

# THE ROLE OF ORGANIZATIONAL CULTURE ON KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PROCESSES IN NON-PROFIT SECTOR ORGANIZATIONS

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**ABSTRACT :** *Non-profit organizations plays a significant role in sustaining societies through the social, environmental and health services they provide to people. However, organizations operating in the sector are facing big challenges that could impact the quality of the service they provide. In this regard, scholars have advised that NPOs should implement theories and practices of for-profit organizations to remain efficient. Yet, as knowledge based organizations, scholars have given little attention to knowledge management in NPOs. More specifically to the cultural factors that affect knowledge management processes. As knowledge is embedded in individuals, this research is investigating the cultural factors to identify the main factors that have an impact on individuals' involvement in knowledge management processes in non-profit organizations.*

**Keywords:** knowledge management, non-profit organizations, cultural, values, norms, practices, interactivity value, collaboration value, trust, orientation value, openness value

## INTRODUCTION

Non-profit organizations (NPOs) is considered the third sector besides the profit and public sectors, and it has a significant role in the social fabrics. As their importance stems from the services they provide to the societies. NPOs solves social problems, improve communities, and develop people's life and the environment [1]. As a result of that, their number has been in increase. For example, there are 3.3 million in India, 227 in Russia and 70,000 NPOs in the UK, and 700 NPOs registered in Saudi Arabia. Therefore, clients, suppliers, and funders are expecting NPOs to provide services that are integrated, tailored in a timely manner [2, 3] This will urge the NPO organizations in responsibility to achieve best practices in performance to prove to the funders that it has the capacity to deliver their services effectively [4]. However, NPOs are considered knowledge-intensive organizations [2, 3], where their knowledge capital is characterized to be heterogeneous, widespread, rarely formalized, and unstable, since that is attributed to the considerable turnover among paid and volunteer individuals working in NPOs [3]. As a result that NPOs' competitiveness will be eroded due to the existence of skilled and expert employees. Moreover, NPOs are facing challenges as private sector organizations which require them to adopt a business model and implement a strategy to enable them to sustain.

## Literature Review

Non-profit organizations are mainly operating to sever communities' needs through a wide variety of organizations that ranging from health care, education institutes, religious groups, and food banks [5]. What characterized these types of NPOs is that they use their revenues to achieve their mission and goals. Hence, the focus of these organizations is to create value for society [3] rather than generating profits to benefiting their stakeholders or the individuals that they own them [6]. However, NPOs are facing severe challenges including increasing demand for the provided services, the decline in the public fund, rise in accountability demands, competitive tendering procedures for service contracts, and Lack of expertise and fund to build their IT infrastructure [6] Moreover, the entrance of for-profit organization to provide social services has put both not-for-profit and for-profit organizations in competition, makes it difficult for NPOs to

deliver its services upon income that cannot be sustained through volunteer effort and philanthropic aid [2]

Besides that, NPOs suffer a high rate of turnover, according to [7] the average rate of turnover between 2013 and 2015 has increased from 16 to 19 percent. Another study by [8] found that the turnover is very quick among small organizations of NPOs. The reason for that was attributed to that NPOs are unable to offer jobs with good salaries, benefits, and job advancement to their employees [9], which in turn constitute a challenge for NPOs to retain employees. This leads to the loss of institutional memory (i.e. knowledge and expertise accumulated in the organization) as key employees leaving the organization [10]. Consequently, the quality, consistency, and stability of the services provided to their clients will be affected [10], which in turn, will lead to miss trust in the system. In fact, it is still unclear how non-profit organizations operate, perform and innovate [1], hence, they suffer the absence of adequate programs that promote their efficiency and satisfy the stakeholders. [11] This indicates that NPOs are operating in a competitive environment due to scarce donor resources and donors' demand for a program impact. [12] stated that the success of NPOs should be based on how efficiently and effectively they meet the needs of their constituencies.

Based on that, researchers have advised that NPOs should search for success factors that help in achieving excellence [3]. Others indicated that this would be possible through managing knowledge as the most valuable asset in the organization, which in turn will enable NPOs to be innovative, flexible, effective and efficient, and able to maintain their competitive edge [13]. Since, knowledge management plays an important role in supporting NPOs to attract sponsors, ensure effective and efficient operations [14]. However, retaining knowledge that is unique, formalized, and accessible by all individuals in the organization is a challenge that NPOs are facing [3]. Accordingly, the aim of this research is to identify the factors that encourage employees to involve in the promotion of knowledge management practices in NPOs.

