

Usage and Applications of Knowledge Management for Improving SMEs Innovation in Sierra Leone

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Abstract - Knowledge must be managed through a Knowledge Management (KM) system. Adequate knowledge of personnel, technology and processes is required for companies to be innovative. As such, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Sierra Leone (SL) require the right amount of knowledge in their personnel, technology, and processes in order to be innovative. Innovation is not an option, but the very means by which SMEs can survive in a continuous changing business environment, and one with so many challenges. This paper seeks to explore the use and applications of KM for improving SMEs innovation in SL. A theoretical study of the literature is done and an interview is conducted through mobile phone of managers and key resource persons in 50 SMEs in SL. The study shows that although KM is a novel concept in SL, it is being practiced by SMEs for improving their innovation. This practice leads to innovation, thereby productivity of the SMEs. Finally, there are empirical evidence of KM positive influence on SMEs innovation and performance.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Knowledge, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises, Companies, Innovation, Performance, Sierra Leone.

I. INTRODUCTION

We are living in an era termed as the “knowledge age” or the “knowledge economy.” Within this context, knowledge is a primary commodity, and the flow of knowledge is an important economic activity. Historically, capital, raw materials and labor have been considered more valuable than creating and applying knowledge. The information age and the knowledge revolution have caused problems for people and companies. Demands for imaginative, intuitive, inspirational leaders who can manage human intellect and convert it into useful products and service continue to grow [1]. Widespread recognition of knowledge as a key organizational resource and a driver of sustained competitive advantage have brought about several perspectives on knowledge. One such

perspective is that, knowledge is a complex form of data and information; a state of mind; an object; a process; a condition or a capability [2].

Sunyoto (2020) [3] pointed that Knowledge is a major resource and has an important role in achieving sustainable competitive advantage and achieving performance. As one of the competitive assets, knowledge must be possessed by each individual to be able to develop skills, so that through the acquisition of knowledge and skills individuals can manage their own careers. Therefore, knowledge must be managed through a Knowledge Management (KM) system. Adequate knowledge of personnel, technology and processes is required for companies to be innovative. As such, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises (SMEs) in Sierra Leone (SL) require the right amount of knowledge in their personnel, technology, and processes in order to be innovative. Innovation is not an option, but the very means by which SMEs can survive in a continuous changing business environment, and one with so many challenges. In this sense, Knowledge Management (KM) has been applied in the business world to gain competitive advantage.

II. BACKGROUND OF THE STUDY

SMEs are an essential part of the economies of most parts of the world. SMEs potentially constitute the most dynamic firms in emerging economies [4]. Katua (2014) [5] mentioned that SMEs are the engine of economic growth and poverty reduction in the world. Nevertheless, the global changes in markets and the continuous changes in consumers' tastes require a high level of organizational flexibility. Such an issue may impose additional challenges on the operations of SMEs, given their limited size of resources [6]. Fitriati et al. (2020) [7] pointed out that companies must be able to create products or services according to the needs of consumers who are increasingly smart in choosing products and services. Furthermore, SMEs have an acute challenge to access funding all across the world. Apart, in developing nations, the study by Bhoganadam, Rao, and Rao (2017) [8] indicated that SMEs

are also facing HRD related issues, infrastructure related issues and external environmental challenges in terms of lack of skilled man power, lack of training, lack of motivation, lack of water, lack of transportation, political challenges, social challenges, cultural challenges, lack of market information, lack of awareness about government schemes, competition, lack of city councils, etc.

In SL, the situation is compounded by the fact that many SMEs are still at the micro-level or family run businesses; with no management systems in place - and oftentimes with no collaterals.

In addition, SMEs are facing other challenges to growth in SL including: low access to information, poor infrastructure, limited access to finance, and weak capacity to scale up businesses. However, on the 30th July, 2020, The World Bank Board of Executive Directors approved a \$40 million grant from the International Development Association (IDA) to support investment and growth of SMEs in non-mining productive sectors in SL[9] (The World Bank Group, 2020). The sum is given as part of the Sierra Leone Economic Diversification Project that will help strengthen the business enabling environment by promoting reforms to facilitate business entry and operation, facilitate strategic public investments to improve competitiveness and private investments, support SMEs and entrepreneurs, and build the capacity of public institutions and private sector operators.

