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**Exploring the Potential of Knowledge Management to Improve Working Conditions
and Employee Wellbeing and Performance.**

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Summary

The potential of Knowledge Management (KM) to promote working conditions and the work environment has not been fully explored. Using a case study approach, this paper found high levels of congruence between the goals of KM and proposed psychosocial factors by Leka et al. (2017) in organising and managing working conditions. This suggests that the infusion of KM into psychosocial risk management initiatives could have the potential to promote employee well-being and performance.

Background

The ever-changing economic and social environments, and technological advancements have resulted in significant changes to the world of work (Jashapara, 2011). This has caused the emergence of new work design such as temporary or precarious employment which can lead to the exposure of workers to poor working conditions, and consequently, poor organisational performance, particularly in developing economies (ILO, 2016). Similarly, the ISO 31000, guidelines (ISO, 2018) place great emphasis on the nature of managing risk because of the advent of new knowledge and analysis which have fostered the review of Risk Management (RM) processes, actions and controls. Hence, these changes have led to growing recognition that to be sustainable, organisations must promote a risk-free work environment.

Accordingly, several initiatives have been developed to improve business sustainability and maximise people well-being and performance. Several of these are based on Psychosocial Risk Management (PRM) approaches and underpinned by theoretical frameworks such as Job Demands Control (JD-C) model (Karasek, 1979) and Job Demands Resources (JD-R) model (Bakker & Demerouti, 2007; Demerouti, Bakker, Nachreiner and Schaufeli, 2001) which have been developed to enable organisations control risks (associated with aspects of work organisation, design and management that have the potential to cause various negative outcomes to employees and organisations) at source, where possible, or minimise their negative impact.

Similarly, the KM concept was introduced for organisational competitiveness and economic growth and aims to achieve these objectives through also addressing aspects of work organisation, design and management. However, despite several endeavours to use KM to promote working conditions, organisation and management, evidence shows that the infusion of Knowledge into Risk Management (KRM) is a recent and significant research area which has not been explored extensively despite its importance (Alhawari et al., 2012), and therefore underutilised for managing factors relating to working conditions and the work environment. This makes the case for KRM in organisations tenable.

Research objective

Therefore, this study explored KM themes complementarity to psychosocial factors, as proposed by Leka et al. (2017), in organisational functions, structures and practices, and how their potential integration can improve working conditions and maximise people and organisational performance through the identification of priorities for action at the enterprise level.

Method

This paper adopted a case-study approach (involving documentary analysis and interviews with managers) as it investigated a contemporary phenomenon within a real-life context (Yin, 2014). This research method has been used in the contribution to knowledge about individuals, groups, and organisations and other related phenomena (Yin, 2014). The unique strength of the case study method is its capacity to deal with a full variety of evidence, like documents, archival records, interviews, physical artefacts, and participant or direct observation (Marshall and Rossman, 2011). According to Yin (2014, p. 105) “these sources of evidence have their comparative strengths and weaknesses, with none of them having a complete advantage over the other, but rather complementing each other”.

The study employed a practice-oriented single case study, as shown in Figure 1. It contextualises the case study as a qualitative methodology. In other words, the research investigated the degree of relationship between KM and psychosocial factors within the business setting, by specifically assessing a manufacturing multinational company in Nigeria through in-depth semi-structured interviews, and the examination of official business documents. Ultimately, the objective is to determine how both KM and managing psychosocial factors can be mutually beneficial to each other through an evaluation of how KM themes and practices can promote psychosocial factors as proposed by Leka et al. (2017) to improve working conditions, and people and organisational performance, and learning.

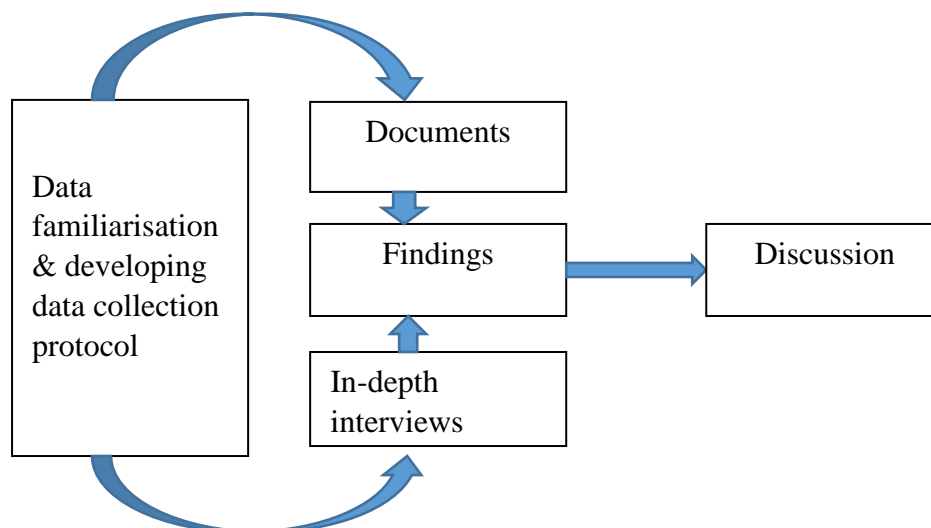


Figure 1 Case study methodology

Data source

Data was collected via the organisation’s policies and procedures (secondary data) that are to work organisation and people management. This research has identified and extracted documents that addressed people practices, organisational learning and performance, and management from the standpoint of managers. This enabled the investigation and recognition of people-related themes that are considered important by the organisation. The twelve policies identified all addressed various targets and expectations of the organisation in terms of the people that will work or are working within it. These policies allowed an evaluation which is high on people orientation by assessing probable practical constraints that policy practitioners could encounter while implementing policies that directly impact on people, and how employees might be affected positively or otherwise.