## Knowledge management

Knowledge management has emerged as a discipline attempting to help organizations to identify the knowledge that exists within the organization either at an individual or at

a collective level to make the most effective and efficient use of it [15]. [16] posit that the strategic management of knowledge in the organization is a key factor in sustaining competitive advantage. Knowledge management is the process of sharing, creating, storing, and diffusing knowledge that engages all individuals in the organization [17]. Knowledge management is defined as the conscious practice or process of systematically identifying, capturing, and leveraging knowledge resources to help firms to compete more effectively [15]. Knowledge is classified into tacit and explicit [18]. Tacit knowledge is highly personal and difficult to be communicated, where it is embedded in contextual experiences. Whereas, explicit is the knowledge that can be easily articulated, which is more formal and systematic and can be stored in repositories, books, and computer programs. Researchers have highlighted the importance of the concept of organizational knowledge which is a "dynamic mix of individual, group, organizational and inter-organizational experiences, values, information, and expert insights [18]. Whereas, others have explored the links between organizational knowledge, individual knowledge, and human action undertaken in the organization [19].

In fact, valuable human and knowledge resources will be lost unless if the management of the organization tack initiatives to gather, sort, transform, record, and share knowledge [20]. Therefore, many organizations have introduced knowledge management programs to enable sharing and integration of knowledge to enhance organizational performance [18], through identifying the information that the organization has and benefit from it in devised ways to make it accessible [20]. According to [21] most of the projects of knowledge management revolved around one of three aims. First, to make knowledge explicit in the organization in the recorded forms such as manuals and hypertext tools. Second, to develop a knowledge-intensive culture by emphasizing behaviors such as knowledge transferring and knowledge donating. Third, establishing systems and tools that encourage individuals to interact and collaborate. As knowledge-intensive organizations [2], NPOs have been exposed to a range of driving forces and consequent pressures to employ for-profit organizations' models and practices to be efficient [22]. Therefore, in their pursuit of efficiency and competition, it is vital for NPOs to adopting business attributes, including knowledge management, to improve their strategic performance [23]. Thus, the focus of this research will be on promoting the behaviors that foster knowledge management practices.

The essence of knowledge management views the organization as a social institution, where it draws its value from the individuals working in it [24]. Therefore, proponents of the humanistic paradigm of knowledge management consider individuals and groups to play a significant role in the processes of knowledge management [25]. Research has found that tacit knowledge, as the most valuable knowledge in the organization, is lost through outsourcing, downsizing, mergers, and terminations as it is embedded in individuals' heads [20, 26]. Hence, the practice of knowledge sharing is one of the mechanisms by which the organization converts tacit knowledge to explicit in order to preserve knowledge over time [27] to sustain efficiency even when employees

leave the organizations [28]. Crucial as it provides linkage between the individuals and the organizations. Through that individuals' knowledge will move to the organizational level, which in turn can be used to create competitive value to the organization [29]. According to [20] "Knowledge is a human, highly personal asset and represents the pooled expertise and efforts of networks and alliances". However, it is considered to be an asset like money or machinery that needs to be managed in the context of implemented strategy [30]. Hence, the researchers in the humanistic stream have focused on the factors that affect individuals in order to manage their knowledge.

Despite, the emerging research of knowledge management in NPOs [14], however, it is still limited [31]. Given that, the extensive research that has been conducted on knowledge management has been mainly on for-profit organizations. In fact, most of the management practices that NPOs recently adopted including; marketing, human resource management, and quality-related practices, have been primarily used by for-profit organizations [5]. Research has shown that NPOs have become closer to the for-profit sector, as they have similar working needs [14]. Thus, they have "increasingly adopted the values and methods of the market to guide management and service delivery" [32]. Hence, creating, preserving, and applying knowledge to create competitive advantage and sustain performance applies equally well to organizations in the non-profit sector and for-profit sector.

Literature search has revealed that previous research on knowledge management has focused on the use of technological factors like the implementation of intranet project to enable knowledge transformation [33], web-based collaborating tool [34], and communication exchange network [35]. [3] have analyzed the practices of knowledge management in a non-profit organization, whereas, other studies by [36] have investigated the effect of human resource management practices on knowledge management practices in multinational NPOs. [37] conduct their study to identify knowledge gaps with volunteers and donors, in membership details and the details of the past activities and operations. [38] study the solutions conducive to reducing the employees' turnover in order to sustain knowledge. Another study by [14] on non-profit community bicycle workshops identified three broad sets of knowledge, namely technical, operational, and personal.

