

# CONDITIONS AND PRINCIPLES FOR KNOWLEDGE CONTINUITY ENSURING IN ORGANIZATIONS\*

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Knowledge workers are those who bear corporate know-how. On their leaving the corporate knowledge leaves too, and as a result the organization significantly loses. Therefore, it is very important to get known as soon as possible which employee and which kind of knowledge are going to leave. The organization management must ensure knowledge continuity by knowledge sharing, i.e. knowledge transfer to the leaving employee's successor. If knowledge is not shared (e.g. person-to-person), it gets lost when its incumbent leaves the organization and its re-creation may be hard. Because the power of any organization consists in its knowledge, the organization should not lose employees bearing critical knowledge. The article focuses on the issue of knowledge continuity ensuring the organization a competitive advantage. For this purpose, it is necessary to fulfil the requirements and conditions identified and tested by means of quantitative and qualitative surveys carried out among middle and top managers from various organizations in the Czech Republic. One of the conclusions of the article is that knowledge continuity ensuring may be considered a strategic approach to human resources management through which an organization ensures its employees' future (by increasing their qualification) and simultaneously enhances its competitiveness.

knowledge continuity management; knowledge; factors; conditions; principles; survey

## INTRODUCTION

According to Drucker (1985), capital, natural resources (such as land), or labour are no longer the basic economic resources or production tools. Knowledge has taken over and will continue to have this role. Value is now generated by means of productivity and innovation and both these factors lie in the application of knowledge in the operations process (Argote, Ingram, 2002; Wong, 2009; Levy, 2011).

The major change in the new world of business is therefore the approach to production factors. Old economy is built on three production factors, i.e. the idea that capital recruits labour. New economy introduces human capital (potential). The proposition 'make money on someone' has been modified to 'make money with someone' (Drucker, 1985; Beazley et al., 2002; Johannessen, Olsen, 2003).

The current requirements for managers' and employees' qualification which is based in particular on the requirement of developing competitiveness are determined by four basic elements, i.e. knowledge, skills, abilities, and experience. Each of these elements has its specific and unsubstitutable role (Leonard, 2005; Shih, Chiang, 2005; Lindner, Wald,

2011). By examining the available resources and outcomes of the survey, it is possible to say that knowledge as well as other important characteristics, such as skills, abilities, experience, and also innovation, shared values, managerial way of thinking, etc. have their indisputable theoretical and practical meaning and serve to describe the necessary context in the area of practical management and organization development.

The goal of the article is to identify the preconditions for and the principles of knowledge continuity ensuring in organizations. A partial goal is to determine how strong the impacts of decisive internal factors determining knowledge continuity ensuring and enhancing organization's productivity are. The findings obtained and the conclusions of the article may be used in practice to preserve corporate knowledge during personnel changes. The article focuses on the specific problem of knowledge continuity ensuring which contributes to reaching a higher level of competitiveness.

## MATERIAL AND METHODS

The first part of the article presents theoretical views on the aspects of knowledge continuity ensuring

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in organizations while the second part analyzes the findings of the survey carried out among managers in organizations in the Czech Republic. The article has been drawn up on the basis of the analysis of secondary data, induction, deduction, outcome synthesis, and evaluation of a questionnaire survey and interviews with 19 managers. The results of the quantitative survey are confirmed by results of the qualitative one.

The quantitative survey has respected the ethical aspects of research (Act No. 101/2000 Coll., on Personal Data Protection). It was aimed at determining the impact of internal factors on knowledge continuity ensuring. The group of organizations included in the survey has been selected by means of quota random sampling among Czech organizations presented on the Internet (the organizations were divided into homogeneous groups according to the criteria specified herein below) and their managers were contacted by e-mail with individual questionnaire internet address specified. The organizations that took part in the Czech TOP100 competition and the managers who had registered for the Manager of the Year for 2009 competition have been addressed the same way, too. The questionnaire consisted of statements regarding the influence of a set of internal factors, which were confirmed or rejected, and/or amended by the respondents. The set of internal factors was identified by means of literature review.