In lieu of the above, SMEs in SL must be strategic in the usage and applications of KM towards improving innovation, thereby provide innovative products and services that satisfy customers to remain competitive. Jorna (2006) [10] had noted that without knowledge, there could be no innovation. Lichtenthaler (2009) [11], Damanpour et al. (2009) [12] and Ben Zaied et al. (2015) [13] related knowledge resources to innovation, and argued that they determine the capacity of the firm to innovate. However, little empirical research has been found to determine the implementation of KM practices in the context of developing countries and small businesses.

III. THE OBJECTIVE OF THE STUDY

This paper seeks to explore the use and applications of knowledge management for improving SMEs innovation in SL.

This paper is divided into eight sections. Section 1 is the introduction, section 2 explores the background of the study, while section 3 is the objective of the study, and section 4 is the literature review. Section 5 is the research methodology; Section 6 focuses on the results, while sections 7 and 8 are respectively about the conclusion and research implications.

IV. LITERATURE REVIEW

4.1 Knowledge Management (KM)

According to Chawla and Joshi (2010) [14], KM is defined as the identification and analysis of available and required knowledge to achieve organizational objectives. Sunyoto (2020) [3] defines KM as a way for companies to identify, create, represent, distribute, and enable the adaptation of insight and experience. Such insight and experience consists of knowledge, both those possessed by individuals as well as the knowledge inherent in the company's processes or standard procedures. In the same vein Akram et al. (2011) [15] define KM as an organizational process that aims to create centralize knowledge source within the organization that acquire, assimilate, distribute, integrate, share, retrieve and reuse the internal and external, explicit and tacit to bring innovation in the organization in the form of the product, people and organizational process. They cited Polyani (1962) who identified the duality of the knowledge, and divided knowledge into two types: Tacit Knowledge and Explicit Knowledge.

1) Tacit knowledge: Polyani (1962) defined tacit knowledge as the abilities, expertise and conceptual thinking. Further, he argued that tacit knowledge is not only attributed to the, what is known, but it is also attributed to the knower as well. Tacit knowledge is very difficult to acquire because it is embedded in the form of capabilities, skills and ideas which individuals carry in their minds. Tacit knowledge can only be seen through the application; that is why tacit knowledge is difficult to capture, exploit and diffuse among the organizational members.

2) Explicit knowledge: Polyani (1962) said that explicit knowledge can be disseminated and shared in the form of hard data, well defined procedures, and standardized principles. Nonaka, takeuchi (1995) defined explicit knowledge as "Knowledge of Rationality". Explicit knowledge is easy to capture, manage, share and disseminate to the people.

4.2 Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises

SMEs are defined by the European Commission as those enterprises that employ fewer than 250 persons and whose annual turnover does not exceed 50 million pound and or total net amount of assets is not exceeding 43 million pounds[16]. SMEs are the engine of economic growth and poverty reduction in the world [5]. SMEs are considered as one of the most important types of business organizations of the economic structure of any country. They play an important role in increasing production, absorbing large numbers of the workforce, improving revenue, enhancing income, and advancing creativity and technological progress. SMEs' shares

could reach (75%) of economic activity in many countries [9]. More specifically, SMEs are known to have the power to create jobs in developed and developing countries [17] [18], contribute to economic growth by expanding the tax base and drive innovations [19]. Given their economic importance, SMEs are supposed to provide innovative products and services that satisfy customers to remain competitive [20].

4.3 Innovation

In general, innovation is defined as an idea, practice or object that is considered as something new by an individual or other unit of adoption. Thus, innovation can be seen as an attempt to achieve a certain goal [21]. Accordingly, Widianingsi (2013) [22], commented that innovation is designed in a belief that all something possible, innovators use imagination them to make things that are not possible be possible the idea that brilliant may sound good in the beginning, but required a long journey to bring it up to a final product through a research process.

Innovation is a key driver of productivity and long-term growth and can help solve social challenges at the lowest possible cost. In clear terms, Sutanto (2020) [21] also noted that the ability of innovation is becoming increasingly important nowadays because it is believed the process of innovation as an engine of development and growth of the company. However, innovation does not just show up without an active effort from the company.

4.4 Knowledge Management, Small and Medium-Sized Enterprises and Innovation

The field of KM is at its maturity [23] and researchers have found that SMEs can benefit from KM strategies to innovate for competitive sustainability. The KM concepts, principles and practices have much to offer to the SME sector where scarce resources, market agility, closeness to the customers and fewer layers are important [24]. Knowledge places an integral role to be productive and innovative in market place. But, unfortunately, organizations don't recognize and take advantage of expertise and skills of the people in the form of knowledge which they possess. Organizations should identify the skills, expertise, creativity and motivation of the people. Knowledge management focuses on this neglected area because in this competitive era organizations compete not only on the basis of efficiency and effectiveness but its success also depends upon how particular organizations identify, gather, manage, integrate, share and disseminate relevant knowledge to their human capital to bring innovation [15].

