be complex. For example, although there are many books and articles (Kelleher and Levene, 2001, MacDonald, 2005, Jashapura, 2011) outlining what KM involves, it is nevertheless an area that retains a certain mystique. What exactly is knowledge in an organizational context and how can KM be distinguished from traditional management, particularly information handling? Similarly what in practice does 'doing KM' involve? The lists of potential activities are extensive, for example, one study has suggested that there are over one hundred different options within the scope of KM to choose from (Hull, 2000). Moreover, quite a few of these, such as knowledge sharing or document storage with metadata, are now widespread and can be found in organizations that do not have explicit KM programmes.

To understand KM it is necessary to look back to its history. For more than fifty years, knowledge issues have been a focus of concern among business thinkers. For example,

Edith Penrose, in her seminal book, The Theory of the Growth of the Firm, focussed on knowledge capability. She argued that the continual change in knowledge within a firm, along with the continual change in external circumstances, presented the firm with a productive opportunity because: 'This increase in knowledge not only causes the productive opportunity of a firm to change in ways unrelated to changes in the environment but also contributes to the "uniqueness" of the opportunity of each individual firm' (Penrose, 1959).

Peter Drucker, a consistently insightful and highly influential commentator on business and management, confirmed that 'knowledge, during the last few decades, has become the central capital, the cost centre and the crucial resource of the economy' (Drucker, 1969). The claim that knowledge is not just important but has become a major source of value was made by many other business writers and had become a widely accepted by the end of the twentieth century.

While the recognition of knowledge as a vital organizational asset was growing, another impetus for KM came from the Japanese company model and stressed that knowledge creation, was a fundamental element of dynamic innovation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). These ideas have slowly moved into the mainstream of commercial management thinking. As a result, KM emerged as a distinctive discipline from the 1990s onward.

KM is a multi-dimensional, cross-disciplinary field and as a result there are many competing views on how it can best be defined. For this article two working definitions are

adopted: '**knowledge is information in context, together with an understanding of how to use it'** (Brooking, 1999 p. 5). This presents knowledge, in the organizational context, as a resource that adds value to an organization that is capable of making use of it. KM is then defined in this article as t**he management perspective, and associated practical activity, intended to make the best use of the knowledge resources available to an organization to meet its productive opportunities.**

As a discipline, KM has been presented in different ways. As recent examples, one author subdivides KM into knowledge creation, organization, transfer and application, (De Sousa et al, 2011) while another identifies: knowledge discovering, generating, evaluating, sharing and leveraging, (Jashapara, 2011). Although the categories are different, it is clear that a KM programme will involve a range of knowledge practices. And, though emphases may differ, for most commentators, the more significant KM practices would be associated with core KM ideas including: Learning Organization theory (Argyris, 1978; Senge, 1990); Knowledge Creation (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995); Intellectual Capital (Brooking 1996, Edvinsson and Malone, 1997; Stewart, 1997) and Communities of Practice (Wenger, 2000). A continuing concern with the application of emergent technology infrastructures and media - such as intranets and associated knowledge stores, and, more recently, the use of social media – is also a hallmark of the discipline (for example, Jashapura, 2011).

Working definitions however, do not solve the question of whether or not an organization uses KM. First, it is possible to look at practical activity but KM practices are not fixed and self-evident. Indeed, an extensive body of literature has shown that the spread of practices

involves adaptation, not just adoption, (see for example: Fenton-O'Creevy et al, 2005). As a result, the way that 'the same' practice is enacted may vary considerably between contexts and identification may be uncertain. An alternative to using the observed presence of KM practices as evidence of a KM programme is to look at cases of KM among those organizations that say they are using the KM management perspective.

Once again, however, it is not that simple: as institutional theory has taught us, when powerful agencies in the institutional environment declare a belief in the value of a particular approach, then conspicuously reporting that one has adopted that approach becomes a way for organizations to display their commitment to best practice – and thereby to increase their standing in the field. And this may be true regardless of quite how and how far the approach has actually been adopted and regardless of its efficacy in that particular context. So one observes the phenomena of colonization (the spread of practices that have come to be expected and so must be adopted to maintain external confidence) and de-coupling (the separation of such practices from the 'real work' that continues largely as before) – to use the terms of Power (1997).