In order to ensure the representativeness of the group of respondents (814 managers from 580 organizations<sup>1</sup>) and to ensure that the findings are evaluatable and generalizable with respect to the sample group, the selection criteria for the survey have been set in a way to roughly reflect the proportional representation of the organizations according to economic sector, organization size, and middle and top managers' gender in compliance with the figures published by the Czech Statistical Office. The breakdown is as follows (the numbers of organizations and managers addressed are shown in brackets):

- according to the economic sector: 15% (85) primary, 15% (85) secondary, and 70% (410) tertiary sector
- according to the organization size (number of employees): 65% (377) small organizations, 20% (116) middle-sized, and 15% (87) large organizations
- according to the middle and top managers' gender: male management 77.5% (654), female management 22.5% (160)

The sample chosen from the basic group is characteristic in all respects and proportionally represents

the groups of organizations as selected from the basic group. The overall questionnaire response was 18.18%, i.e. 148 respondents from 146 organizations took part (2 organizations responded twice).

The structure of the respondents was as follows:

- according to economic sector: 38.9% (58) primary, 9.6% (14) secondary, and 51.5% (76) tertiary sector
- according to organization size (number of employees): 28% (41) small, 41% (61) middle-sized, and 31% (46) large organizations
- according to middle and top managers' gender: male 76.6% (113), female 23.4% (35)

55.1% of respondents held a senior management position, 68.9% were university graduates, 45.5% represented the age group 46–62 years, 70.1% made employees of Czech organizations.

Primary data were evaluated using the tools of descriptive statistics and also the methods of comparison, induction, deduction, and synthesis. Within the frame of descriptive statistics, the following tools were used: absolute and relative frequency and the impact of monitored factors has been determined based on analysis of categorial data by the square of the association coefficient, i.e. based on the coefficient of association which shows the extent (percentage) to which the examined factor influences the variable. To evaluate the data, the SPSS software, Version 19 and MS Excel 2007 were used.

#### Theoretical background

Employees leaving organizations take away vitally important knowledge (Levy, 2011). Without the right procedure aimed at capturing such knowledge and its transfer to their successors, the organizations lose it. To prevent the loss of knowledge held by the leaving employees, it is possible to apply knowledge continuity procedures, which is a branch of the knowledge management. While the knowledge management focuses on the capturing and sharing of know-how important for colleagues who have similar tasks in the organization, knowledge continuity management is targeted at the transfer of crucial knowledge from departing employees to their successors (Beauley et al., 2002). Critical knowledge is a minimal knowledge base and if knowledge drops under the level of this base it leads to discontinuity of knowledge. Any level of a successor's knowledge base, if higher than that of the leaving employee, is better. An employee's knowledge base consists of the basic set of his/her

<sup>1</sup> basic file = all organizations in the Czech Republic (total of 2 651 571 in 2010 according to the CSO); sample = 580 organizations operating in the CR; cleaned sample = 159 organizations responding to the questionnaire. Currently there are 2 654 571 organizations in the CR (out of which the small ones constitute 98.79%, medium 1.12%, and large 0.09%). Economic sector covers 4 885 200 employees, primary sector 4% employees (out of which 76% are men, 24% women), secondary sector 37% (74% men, 26% women), and tertiary sector includes 59% employees (46% men, 54% women)

knowledge necessary for the given position (Beazley et al., 2002; Leonard, 2005).

The success of organizations currently lies in the efficiency of knowledge sharing by generations of employees which is influenced by the development of a suitable environment and the support of co-operation. Such co-operation needs to be encouraged by efficient communication and work co-ordination. According to Haldin-Herrgard (2000), Cambera et al. (2006), Eucker (2007), and Harsh (2009), knowledge becomes inefficient if it is not directly linked to the context and plans of the given organization. A corporate knowledge strategy determines whether the organization utilizes primarily tacit or explicit knowledge. If the event explicit knowledge prevails, codification strategies (broad databases, IT) are used, as confirmed by Shih, Chiang (2005) and Somaya, Williamson (2008). When working primarily with tacit knowledge, personalization strategies are applied (employees' creativity, an individual approach to a product or customer, knowledge sharing support; databases only have a supportive role). Jeon et al. (2011) add that organizations applying codification strategies produce savings by reducing labour and communication costs thanks to the repetitive utilization of knowledge. Organizations utilizing a personalized strategy provide services built on the tacit knowledge of a person who has developed it.