Others have examined the effect of internal marketing as enablers of knowledge management implementation [39]. [1] conducted their research on knowledge management capabilities, and they investigated the capacity for collection of resources, interpreting the information and creating meanings and the conversion of information to be knowledge. Other research examined the impact of organizational commitment, training, and knowledge-centered culture on knowledge management practices [40]. Given the small scale of this research, there is a lack of in-deep analysis of the role of the organizational culture in creating a supportive environment for the promotion of knowledge management in NPOs. Research illustrates that organizational culture is considered to be an important factor that can foster the implementation of knowledge management [41]. It creates an environment that affects individuals' ideas, which in turn

shape their thinking, behavior, and perception of the organizational environment [42]. Hence, this research will draw on the literature on knowledge management to identify the cultural factors that have an impact on individuals' involvement in knowledge management processes.

### **Culture**

Culture in organization research was used as a metaphor to examine organizations as forums where individuals constructed meanings and expressed them in their interaction [43]. It leads to organizational functions, how individuals interact and the decision is made. Organizational culture is defined as "the shared, basic assumptions that an organization learned while coping with the environment and solving problems of external adaptation and internal integration that are taught to new members as the correct way to solve those problems" [44]. There is no consensus on the definition of culture as it defined based on the number of commonly shared processes, shared methods of thinking, feelings, and shared meanings [45]. Culture is developed over time to represent organizational identity and reflected in an unwritten set of values that guide individuals' behaviors and perceptions in the organization [46]. Culture "affects various employees and organization-related outcomes" [47], and it affects individuals' behavior, learning and development, creativity and innovation, and knowledge management [48].

In fact, knowledge management is not an independent phenomenon that exists in the organization, its practices are highly affected by the social setting in which it embedded [49]. Hence, the effective implementation of knowledge management depends on the social ecology of the organization [50], and requiring more consideration to the cultural aspects of the organization [51], to integrate the daily activities of employees to reach the organizational goals. Culture specifies the shared perception of individuals, thereby, affect their behavior. Similarly, [52] indicated that culture has an impact on how individuals understand what is useful, important, or valid knowledge in the organization. According to [53] culture is a "critical factor in building and reinforcing knowledge management as it impacts how members learn, acquire and sharing knowledge". [54] illustrated that promotes shared objectives tends to perceive the knowledge possessed by individuals to belong to the organization, which in turn will lead to greater efforts of knowledge sharing. [55] added, it shapes individuals' attitudes towards knowledge sharing by affecting their cognitive style.

Several organizational researchers have taken different approaches to study culture to provide a full understanding of organizational cultures. Some researchers consider culture is not unitary but there are subcultures in the organization [56]. While others follow the symbolic-interpretivism approach, where they generally focus on symbols and symbolic behavior to understand culture [57]. However, the work by Schein was more influential than others as he articulated a conceptual framework for analyzing and impact the culture of the organization. According to [58] culture exist at three levels: basic assumptions, values, and artifacts. Assumptions represent the interpretative schemes that enable individuals to comprehend situations, to make them understand ongoing events, actions, and human relations, and, thereby, form the

foundation for collective action [49]. Values represent the visible aspects of culture that denote embraced beliefs that illustrate what is important to a specific cultural group. Artifacts are the most visible aspects of culture, and they represented in art, technology, behavior patterns, myths, heroes, rituals, and ceremonies [59].

In light of the multilevel concept of culture, values are considered to be vital in understanding organizational processes [60], as they provide a detailed explanation of the activities and functions of the organization and the behaviors of its individuals [61]. Several researchers in the management field have shown that values are crucial to organizational survival [62] and can create a competitive advantage through enhancing organizational performance [63]. Schein's view of a culture is relevant to the aim of this research, therefore, this research will seek to identify the related cultural values that impact individuals' involvement in knowledge management practices.