The adoption of practices in the hope of 'looking good' creates a tendency for organizations in a field to look alike – what is called *institutional isomorphism* (Powell and DiMaggio, 1991) by sociologists.. As Frumkin and Galaskiewicz (2004) have shown, government bodies can and do stimulate isomorphic processes in private and non-profit organizations that are dependent on government regulation or funding. And this happens

regardless of the actual consequence for organizational effectiveness, as far as it can be ascertained.

So, simply taking at face value managers' claims to be using KM may be unsatisfactory – it might include what we could call 'rhetorical adoption' (Paton, 2003, p. 96). Instead, it is important to ensure that an organization demonstrates the presence of KM programmes rather than isolated activity or rhetorical implementation presented as if it were a more serious KM programme. This will include the implementation of active KM practices from among the cluster of ideas that are widely seen as being central to the new discipline, linked together by an explicit KM rationale. KM programmes can thus be demonstrated by a minimum of objective data in the form of documented policies and rationales, the presence of people assigned to KM work, and observation of work in progress, together with confirmation from senior organizational managers that programmes are active and supported within the organization.

Section 2. Research Methods and Case Study Organizations

The Research

As KM has become important to organizations beyond the private sector, it was appropriate to research how it had affected non-private organizations where it had been tried. The research methods used are now described and the three case organizations introduced.

Previous to this research, attempts to consider the use of KM in NGOs had relied on surveys. The results established that KM was widely known in the sector and respondents could describe activities being implemented within their organizations. The information was descriptive and focused on determining activities, rather than considering the outcomes (Hovland, 2003; Ramalingam, 2004). Consequently, a way of looking at KM activity in some depth within its organizational context was needed. Case study analysis was chosen as an appropriate method to achieve this - 'The case study is the method of choice when the phenomenon under study is not readily distinguishable from its context', (Yin, 1993, p. 3). Moreover many KM case studies have been carried out and documented, but the literature is strongly biased towards commercial examples, (Trezzini et al, 2004; Jennex, 2005). In the research discussed here, case studies were carried out in three international development charities and an element of longitudinal research was included to ensure the programmes were lasting and not short-lived deviations from business as usual (Corfield, 2011).

Identifying three case charities

Three UK-based medium-sized charities that were considered to be leaders in the KM area were approached. Initial discussions and visits confirmed that the two criteria for KM , as set out above, would be met in these charities. First, each had a knowledge manager who was responsible for delivering a programme that was based on a documented KM rationale. This programme considered managing knowledge across a wide spectrum of management purposes and had been explained and disseminated widely among staff. Second, in each case these programmes included activities that were variants of core KM

practices. The charities invited to take part were all positive about the idea of allowing an external review of their programmes and plans and each was able to include the involvement of an appropriate senior manager.

NGO A and NGO B were both faith-based organizations with extensive links to communities in the UK and partner organizations in overseas countries where their development programmes were based. NGO A was the smallest of the three and did not have its own offices abroad, using specialists based with partners. It very much focused on its core faith base. NGO B was the largest with sub offices in Africa, Asia and South America and uses high profile campaigns in the UK for advocacy and fundraising. NGO C, in contrast, was secular in origin and had seven sub-offices around the world, each very different in programme focus and size. The sub-offices specialised in building technical expertise in these programmes and sharing the results across the development community. Each NGO could be characterised as 'medium' in size, neither being a small specialised NGO, nor one of the major international players in terms of scope or profile.

Fieldwork

The main fieldwork for the three case studies was carried out during the period 2004 to 2007. Thereafter, each case was 'tracked' via follow-up visits until late 2010. The rationale for this follows the explanation: 'In longitudinal research, data are collected on one or more variables for two or more time periods, thus allowing at least measurement of change and possibly explanation of change', (Menard, 2008). The return visits were included to see whether the programmes would be sustained and how they evolved in the face of the

departure of key staff and other organizational contingencies. This was considered essential, given the possibility that these programmes might prove to be short-lived management 'fads' or mere 'rhetorical' smokescreens.

These follow-up visits, and also visits to offices beyond the central headquarters, were used to incorporate a wider range of perspectives on the question of whether the programmes were giving lasting value to the organizations.

See Table 1 (at end).

Criteria for Judging the Quality of Research Design

Certain criteria must be established to ensure that qualitative data from case studies, meet acceptable standards; researchers must show that their work has been properly executed. Yin takes a view on establishing agreed standards for data collection quality and sets out four tests which 'have been commonly used to establish the quality of any empirical social research' (Yin, 1994, p. 32).