It is necessary to add that Shih, Chiang (2005) and Jeon et al. (2011) agree that an efficient organization has to focus on one of the above-mentioned types of strategies and use the second as an auxiliary one. It is not possible to adopt both approaches to an equal extent or to reject one of them completely. Based on the above conclusion is that to ensure knowledge continuity organizations must have suitable conditions (Beazley et al., 2002; Luring, Selmer, 2011; Levy, 2011). Scientific articles and specialized publications list seven of the most important internal factors determining knowledge-based processes. They include: organizational culture, structure, climate, stimulation, the will to share knowledge, motivation, and trust (e.g. Locke, Latham, 2004;

Ashkanasy, Humphrey, 2011; Levy, 2011). Since there is no uniform view of authors on differences between organizational culture and climate, in the frame of the survey these terms have been defined. Organizational culture has been defined as a common and shared system of ideas, opinions, beliefs, attitudes, standards, and values of an organization (Locke, Latham, 2004; Ramlall, 2004; Hong et al., 2011; Kachaňáková, Stachová, 2011). On the other hand, organizational climate is about how employees perceive the functioning of their organization (Ashkanasy, Humphrey, 2011). Arnold et al. (2009) state that while organizational culture is an organizational frame, organizational climate is the internal psycho-social environment favourable for the development and releasing of human potential with the aim of fulfilling organizational goals. Šigut (2004) adds that organizational climate is, in other words, the existing atmosphere in an organization.

## RESULTS

### Testing of internal factors influencing the knowledge continuity ensuring

The paper deals also with the testing of the internal factors determining knowledge continuity ensuring. It does not take into account external factors since the topic focuses solely on the transfer of knowledge already acquired from a leaving employee to his/her successor. Based on the background information obtained (frequency of responses, i.e. significance of the individual factors according to the respondents), the relationship between two quantities has been determined and the strength of dependency oscillates from 0.453 (middle strength) to 0.831 (very high strength) – see Table 1.

On the basis of the calculated coefficient of association we may state that internal factors impact the knowledge continuity ensuring in an organization. Knowledge continuity ( $Y$ ) is dependent on internal factors (dependent variables)  $x_1, x_2, \dots, x_7$ , i.e.:

Table 1. The values of coefficients of association of internal factors in all organizations

Level	Variables	Internal factor	Response rate	$r^2$
Organisational	$x_1$	Organisational culture	78	0.541
	$x_2$	Organisational structure	47	0.453
	$x_3$	Organisational climate	148	0.831
	$x_4$	Stimulation	93	0.612
Individual	$x_5$	Willingness of knowledge sharing	86	0.603
	$x_6$	Motivation	125	0.758
	$x_7$	Trust	62	0.517

Source: author's survey

$$Y = f(x_1, x_2, x_3, x_4, x_5, x_6, x_7)$$

where:

$x_{1...n}$  = factors influencing knowledge continuity which are interlinked (they do not operate in an isolated way)

Knowledge continuity ensuring in organizations, regardless of its size, is to the largest extent influenced by organizational climate where the strength of dependency of the association coefficient is very high. We may say that the level of knowledge continuity ensuring is from 83.1% determined by the organizational climate, i.e. an internal factor at the organizational level. Organizational structure has the least influence on the level of knowledge continuity ensuring (45.3%).

Knowledge continuity ensuring in organizations is influenced both at individual and organizational levels. At the individual level it is determined, for example, by trust in colleagues, previous negative experience with knowledge sharing, willingness to share knowledge, and employees' internal motivation.

The survey has shown that individual factors (internal motivation, previous experience with knowledge sharing and trust) have a positive impact in relation to the particular organizational culture. Simultaneously it can be stated that organizational factors (organizational climate, stimulation/remuneration system, communication process, willingness to invest into employee education) have a positive impact in relation to the culture of the given organization.

#### **Determination of conditions and principles for knowledge continuity ensuring in organizations**

Taking into account the theoretical base, the qualitative survey followed by the quantitative one (which have proven the accepted conclusions), preconditions and principles of knowledge transfer and sharing in organizations among current employees and between employee generations have been determined. By respecting the determined preconditions and principles and their systematic ensuring, it is possible to improve conditions for knowledge continuity ensuring.