Values are the visible manifestation of a culture that reflected in a set of social norms that outline the rules for social interaction that govern individuals' actions and communications [49]. [64] "conception, explicit or implicit, of what an individual or a group regards as desirable, and in terms of which he or they select, from among alternative available modes, the means and ends of action". Values manifested in norms, which in turn shape specific practices [52, 65] and determine, the "rules, expectations, rituals and routines, stories and myths, symbols, power structures, organizational structures and control system" [49]. Subsequently, norms and practices instigate the individuals' behaviors by providing the social context through which individuals communicate and act [52]. Norms stem from values [65] and they are easy to be identified by individuals, hence, they are susceptible to change. Practices are the most observable manifestation of a culture, as they help in understanding the repetitive behaviors such as how individuals in an organization answer the phone.

In fact, values are considered as essences by which communities are constituted [66], operating as standards that define members' behaviors [67]. They guiding and impacting the inclination, priorities, actions, and attitudes of societies and their members [68]. Hence, values offer an explanation for the activities and functions of an organization and for the appropriate attitude of its members [67]. They operate in the realm of religion, politics, social, and economy [69]. Consequently, they are ranging from humanity to profit maximization, through which organizations and individuals can be guided in different situations [22]. They added, that values are various based on how they are constructed. For example, material values will be evolved around money, property, and benefits, personal values like tactfulness, trustfulness. Whereas, intellectual values such as wisdom and moral values such as faithfulness [70].

Putting this into the setting of knowledge management, cultural values will determine the norms and practices that favor knowledge management in relation to "who is expected to control what knowledge, as well as who must share it, and who can hoard it" [52]. Norms and practices play a crucial role in transmitted the underlying values into specific knowledge management behaviors [3]. In fact, the prevailing

studies on organizational culture and knowledge management shows range of values supporting the implementation of knowledge management. According to [65], core values such as "interactivity, collaboration, the orientation of collective knowledge (vs individual knowledge), orientation toward the existing knowledge, and expertise", govern the social interaction in relation to knowledge management.

In interactivity value, norms and practices will foster individuals' interaction either formal through periodical meetings or informal through unplanned and unstructured interactions among individuals. Interactivity has been considered for several years as a critical element of learning [71]. Several researchers considered social interaction an enabler of knowledge management behavior [72]. Others [73], suggested that the rich communication interaction can facilitate the allocation of valuable knowledge in the organization whereby individuals may expend considerable resources to absorb, transfer, and utilized the desirable knowledge. [74] contended that interaction provides a base for individuals' knowledge to be exposed to wider views and expertise in the organizations. Moreover, the use of technology can provide multiple channels for social interaction in the organization through online messaging, online chat, online meetings, discussion forms in a recordable format to keep tracking the archived knowledge [65].

Collaboration value, according to [75] involves "exchanging information, altering activities, sharing resources, and enhancing the capacity of another individual or organization, for mutual benefit, and to achieve a common purpose". It is emerged based on mutual respect, care, and support for each other [76], and highly considers the cooperation between team members and team accomplishments. It creates organizational strength through mobilizing the involvement of all individuals in the organization into common goals [77]. As, norms break the mental silos and promoting the natural flow of conversation between individuals, which in turn, leads to knowledge construction [78]. Whereas individuals tend to be not concerned about the effort they exert in contributing knowledge as others likewise contributing. [16]. Collaboration is considered as means by which the organization can create better knowledge management culture [79] and influence knowledge management practices [80].

In fact, collaboration coexists with trust as the relationship between task participants is built on mutual trust and collaboration [81]. Trust was found to reduce work complexity and fostering collaboration [82] and collaboration breeds trust (Putnam, 1993). Hence, the collaboration will occur when individuals are certain that their colleagues will not take advantage of them, accordingly, individuals will place resources at others' proposals [83]. Trust is seen as an alternative way to monitor or verify the information [84], because it embraces sets of shared expectations among the individuals who are involved in the collaboration [85]. Hence, it increases the confidence of knowledge donors to provide useful knowledge and the knowledge seekers to listen, absorb the knowledge, and put it into use [87]. Based on that, trust is considered one of the cultural values that lead to positive knowledge management behaviors [49] and retaining knowledge in the organization [85].