These are 'construct validity', 'internal' and 'external validity' and 'reliability'. To achieve these, the case study approach was based on clear protocols that ensured consistent standards and methods between the individual case studies. Multiple sources of evidence were collected in the form of interviews, observation and collation of appropriate documentation.

The research included sets of ten interviews, replicated across the case studies. Participants were chosen, by the researcher, for their varied roles within an organization – to represent a wide range of teams (and competing interests). Where possible, roles were matched across the three cases (see table 2) and each included a Senior Manager to ensure the interviews included someone able to relate the KM programme to organizational strategic direction.

See Table 2 (at end).

More than 30 interviews took place in total, using a semi-structured form, with discussion taking one hour to allow for building rapport and to provide appropriate depth.

It was still necessary to treat all information from interviews with caution, so a report was presented back to the case participants, in order to meet the condition to 'have the draft case study report reviewed by key informants' (Yin, 1994, p. 34).

Section 3. Findings

Commonalities between NGOs

Some common characteristics are immediately worth noting. First, in all three cases the use of intranets and the creation of 'knowledge bases' was central to the programmes. This supports the focus of many of the current texts on KM which, while asserting KM is not restricted to technology tools, recognises that technology is fundamentally linked to its

delivery (Jashapara, 2011; De Souza, 2011). A recurring motif was the justification that KM provided for the introduction and use of new information and communication technology (ICT). In all three organizations KM provided a powerful rationale for technological upgrading; rationales that were explicitly linked to their missions.

Second, in all three cases staff initially found KM language and ideas difficult to comprehend - thus:

- 'It was too abstract, whereas accountants are practical. We didn't like the airy-fairy big sell.' (NGO A, Finance Manager).

- 'Knowledge is a difficult word and we struggle with it' (NGO B, Knowledge Officer).

- 'I think knowledge management used to lack credibility and was seen as remote and ethereal' (NGO C, Web Manager).

The most successful KM teams worked hard to convince individual workgroups that the programme was relevant to their own objectives and work plans. It was only when the activities had been linked to specific team objectives, usually through focused training and the identification of local 'champions', that KM became accepted as part of the organizations' core work. This was not always the case in NGO C, where the KM programme was considerably less positively received as a result.

Thirdly, several key activities within the KM repertoire were *not* in evidence in any of the three charities. None had attempted to identify intellectual property, nor carried out knowledge audits, gap analysis or mappings that might measure their intellectual capital,

although these are commonplace in KM texts. There was never any suggestion that by increasing their knowledge base, charities could compete more successfully against each other; on the contrary the idea of networking to share knowledge across organizational boundaries was widely approved. This feature of NGO culture has not been changed by KM; they 'work in cooperative networks with each other, with local and international NGOs (Bell and Coicaud, 2006, p. 1).

In this way, the selective use of KM activities such as intranets, communities of practice and knowledge sharing programmes suggests that they focused on practices that complemented their public values as well as those that supported their chosen outcomes. This was best expressed by an HR staff member who was not directly involved in establishing the KM programme but who was strongly positive about its results: 'Yes, I can see the link. I can forge a link, particularly in making better, more effective use of resources. This makes sense, thinking of our mission and values' (NGO B, Head of HR).

KM Outcomes

What evidence was there that the programmes were enhancing capacity or performance? The great majority of the interviewees in all three charities offered positive views and assessments. In fact, only one of more than thirty respondents appeared to feel negative about the whole programme. More respondents were negative about aspects of the implementation; but the general purpose and approach of the KM activity were felt to be valid. Hence the potential for KM to add value was accepted in all three NGOS across the range of functions and seniority interviewed. That said, the reasoning and experience that

underpinned these judgements was different in each case and so the results are now considered by individual NGO.

Outcomes – NGO A:

In NGO A, KM was positioned as an essential part of their future planning. The focus on formal learning reviews had been sustained for over eight years and was still being refined as a tool for giving the organization the positive attribute of flexibility in the face of environmental change, which was a formal strategic goal. The proxy measure of number of reviews taking place would suggest genuine commitment to the programme although the frequency was not uniform across the organization. While it was not possible to link the programme to overall output measures, success stories of occasions when KM had led to improved planning and performance were frequently discussed.