#### **Preconditions**

- Encouraging an organization's will to develop and invest in its employees, improve their qualification, support knowledge sharing among current employees and between generations of employees, and continue to improve the organizational climate and increase trust.
- Employees' identification with the organizational culture in which knowledge continuity ensuring will be anchored and which will enable more efficient sharing of knowledge between generations of employees.

- Realization of the fact that wisdom is not a possession of an individual. Organization's critical know-how should not be in hands of a single employee as his/her leaving could jeopardise it.
- Knowledge may be transferred solely from a person with better knowledge to a person with poorer knowledge.
- Knowledge is currently the greatest competitive advantage of organizations.
- Without ensuring knowledge continuity no business continuity management may be ensured.
- Knowledge continuity as an anticorruption measure. The position of the leaving employee should be occupied solely by an employee sharing knowledge with the leaving employee who should train this successor. This would ensure the continuity of the corporate knowledge, the knowledge would be preserved and also the risk of recruiting an employee without experience and critical knowledge would be eliminated.

#### **Principles**

- Knowledge sharing among current employees and between generations of employees as a criterion in the process of performance evaluation.
- Frequent interaction among employees. Organizations should possess premises where employees could meet and share their ideas in open, informal conversation.
- Improvement of the remuneration system in the area of knowledge sharing and financial motivation of employees to share knowledge with their successors.
- Elimination of organizational barriers – conflicts, top management support, creating friendly workplaces, integration of private and work aspects of life.
- Importance of knowledge continuity ensuring arises also from the *Patero optimum*, i.e. 20% of knowledge employees generate 80% of the effect. Therefore it is important to ensure the continuity of knowledge of employees generating value for the organization.
- Placing emphasis on high performance and competencies of management, interest in employees, efficient communication, high motivation, and team spirit to share, transfer and preserve knowledge and experience, and, last but not least, on a positive climate in the organization.
- The art of listening and the art of accepting. Employees have to be willing to listen to the experience of the others and also be able to learn from experience.
- Best environment = best performance. An employee's performance is determined by the internal environment and internal factors. By improving these internal factors (i.e. increasing trust, improving the organizational climate, adhering to ethical codes,



etc.), it is possible to create conditions encouraging employees' performance and thus improving the overall performance of the given organization

- Critical evaluation of knowledge and experience transferred (common sense). It is not possible to strictly follow all the experience and knowledge of an employee who has left. The ability of evaluating the knowledge gained and its utilizing in an appropriate manner is necessary.
- Knowledge by continuous learning. Knowledge may be gained by posing questions to individual knowledge employees.
- 'Bata's system' – training 'one's own' staff. This system is applied, for example, by Škoda Auto a.s., which has its own secondary school and bachelors study programmes. It is important to re-establish this system and support it. It was a duty of each manager employed by the Bata company to educate and train his substitute and successor.
- Paying attention to the age structure of employees with an emphasis on higher age categories.

## DISCUSSION

Based on the above-mentioned principles and rules and the comparison of outcomes with the findings of surveys carried out abroad, it is possible to say that by creating a suitably motivating environment, it is possible to stimulate employees to generate new knowledge, share current knowledge with colleagues and successors, and to be willing to help new employees to learn fast.

The outcomes of the questionnaire surveys have shown that employees are motivated to share knowledge if they have friendly relationships with their superiors and colleagues, are proud to be with the organization for a long period of time, and if their superiors appreciate their work and provide them with positive feedback. Another group of respondents places emphasis on financial aspects (financial security). On the contrary, some employees are not motivated by finances, but by the opportunity of promotion and building their reputation, which is confirmed by the conclusions of the quantitative survey.

The system of remuneration has a positive impact on the quality of knowledge, too. The forms of remuneration, i.e. stimulation from the part of the organization, should be varied. Stimulation can be of a material and non-material nature (such as public praise, promotion) and all its forms should be efficiently used to improve the quality of knowledge.

Remuneration should be provided to both the employee who passes over the knowledge (the leaving employee) and to the employee who is willing to accept it (successor). These conclusions are also proven in the surveys carried out by Kim, Lee (2006) and Levy (2011) who state that the system of remuneration has

an impact on knowledge sharing. In their surveys, Smith, McKeen (2003) as well as Zhang et al. (2006) state that the existence of such a system of remuneration (bonuses, knowledge-oriented promotion, etc.) will strengthen the motivation of employees to share knowledge.