Orientation value determines the organizational strategy towards knowledge management. Others [86] considered the most commonly used knowledge management strategy is; knowledge source, knowledge type, knowledge-focused, and knowledge breadth. Knowledge source refers to the sources through which the organization obtains its knowledge. The organization may obtain knowledge through internal resources that exist in individuals' minds, research, procedures, software, and databases [87]. This type of knowledge is created and distributed inside the organization. Whereas, external knowledge refers to the knowledge that is added to the organizational knowledge from external resources such as; acquisition, new employees recruiting, and consultants. Knowledge type denotes the most used classification of knowledge, tacit and explicit. The strategy of explicit knowledge emphasis the use of conversation and social networks in an informal meeting, while in tacit strategy the focus is on the codification of knowledge in the formal meetings of knowledge sharing. Knowledge focus concerns the exploration of new knowledge and the exploitation of existing knowledge. An organization uses an exploration strategy to enhance its competitiveness and efficiency [87], while, it uses an exploitation strategy when the level of its knowledge is higher than its competitors [86]. Knowledge breadth refers to the extent of which organizational knowledge is specialized or generalized. Specialized knowledge enables the organization to build its core competencies, while, generalized knowledge requires the organization to combine its knowledge with other resources to increase its efficiency.

Openness value is considered one of the explicitly stated values that stimulate knowledge management behaviors [88]. It refers to the level of transparency in sharing work-related knowledge [89]. Openness is defined as "the degree to which employees are willing to exchange their ideas and knowledge with colleagues, even if those ideas contradict popular opinion" [90]. Highly open individuals are inclined to have positive attitudes towards acquiring new knowledge as well as disseminating knowledge within their teams and are passionate to develop their expertise [91]. Elsewhere [92], in their research found that openness in communication increases individuals' awareness of the importance of communication and the willingness to share knowledge with each other's. Hence, providing contact opportunities such as seminars, workshops, and group meetings will enable individuals to exchange ideas, opinions, and knowledge.

What we conclude from the aforementioned literature review is that most non-profit organizations are not profit-oriented. Hence, they cannot afford to employ human resource specialists to use motivational systems through which they can guide individuals to the desired behaviors of knowledge management. However, previous research suggested that the use of specific cultural values could have an impact on human resource strategies. As the presupposed values will result in behaviors that favor knowledge management practices [93]. Therefore, promoting the following cultural values; interactivity, collaboration, trust, orientation, and openness will have an impact on the success of the implementation of knowledge management in a non-profit organization. More importantly, some of these values

mutually coexist, reinforce each other and their functions integrated.

## DISCUSSION

In spite of the valued service that NPOs provide to the societies, our literature search reveals that the sector is still under development and suffers critical challenges related to; staffing, competing with other organizations for the fund, and granting the satisfaction of their stakeholders. NPOs are considered knowledge-intensive organizations as the delivery of their services relies on individuals' knowledge. As knowledge-intensive organizations, the high rate of turnover is conducive to the erosion of organizational knowledge that negatively will affect the quality and efficiency of the service. As knowledge management in NPOs is in its infancy, therefore, it is imperative for these organizations to apply knowledge management strategies that have been applied in for-profit organizations and their positive impact on the effectiveness of the organizations has been proved.

To successfully managing knowledge in NPOs, it is imperative to consider the role of individuals in knowledge processes. As they play a key role in leveraging organizational knowledge through their direct participation in the creation, sharing, and using of knowledge. Hence, managing knowledge effectively will be dependent on getting individuals connected within the organization. This would be through the introduction of the notion of a community of practice, where, individuals involved in the practices of knowledge management for the sake of functioning in the community. This view attempts to transform knowledge from individuals' domain into the organizational domain, as a result of that, knowledge will be considered as organizational assets or community knowledge. In that case, knowledge will be converted from tacit to explicit and it will be embedded in rules, routines, procedures, manuals, codes of conduct, and structure, thereby, knowledge will not be affected when employees leaving the organization.

Creating such an environment facilitates the dissemination of knowledge in the organization. Requires identifying knowledge enablers, specifically cultural factors that will expedite the implementation of knowledge management in NPOs. Hence, promoting cultural values of interactivity, collaboration, the orientation of collective knowledge, orientation toward the existing knowledge, expertise, trust, and openness to be significant in supporting the implementation of knowledge management. Whereas, the promotion of each type of these values can stimulate different practices of knowledge management (i.e. knowledge sharing, creating, disseminating, and storing). More importantly, these types of values may be context-specific, where, their effect will vary according to the type of organization and the national culture. Thus, it might be interesting to empirically investigate the effect of these values on the implementation of knowledge management in NPOs in different countries.

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