The KM programme had been introduced via small scale trials intended to prove the concept before making it a formal programme. The learning review that had convinced the CEO to support KM followed the organization's response to an overseas emergency. 'Lessons learned' were written up to ensure that on future occasions they could improve their speed of response and ability to raise donor awareness. These learning points were enacted in the following emergency, even though it took place in a different continent and involved different personnel and was seen as a convincing example of learning leading to the transfer of good practice. This story was well known in the organization and several interviewees commented on its importance as a practical example of successful capacity growth. The Senior Manager responsible reported: 'We were able to pull out the document

and instantly there was important learning that informed the response, and we could see a visible improvement' (NGO A, Overseas Director).

Staff in other parts of the organization also quoted relevant examples of success as is shown by this comment: 'another success was the recent learning review. In this case, failed work could give lessons and lead to the best work' (NGO A, Support Manager). This view highlights the way that the KM programme was adapted and accepted by very different parts of the organization, helped by the training and support focus of the KM team. The changes made as a result of the KM learning programme were seen as evidence that they were becoming more responsive and therefore agile in delivering their mission, while also remaining true to their stated intention to work in partnership and learn from those they worked with. 'One of our core values is in terms of the whole issue of relationships, how we work together, how we learn from each other. We want to work in partnership, with mutual respect on both sides' (NGO A, Communications Manager).

Although KM was clearly identified as a priority in the formal organizational strategy, there was no formal measure of success. Similarly, as the work was dispersed across the organization, there were no audited costs for the time spent on KM activity. However, the strong endorsement of the KM learning focus was emphasised by the most frequent negative theme from the interview subjects: that technology support should be greater to allow more sharing and re-use of the knowledge generated by the programme. Positive responses from interview subjects included the senior manager involved, who said: 'I genuinely believe we have taken some significant steps forward', (NGO A, Overseas

Director). The programme is still continuing, with strong senior management support to this day.

Outcomes – NGO B:

In NGO B, the organizational strategy was focused on more decentralised decision-making and the programme was centred on technology-based changes. It was somewhat easier to evaluate because there was a straightforward proxy measure - that the system was in place and being widely used across the organization. Positive results from the individuals commenting on the programme included a belief that they were now making more effective use of the technology available, building cross-organizational networks and also some interview subjects suggested that they were now able to make cost savings. KM was seen as a positive influence on the delivery of a technology project which perhaps suggests that it has the potential to provide a link between users and technology providers. An IT support staff member stated that: 'It was one of the best collaborations because it was not seen as a business project, nor was it seen as an IT project but seen as an organizational priority', (NGO B, IT Liaison).

A senior manager provided this positive response in support of the KM programme to use social media and new technology to deliver advocacy and relationship building: 'It is a quantum leap and very exciting' (NGO B, Overseas Director). In a follow-up visit in 2010 all the main features of their KM programme were still very much in evidence, despite a major restructuring in the intervening period. In the Kenya office, improvements to local

technology infrastructure were increasing the use of the intranet and document storage system, intended to support the strategic change towards less centralised decision-making.

Outcomes – NGO C:

NGO C intended to cultivate its knowledge resources in order to influence and provide value to a wide range of stakeholders. Their less centralised structure affected the KM programme: it was given weaker support than in the other two charities and there was less understanding of what the programme involved and what it was intended to achieve. So, while staff valued their knowledge products and wanted a programme to support these internationally, the view from several interview subjects was that having a less directive UK headquarters sometimes reduced the effective cross-organization knowledge-sharing: 'the organizational structure, which in terms of countries is fairly evolved and federated in style, does hinder the implementation (NGO C, Head of IT).

This interview subject also suggested that there were additional difficulties in assessing the effectiveness of a programme whose main purpose was to increase the organization's influence in diverse contexts: 'For us, it is rather difficult to identify what knowledge is going to be used for. It is easier if you are with an organization that is focused on making sales, and making profits from those sales' (NGO C, Head of IT). Despite these difficulties, the consensus was that KM was appropriate for this NGO but that the programme needed to be more focused and better supported. In 2010, they were still working to develop their KM programme.

The de-centralised model of the organization did however mean that there were pockets of success in offices beyond the UK. Interviews with local staff, confirmed by comments from their UK contacts, provided evidence that innovative work adapting KM practices to local conditions was taking place, for example working with very basic technology to share ideas and influence the surrounding communities. The UK KM specialist was one of several people of this opinion, saying: 'The South American office has always recognised the importance of KM from the Director down. They have a strong and well-led programme', (NGO C, KM leader).