The outcomes of the survey have also revealed that a combination of explicit and tacit knowledge is used in practice (and evaluated accordingly), however, tacit knowledge is currently more dominant as it is linked to one particular person. Also in terms of organization competitiveness ensuring, tacit knowledge is more important since it is the result of personal involvement (emotions and motivation), opinions (mental models), and relationships. This means that tacit knowledge sharing is possible only in an atmosphere of trust. Holders of knowledge critical for the organization create a competitive advantage.

Further development of this topic should focus on the targeted and systematic application of the principles within organizations. For the organizations it is important to improve motivation, their knowledge strategy, and to build an organizational culture and climate encouraging knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing should become the key performance indicator (KPI – specific, monitorable, and specified for individual positions) in the system of remuneration of the given organization in the given period and should cover all employees.

The above is closely associated with the monitoring of the population aging (not only by organizations), i.e. which employees are about to retire and when. Due to changes in the current demographic situation, this topic will be increasingly important. Significance of this topic is also confirmed by the so-called age management which deals with the changing age structure of the population and focuses on its impacts at the social and political levels (international) as well as at the organizational and individual levels. It concentrates on management of all age groups, i.e. the age management is a comprehensive approach to dealing with the current demographic situation.

It is possible to summarize that the process of knowledge continuity ensuring has to be planned, implemented, monitored (e.g. by means of dashboards), checked (both in terms of structure and quality), and continuously updated for the purposes of its application in specific conditions of the given organization. This would be beneficial to the improvement of efficiency of the above processes.

## CONCLUSION

On the basis of the carried-out survey, it may be stated that at present organizations have no personnel or financial reserves or a systematic approach for determining the impacts of an employee's leaving.

Knowledge continuity ensuring may be considered a strategic approach to human resources management, by means of which organizations improve their employee's qualification and thus ensure their future, enhance their competitiveness, and minimize the negative impact of an employee's leaving on corporate knowledge. This, in turn, leads to the support of knowledge management, fulfilment of the set personnel strategy, and generally to the preservation of the healthy core of any organization.

The competitiveness of individual organizations in the market economy is determined not only by the level of technologies and the previously mentioned organizational culture and climate, but also by the level of knowledge of individual employees in the organization and its efficient utilization. This is currently seen as a decisive general factor. The knowledge of the knowledge employees therefore needs to be continuously updated, cultivated (improved) and, last but not least, shared and preserved, which may be achieved by knowledge continuity ensuring.

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### **Předpoklady a principy pro zabezpečení kontinuity znalostí v organizacích**

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Znalostní pracovníci jsou ti, kteří mají cenné znalosti a při odchodu z organizací tyto znalosti odchází s nimi, což pro organizace znamená ztrátu. Je důležité vědět v předstihu, kteří pracovníci a s nimi jaké znalosti mají odejít. Vedení organizace musí zajistit kontinuitu znalostí sdílením znalostí tak, aby bylo možné tyto znalosti přenést na ostatní. Pokud znalost nebude přenesena (z osoby na osobu), může dojít při odchodu pracovníka ke ztrátě těchto znalostí. Protože síla všech organizací závisí na znalostech, musí organizace znalosti uchovávat a přenášet na nástupce. Článek je zaměřen na problematiku zabezpečení kontinuity znalostí jako nástroje dosažení konkurenční výhody. K jejímu zabezpečení je nutné dodržovat požadavky a předpoklady, které byly identifikovány a testovány pomocí kvantitativního a kvalitativního výzkumu mezi manažery na vyšší a střední úrovni řízení v organizacích v České republice. Jedním ze závěrů článku je, že zabezpečení kontinuity znalostí lze považovat za strategický přístup k řízení lidských zdrojů, pomocí kterého organizace odborným růstem svých zaměstnanců zajišťuje jejich budoucnost a podporuje svoji konkurenceschopnost a minimalizuje negativní dopady odchodu znalostního pracovníka.

management kontinuity znalostí; znalosti; factory; předpoklady; zásady; výzkum

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