Another set of data was collected through the semi-structured interview approach. The decision to interview people in the managerial position within the organisation was due to their expert knowledge (Bogner, Littig, & Menz, 2009) in the activities and processes of the business, particularly as it relates to policy and procedure formulation and implementation. A semi-structured interview approach is adopted which gives the interviewer and the interviewee an opportunity to pursue an idea or give response in more detail (Gill et al., 2008, p. 291) respectively. Thirteen semi-structured interview questions were developed to comprehensively investigate the drivers to people and organisational performance and learning which influences work organisation and management. The study had a sample size of 42 managers representing 40% of managers in the organisation. These managers are spread across 6 SBUs and 1 Central Unit of the organisation with 6 managerial category levels as explained earlier on. 4 of these SBUs makes and sells varieties of products like personal and home care products, dairy products, assembling electrical products, agricultural products, while supply chain and distribution SBUs are process-based. The central unit interacts with the 6 other SBUs by providing vital activities and support ranging from recruitment, training, learning and development, policy implementation and roll-out and research and development (R&D) to mention a few.

Analysis

Using thematic analysis to analyse the documentary data collected, according to Braun and Clarke's (2006) guidelines, a systematic review and re-reading of policies was carried out to identify, acquaint, infer and record interesting and re-current themes and ideas (Gee, 2011; Rapley, 2008). During the first reading, markings and comments were made on various areas of interest. On the second reading, key words within policy documents were compared, leading to the generation of initial codes. These codes were then grouped to determine themes which were then reviewed and applied to the documentary data. The emergence of themes was based on the active mapping, description and interpretation of the main features within reviewed documents.

Subsequently, some of the identified themes were renamed, expanded or modified to accommodate the taxonomies found in the company's policy documents, relating to how knowledge and work environment is being organised and managed. To attain a comprehensive and equally realistic level of theme classification, the coding exercise was carried out on three occasions. Originally, there were 9 first order themes and 24 second order themes. However, after two further reviews which involved the re-alignment, modification, combination and removal of themes, the final 6 first order themes and 16 second order themes were achieved with detailed descriptors. To enable easy traceability and authenticate the sources of these themes and sub-themes were documented.

In the case of interviews, data collected was transcribed and read repeatedly with a view to familiarise, extrapolate and comment on various points of interest. Interview transcripts were summarised with the purpose of generating initial codes based on identified key discussion areas. The coding phase of analysis entailed identifying and grouping key words emanating from the responses of managers from semi-structured interviews. The emerging codes were then sorted into potential themes by assigning the coded data extracts to themes that best captures their meaning. Initially, there were twelve themes that were colour-coded alongside with the interview question and the answer the respondents have provided. This was done to enable the researcher trace back data to their original source where needed.

Finally, these themes were further reviewed in order to: (a) re-allocate some data extracts which do not fit into the current theme based on theme definition; (b) modify the theme definition in

order to accommodate a data extract; (c) combine one or more themes to avoid duplication of themes and to ensure a coherent pattern among themes and to broaden the scope of each theme in order to enable an exhaustive coverage of their respective data constituent, (d) conduct further interviews with specific respondents to enable additional clarifications to some aspects of previously given answers to interview questions and; (e) to entirely eliminate data components that are not relevant or that do not fit into any of the themes. The final thematic analysis revealed 5 main themes and 13 sub-themes. Each of these themes have been extensively defined and a column for data sources have been created to substantiate the identified themes.

Findings

Investigating the use of a KRM approach to promote working conditions, work organisation and management, findings showed that leadership must clarify employees' contribution in setting organisational objectives (employee engagement). This must be fostered by a culture of delegation and trust in decision-making from management to employees (employee empowerment). Organisational learning promoted through leadership, collaborations, training, network of peers, communities of practice, trust and individual leadership capabilities can encourage good workplace climate, work retaining employee interest and in general a positive work environment. It was found that motivation and reward for employees to share and use knowledge through social networks and work systems averted work-related risks. In addition, clear and effective communication can ensure that new information resulting from changes in work is disseminated timely across organisational culture and functions to prevent people's exposure to various types of risks that are associated to poor and ineffective communication.

The study highlights that sustained knowledge-based risk prevention initiatives could improve employees' well-being and ultimately their performance by alleviating negative outcomes and promoting positive ones, rather than people's devotion or loyalty to work or the organisation. Notwithstanding, good work systems were found to promote increased positive behaviours which, in turn, influenced working conditions. Leadership's influence had an important part to play in all aspects of work organisation and management. Findings from the study will be integrated and further discussed in the final paper.

Implications in practice

The potential relatedness of KM themes and psychosocial dimensions/factors makes the argument for integrating both concepts more tenable because the complementarity between their themes and factors have the potential to improve working conditions if managers view the objectives of these two concepts as one and the same, which is, addressing aspects of work, design and management to improve employee engagement and performance.

Also, the relatedness between KM themes and psychosocial factors indicates that by organising and managing workplace conditions and working environment, there will be improved business sustainability and organisational performance enabled through improved employee involvement as advocated by knowledge management practices. This further affirms that an organisation that addresses psychosocial factors can potentially mitigate/eliminate risks associated with poor performance, but rather promote work designs, organisation and management which fosters people's interest and engagement in the workplace.

Conclusion

Based on the extent of congruence between KM themes and psychosocial factors, the potential of KM to promote the management of psychosocial factors towards improving working conditions, and therefore employee wellbeing and performance will be a tenable argument.

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