Summary

How do these outcomes match the conceptual framework set out above? In each case study, there was sufficient evidence to show that knowledge was accepted as an organizational resource that required appropriate management within each NGOs context. The data accumulated suggests powerfully that their programmes were genuine and wide-ranging management initiatives intended to deliver organizational benefit. In this way the work undertaken matched the range of activities discussed in the introduction to this article: **creation, organization, transfer and application** of knowledge in order to effectively support the delivery the organization's purpose (de Souza, 2011).

The values that lead NGOs to work to alleviate poverty can be linked to the idea that knowledge is for sharing rather than for personal power or organizational rent-seeking. Those activities that reflected this: communities of practice, learning and technology for easier sharing, were selected for promotion while other items in the KM repertoire were

not. The chosen KM practices were thus a good 'fit' with the underlying organizational culture and were very practical in their focus. As an authoritative voice pointed out: 'you can see it that fieldwork is a working hypothesis, so that if you can prove it and then argue from the lessons you have learnt, that is how to get influence', (NGO C, CEO).

However, the case that KM was 'working' in one or more of these NGOs falls well short of overwhelming. Some small-scale 'quick wins' were reported, but – and this is hardly surprising – no business transformations or audited figures showing unquestioned benefit were unearthed. Indeed, it was not possible to estimate the value of benefits and costs in ways that would justify the investment of time and money. Since the three charities were chosen partly because of their status as KM leaders within the NGO community, the lack of clear evidence that their programmes were 'working' is striking.

However, it is equally striking that despite reviews, top level staff turnover, restructuring, and the onset of the 2008 recession, the KM programmes had survived over five years (one case was approaching the *tenth* anniversary as the research ended). Each NGO had restructured at least once during the period of the research contact and so had opportunities to cut back the programmes, but had chosen to continue the investment in KM, which suggests that continuity was not merely organizational inertia. In short, there was powerful evidence from the endorsements that came from staff from a wide range of disciplines and from different years and different locations, that KM was valued even if it could not be shown to be valuable.

Section 4. Discussion

As with other management innovations, KM has been promoted in simplistic terms. These terms appear to dispel the uncertainty and ambiguity of efforts to change organizations, by offering a suite of practical interventions that promise rapid and tangible, 'bottom line' results. Anyone who takes such claims literally might well be disappointed by the longitudinal observations reported above and wonder why more achievements had not been identified. Instead, we suggest that what is interesting about these cases is the way that KM was embraced and became embedded and valued in the organizations despite the fact that those involved could not show that KM 'worked'.

To interpret the cases in these terms, we start from the observation that the three programmes were very different in focus. In each of the three organizations KM was selectively adopted. As noted above, significant strands in KM were simply ignored from the outset. Then they creatively adapted those selected items through extended processes of implementation and review in order to help in addressing specific challenges. These processes involved aligning KM language and activities not just with high-level organizational goals but also with team objectives to ensure the KM programmes were seen as practical and relevant. Thus, in the two NGOs where the KM programmes were most well received (A and B), interview subjects commented on their contrasting views of KM before and after the programme of activities had become established. Despite stating that they were previously concerned about the abstract and 'airy fairy' nature of the discipline, staff commented approvingly that, once involved in the programmes, they felt

KM work was 'common sense' (NGO A, Head of Finance) or – approvingly - 'not rocket science' (NGO B, Head of HR) and linked closely to their work objectives. Only in the third case, in the UK office, was there a continuing sense of reluctance, with the idea of KM being an 'add-on', or the less than positive comment, 'they just expect it to happen', indicating that the respondent believed that a more proactive approach would have improved the outcome, (NGO C, Librarian).

Establishing KM norms

Tailored to the different contexts in these ways, the KM programmes gave permission or approval for activities that interviewees welcomed. Staff in the three case study organizations became more aware of 'knowledge issues' and the knowledge dimensions of the challenges their organizations faced. That is, they recognised the need to establish norms and practices designed to make the most of the organization's collective experience and expertise. In disparate ways, these norms and practices aimed to make articulating, accessing and sharing relevant experience, contacts, information, evolving understandings, etc, a more formal feature of organizational relationships, and less a matter of occasionally stumbling on fortuitous connections. This greater awareness of knowledge issues meant staff became more confident in discussing the cultivation and use of their knowledge resources. For example, as expressed by one interviewee: 'staff used and valued the terminology that enabled them to discuss knowledge and learning issues in a way that had not been possible before' (NGO A, Evaluation Officer).