Knowledge sharing can improve innovation capability between supplier and manufacturer [25]. Innovation in SMEs

is at the core of inclusive growth strategies: more innovative SMEs are more productive SMEs that can pay better wages and offer better working conditions to their workers, thus helping reduce inequalities. Furthermore, recent developments in markets and technologies offer new opportunities for SMEs to innovate and grow. Digitalization accelerates the diffusion of knowledge and is enabling the emergence of new business models, which may enable firms to scale very quickly, often with few employees, tangible assets or a geographic footprint [26].

However, SMEs are, on average, less innovative than large companies. For example, across OECD countries, the median value in the national SME share of business R&D is 35%. Moreover, small firms (10-49 employees) are approximately only half as likely as large firms to have a business website allowing for online ordering and only one-third as likely as large firms to be using Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP), a software platform that integrates core business processes in real-time [27].

V. RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

Qualitative method was used for this study. Qualitative method has become more widely acceptable in business disciplines as a legitimate form of research design, especially in management and marketing and to a lesser extent in accounting, finance and economics. A description and interpretation of an individual's social environment or an organization's external context is imperative in order to achieve a gestalt perspective [28]. Therefore, the main aim of qualitative research is to achieve an in-depth analysis and holistic understanding of what is being studied; in other words, 'why they do what they do' [29]. It is used to inform business decisions, policy formation, communication and research.

Due to its subjective nature, it can be argued that quantitative research provides better findings [30]. However, Lee et al. (2004) [31], advantages arguments for using Qualitative research: qualitative research provides a more realistic feel of the world that cannot be experienced in the numerical data and statistical analysis used in quantitative research. It provides flexible ways of collecting data and information and use of primary and unstructured data gives qualitative research a descriptive capability.

In this study, empirical literature is examined, coupled with online interviews of managers or key resource persons of 50 SMEs in SL as shown in table 1. The interviewed was recorded and listened to again, in order to clarify and expand the issues into summary notes.

Table 1: SMEs Industry Sectors

Industry Sector	Frequency	Percentage
Banking and Insurance	9	18
Information and Communication	4	8
Consulting and Business Service	7	14
Construction and Engineering	3	6
Real Estate	2	4
Wholesale/Retail	15	30
Service Industry	10	20
Total	50	100.0

VI. RESULTS

KM practices in firms are suggested by many authors to contribute to competitive advantage. The literature empirically discussed the effects of KM on various aspects of SMEs' innovation. However, no study has yet been done that links KM to improving SMEs' innovation in SL from a holistic perspective. Findings from this section are structured into two: (1) from the interviews of managers or key resource persons, and (2) from empirical studies.

6.1 Findings from Interviews

55% of the interviewees said that the concept of KM is entirely new to them. Surprisingly, 45% of these persons said that the concept of KM is not unique to them.

Interviewees provided their understanding of KM as: KM is seen as the utilization of the know-how of both the trained and untrained – the qualified and the experienced team up in performing their duties (Sierra Leone Ports Authority); KM is packaging the libraries holdings for effective dissemination of such information not only for the institution itself but to all its clients - the general readership in Sierra Leone (Sierra Leone Library Board); KM is the process of collating ideas, evaluating achievements and failures to make strategic decision in improving the overall standard of the institution (Sierra Leone Commercial Bank); KM is the means through which skills, experiences and abilities of staff are effectively mobilized for the attainments of organizational goals (Bank of Sierra Leone); KM is a process through which organizations generate values from their intellectual knowledge-based assets (Private Sector Advisory Unit, Office of the President); and KM is how individuals or organizations can effectively manage their skills for proper or effective outcome (Premier Talk Radio, Premier Media Consultancy Ltd.).

All of the interviewees mentioned that their SMEs have a KM strategy.

All the interviewees agreed that KM strategy benefits their SMEs in terms of profit or efficiency and effectiveness.

These strategies also make their SMEs to be innovative, thereby productive. A particular interviewee mentions that individual staff targets which are set at the start of the year are ensured that they are achieved, which ultimately will culminate in the achievement of the SMEs' goals. Some other SMEs said that KM had enabled the smooth running of operations and accurate documentation for the numerous activities. One SME clearly states that KM has improved its staff skills in performance, which has a direct impact on its effectiveness. Others said that KM has made it possible for the information to be harnessed and packaged for easy dissemination to users.