Constraints

However, even where the three NGOs had selected appropriate activities with care, each ran up against severe constraints that restricted the further development of their KM activities. One aspiration for the NGOs – echoing the experience of private international companies reported in the KM literature - was to make their partners in the global south a part of their IT-enabled knowledge-sharing networks. But the achievements here were very limited – and likely reasons are not hard to find. Simplifying rather ruthlessly, the contrast between the large multinational corporations MNC and NGO contexts seems to arise in these ways: MNCs share – or can insist on - some common business values, can rely on the use of (say) English as the language of international business, and can generally afford fast and reliable infrastructures. In contrast, to a greater degree, NGOs have to negotiate their organizational cultures with partners, work across major cultural and linguistic divides (within as well as between countries), and are unlikely to afford a reliable and fully extensive IT structure, especially in the case of African countries where connectivity is often poor. Indeed, affordability may be the critical point here: a lack of resources was seen as a constant problem within the NGOs – for example: 'But there are now cost cuts, so you have a fantastic site with not enough resources' (NGO B, Communications Officer).

The models of KM presented in practical texts often gloss over the financial requirements for an international KM programme. Or rather, they generally assume a very large and generally successful organization that can rely on economies of scale, spreading the costs of a modest addition to overheads over a wide range of business units and countries, (See for example: Collison and Parcell, 1997). As with other management techniques KM

developed initially within large organizations. The modest size and limited resource base of this group of charities was recognised as a limit to the scope of their KM programmes.

Section 5 Conclusions

KM programmes in the three case study NGOs pre-dated the start of the research and survived through the four to eight years of intermittent fieldwork. During this period, NGO's were searching for efficiency and effectiveness gains to enable them to bring more benefits to the people they exist to serve. This focus is one shared with many organizations in the public as well as the private sector. A primary motivation for KM reform within these UK-based non-profit organizations is that the UK government, which is an important funder, is also concerned with improved management and accountability among its funds receivers. Consequently, NGOs believe they have to act to show that they are in compliance with government preferences for reform and innovation. As one senior manager expressed it; 'the industry is into [Knowledge Management] and this is threatening – you have to do it', (NGO C, Director).

But in this in-depth review of three case studies, the reasons given for the continuation of KM in all three NGOs suggests that these programmes were not simply serving the 'ceremonial' purpose of impressing donor agencies – though the NGOs were also attuned to that possibility, albeit as a possible further benefit of KM. The study developed a close familiarity with the actual practices in each case, and listened to the voices of a range of people - those who worked directly in a KM role, those who adjusted their work patterns to

incorporate the new activities, and those who were not directly involved. The programmes were seen as worthwhile (and in that sense as 'working') in all three charities even if opinions varied on the extent of their success.

Limitations of the research

Of course, in research terms, a price was paid for the extended and in-depth monitoring of each case – one of which is that only three cases could be given this level of attention. Also time scales for organizational change could be longer than the eight years maximum study here and there was scope for more interaction with users beyond the UK. However, the full research documentation includes a methodology that would allow follow up studies to develop knowledge further in this area, (Corfield, 2011)

Implications of the Research

With the limitations in mind, some implications for practitioners can be suggested. It seems KM does indeed offer ways of addressing perceived organizational needs and challenges that arise in these particular non-commercial organizations. However, success requires that those leading such initiatives are prepared to work with the grain of their own individual organizations and identify how KM can enhance their specific 'productive opportunities'.

Four areas were identified in the research conclusions as particularly important.

1. Those implementing KM are required to be appropriately selective in their choice of KM practices so that they address their own organizational challenges.

2. They need to tailor the practises, painstakingly, to the requirements of that context.

3. They need to be realistic about the very different resource availability in contrast to the many case studies and eulogising reports from the commercial sector.

4. They must also be willing to take a long view of the sorts of capacities and performance improvements they are aiming for; and to accept that evidence of the contributions of KM may remain suggestive rather than conclusive. KM in these contexts seems to offer few if any of the 'quick wins' suggested by some of the popular KM guides.

On the other hand, if KM is introduced and carried through in the ways outlined above, then fears that it may undermine central NGO commitments, by introducing inappropriate commercial values, seem groundless.

For those with more theoretical interests, the findings from this study fit well with a developing body of work on the transfer of practices between different contexts (e.g. Paton, 2003; Fenton O'Creevy et al, 2005). Isomorphic pressures may explain why and how practices spread – but they do not determine the form that those practices take in new settings. Beckert (2010) argues that in their formulation of institution theory, DiMaggio and Powell (1983) were not arguing that the outcomes would be homogenous organizations, rather that more than competitive market pressures were at play within those organizations.

What researchers refer to as 'practices' cover a range of activity patterns, and they are often loose and 'malleable'. Particular purposes may have originally been embedded in a

practice that is later recognised, codified and promoted for adoption elsewhere, as a recipe for achieving those purposes. But those working in the receiving context will have their own purposes – and in due course these may very well modify or supplant those original embedded purposes, as well as radically alter the recipe's component activities. In this way practices change as they spread, and if they continue to 'work' – in the sense that they are seen as worthwhile by those in that organizational context – this does not necessarily mean they work in the way that they are expected to work by those promoting them.

References:

Argyris, C., & Schon, D. A. (1978). *Organizational learning: A theory of action perspective.* Massachusetts: Addison-Wesley.

Beckert, J. (2010). Institutional isomorphism revisited: Convergence and divergence in institutional change. *Sociological Theory, 28*(2), 150-66.

Bell, D., and Coicaud, J. M. (2006). *Policy brief number 9: The ethical challenges of international human rights NGOs*. Tokyo: United Nations University Press.

Brooking, A. (1996). *Intellectual capital: Core asset for the third millennium.* London: Caspian Publishing.

Brooking, A. (1999). *Corporate memory: Strategies for knowledge management*. London: International Thomson Business Press.

Clarke, J., & Newman, J. (1997). *The managerial state: Power, politics and ideology in the remaking of social welfare.* London: Sage.

Corfield, A. (2011). *Knowledge management in international development charities*, unpublished PhD thesis. Milton Keynes: The Open University.

Collison, C., & Parcell, G. (2004). Learning to fly: Practical lessons from one of the world's leading knowledge companies. Oxford: Capstone. (First published 2001).

Desouza, K. C., & Paquette, S. (2011). *Knowledge management: an Introduction.* London: Facet Publishing.

DiMaggio, P. J., & Powell, W. W. (1983). The iron cage revisited: Institutional isomorphism and collective rationality in organizational fields. *American Sociological Review*, *48*, 147–60.

Drucker, P. F. (1969). *The age of discontinuity*. London: Heinemann.

Edvinsson, L., & Malone, M. S. (1997). *Intellectual capital: The proven way to establish your company's real value by measuring its hidden brainpower.* London: Piatkus.

Fenton-O'Creevy, M. P., Gooderham, P. M., & Nordhaug, O. (2005). Diffusion of HRM to Europe and the role of US MNCs: Introduction to the special issue. *Management Revue: The International Review of Management Studies, 16*(1), 5-11.

Frank, T. (2002). *One market under God: Extreme capitalism, market populism and the end of economic democracy.* London: Vintage Books.

Frumkin, P., & Galaskiewicz, J. (2004). Institutional isomorphism and public sector organizations. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory*, *14*(3), 283-307.

Hovland, I. (2003). *Working paper 224, Knowledge management and organizational learning: An international development perspective. An annotated bibliography.* London: Overseas Development Institute.

Hull, R. (2000). Knowledge management and the conduct of expert labour. In C. Prichard, R. Hull, M. Chumer & H. Willmott (Eds.), *Managing knowledge: Critical investigations of work and learning* (49 – 68). London: Macmillan Business.

Jashapara, A. (2011). *KM an integrated Approach.* Harlow: Prentice Hall.

Jennex, M. E. (2005). *Cases studies in knowledge management.* Hershey: Ideas Group Publishing.

Kanter, R. M., & Summers, D. V. (1994). Doing well while doing good: Dilemmas of performance measurement in non-profit organizations and the need for a multiple-constituency approach. In D. McKevitt & A. Lawton. (Eds.), *Public Sector Management: Theory, Critique and Practice* (pp. 220 – 236) London: Sage Publications.

Kelleher, D., & Levene, S. (2001). *Knowledge management: A guide to good practice*. London: British Standards Institute.

Luke, B., Kearins, K., & Verreynne, M. L. (2011). The risks and returns of new public management: Political business. *International Journal of Public Sector Management, 24*(4), 325-55.