6.2 Empirical Studies

An analysis of the research findings has revealed certain notable trends and issues with regard to KM in improving SMEs' innovation.

Firstly, Wang and Wang (2012) [32] studied the relationship between knowledge management, innovation and performance. The hypothesis of study stated that knowledge management not only affects the performance positively but also has an impact on innovation, which in turn contributes to firm performance. To achieve the purpose of the study, the required data was collected from 89 high technology firms in Jiangsu Province of China. A survey was conducted in China to test the research model, the data collection developed through a questionnaire. The results of study found that both explicit and tacit knowledge management practices facilitate innovation and performance. Explicit knowledge sharing has a significant effect on innovation speed and financial performance. While tacit knowledge management has significant effect on innovation quality and operational performance.

Second, Aliyu (2016) [33], investigated the influence of KM on SMEs performance. The study based on quantitative approach method by collecting primary data from 978 manufacturing SMEs in Kano-Nigeria. The valid sample size was 278 responses that analyzed using Partial Least square (PLS) to examine the study hypothesis (the influence of knowledge management on Small-Medium Enterprises performance). The conclusion reached that knowledge management had positive significant influence on SMEs performance in Kano-Nigeria.

Third, the study by Byukusenge, Munene, and Orobia, (2016) [20] which was to investigate whether knowledge management under its three dimensions of knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing and responsiveness to knowledge lead to innovation in Rwandan SMEs, highlighted the powerful influence of knowledge sharing in predicting innovation in SMEs.

Furthermore, the study by Hussain et al. (2019) [34], found that knowledge identification/creation, knowledge collection, knowledge organizing, knowledge dissemination, and knowledge application have positive and significant impact on innovation capacity of the SMEs in AJ&K. Fitriati et al. (2020) [7] in their study, the role of innovation in improving SME performance, amongst other findings, pointed that there was a positive influence of knowledge management with innovation, there was a positive effect on entrepreneurial orientation with innovation, there was a positive influence of knowledge management on the performance of SMEs, there was a positive influence on innovation with the performance of SMEs, there was a positive influence of knowledge management with SME performance through innovation as mediation, and there was a positive influence on entrepreneurial orientation with SME performance through innovation as mediation. Again, the study of [35], indicated that the results of hypothesis testing show that tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge influence adaptive creativity which affects firm innovation. Individuals who can adapt to tacit and explicit knowledge have good creativity. So, in the end, they can support innovations in the firm. The research findings also strengthen the mediating role of adaptive creativity in the influence of human capital and firm innovation.

VII. CONCLUSION

The purpose of this paper was to explore the use and applications of KM for improving SMEs innovation in SL. Several findings are noteworthy: First, KM, although a novel concept in SL, is being practiced by SMEs for improving their innovation. Second, that KM practice leads to innovation, thereby productivity of the SMEs. Third, there are empirical evidence of KM positive influence on SMEs innovation and performance.

Given that SMEs basically focus on the quality and the adoption of best production practices, KM practices of exploration, storage, exchange and dissemination of knowledge can lead to innovation and ensure the best performance of SMEs. KM ensures that SMEs that manage their explicit and tacit knowledge better will deal more successfully with the challenges of the new business environment. KM is seen as a key factor in realizing and sustaining SMEs success for improved efficiency and innovation.

VIII. RESEARCH IMPLICATIONS

The practical implications of this research are aimed at SMEs in SL. SMEs should vigorously practice the management of knowledge so that they can be better developed. This, will have an impact on innovation and thereby, performance. The following are guidelines for

successfully conducting KM in SMEs. The ideas are taken from Smith (2001) [36].

Instill a corporate-wide culture that weaves knowledge into every business process. For instance, the World Bank leverages global knowledge sharing to attain its goal of becoming a clearinghouse for expertise on sustainable development.

Encourage knowledge sharing by locating people who normally work together close to each other. Knowledge sharing, an all-hands contribution, is also the pooled expertise and efforts of alliances and networks.

Implement communities of practice that informally bind together people who share expertise, passion for joint enterprises and a common interest in knowledge sharing.

Change performance measurement and reward systems by implementing equitable recognition and reward processes built on trust and commitment.

Enable people to use tacit and explicit knowledge and technology as tools to leverage their own professional and personal intellect.

Take ownership of knowledge to maintain expertise and speed up the application of new ideas.

The limitations of the research include the difficulty of interviewing respondents in SMEs especially through the use of mobile phones from a great geographical distance (between China and Sierra Leone). Finally, the researcher recommends that future research looks at specific application of KM in SMEs in SL.

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