MacDonald, J. (2005). *Understanding knowledge management in a week*. London: Hodder and Stoughton.

Marobela, M. (2008). New public management and the corporatisation of the public sector in peripheral capitalist countries. *International Journal of Social Economics, 23*(6), 423–34.

Menard, S. (2008). *Handbook of longitudinal research: Design, measurement, and analysis*, Amsterdam: Elsevier.

Mordaunt, J., Paton, R., & Cornforth, C. (2007). Beyond non-profit management education: Leadership development in a time of blurred boundaries and distributed learning. *Non-profit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly*, *36*(4), 148S-62S (supplement).

Nonaka, I., & Takeuchi, H. (1995). The knowledge creating company: How Japanese companies create the dynamics of innovation. Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Paton, R., & Mordaunt, J. (2001). Non-profit management education: International trends and issues. *Public Performance and Management Review*, *25*(1), 57-73.

Paton, R. (2003). *Managing and measuring social enterprises*. London: Sage Publications
Ltd.

Paton, R., & Mordaunt, J. (2004). What's different about public and nonprofit "turnaround"?
Public Money and Management, *24*(4), 209-16.

Penrose, E. (1995). *The theory of the growth of the firm,* (3rd ed.). Oxford: Oxford University
Press.

Pollitt C., & Bouckaert, G. (2011). *Public management reform*. Oxford: Oxford University
Press.

DiMaggio, P. J. & Powell, W. W., (1991). The iron cage revisited. In Powell, W. W., &
DiMaggio, P. J (EDS) *The new institutionalism in organizational analysis* (pp. 63 – 82).
Chicago: University of Chicago Press.

Power, M. (1997). *The Audit society.* Oxford: Oxford University Press.

Ramalingam, B. (2004). *Knowledge strategies: From organizational policy to organizational
practice*. London: ODI Research and Policy in Development Programme.

Senge, P. M. (1990). The fifth discipline: the art and practice of the learning organization.
New York: Currency Doubleday.

Stacey, R., & Griffin, D. (2006). Complexity and the experience of managing in public sector
organizations. Abingdon: Routledge.

Stewart, T. A. (1997). *Intellectual capital, the new wealth of organizations*. London: Nicholas
Brealey.

Trezzini, B., Lambe, P., & Hawamdeh, S. (2004). *People, knowledge and technology: What have we learnt so far?* Singapore: World Scientific.

Wenger, E. (2000). Communities of practice: The structure of knowledge stewarding. In C.Despres, & D. Chauvel. (Eds.), *Knowledge horizons: The present and the promise of knowledge* (pp. 205 –24). Cambridge MA: Butterworth-Heinemann.

Yin, R. K. (1993). *Applications of case study research*. Newbury, California: Sage.

Yin, R. K. (1994). *Case study research: Design and methods* (2nd ed.). Newbury, California: Sage.

Table 1: Research Timeline:

Year	NGO: A	NGO: B	NGO: C
2004	Research (12/04)		
2005	Report (02/04)		Research (07/05) Report (08/05)
2006	Visit (11/06)	Research (11/06)	Visit – S America (06/06)
2007		Report (03/07)	
2008		Visit (02/08)	Visit (11/08)
2009	Visit (03/09)	Visit (02/09)	
2010	Visit (03/10)	Visit – Kenya (03/10)	Visit (02/10) Visit – Kenya (03/10)

Footnote.

Research: Start date of the original in-depth case study based in NGO central office
Report: Report issued to each NGO at the completion of the in-depth study
Visits: Follow up contact with NGO, at central office, or a sub-office

Table 2: Interview Subjects

NGO: A	NGO: B	NGO: C
Knowledge Manager	Knowledge Management Officer	Knowledge Manager / Librarian
Learning Officer	Knowledge Management IT Liaison	Image Librarian
Senior Manager	Senior Manager	Chief Executive
Head of Overseas Operations Team	Overseas Manager	Senior Manager
Evaluations Officer	Overseas Administrator	Research /Operations Officer (1)
Support Enquiries Manager	Operations Manager / Knowledge Champion	Research /Operations Officer (2)
Communications and Volunteer Manager	Communications Officer	Communications and Enquiries Manager
Head of Finance	Head of Finance	Web Manager
Head of Human Resources	Head of Human Resources	Quality Assurance Administrator
Head of IT	Head of IT	Head of IT