

A Study of Knowledge Sharing Practices of Civil Society Organizations in Sri Lanka

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Abstract

The problem focused in this study is the unsatisfactory level of intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of Sri Lankan civil society organizations (CSOs). It fills a knowledge gap through a systematic approach to Sri Lankan CSOs and an extension of knowledge management exploration to a relatively new area. The objectives of the study were to identify factors contributing to knowledge-sharing practices in CSOs, empirically establish such relationships and to propose recommendations for CSOs to enhance their intra-organizational knowledge sharing. Through a detailed literature review, organizational culture, structure, and presence of Information Technology (IT) were identified as causal factors. Based on the conceptual model it was hypothesized that the degree of presence of a conducive culture positively influences the knowledge-sharing practices of CSOs (H1), the degree of presence of a hierarchical structure negatively influences the above (H2) and the degree of presence of IT positively influences the above (H3). A predominantly quantitative approach was adopted with a convenience sample of 92 respondents from 42 CSOs. In-depth interviews with seven respondents were also used as a supportive qualitative approach. The validity and reliability of the questionnaire were appropriately established. Hypotheses H1 and H3 were supported but not H2, indicating that the degree of presence of a hierarchical structure has no significant influence. The in-depth interviews revealed, individual and organizational capabilities and the nature of knowledge as other factors that influence the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of CSOs. Based on the findings it is recommended that CSOs should have knowledge sharing practices embedded in the system and linked to their work and the organizational objectives, inclusive of proper planning and systematic execution. Assigning the required capable people in a conducive culture with an adequate IT infrastructure is essential for fulfilling their mandate.

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1. Introduction

Knowledge is a critical resource that needs to be well managed for effective performance of both profit and non-profit oriented organizations whether they deliver a product or service. To capitalize on knowledge, organizations need to understand how knowledge is created, shared and used.

Though knowledge has always been recognized as an important resource, it is only in the last decade that it was considered a primary source of competitive advantage, critical for long term sustainability and success (Ipe, 2003).

The term "CSO" is generally used to organizations such as registered charities, development non-governmental organizations, community groups, women's organizations, faith-based organizations, professional associations, trade unions, self-help groups, social movements, coalitions, and advocacy groups. In the era of Knowledge Workers (Drucker, 1993), CSOs also need to focus on knowledge sharing as an important activity. With their vision to make a difference to society, proper knowledge sharing becomes even more important for them.

2. Research Problem

The research problem focused in this study is why intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices adopted among Sri Lankan CSOs are not at a satisfactory level.

At first, six informal preliminary discussions with experts and leaders in the industry were held. The researchers used their social network in the industry to meet some heads of organizations. The purpose of this was to understand the prevailing situation in the sector of knowledge sharing practices, to identify common challenges in effective knowledge sharing and to design the concept, methodology, methods and techniques of the study. A pilot study was also done for this purpose and 10 people from different organizations responded to this study. The outcome of this revealed that these organizations practised knowledge sharing in a reactive way and lacked proper administration of people and practices to maximize knowledge sharing. In brief, intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices adopted among Sri Lankan CSOs are not at a satisfactory level.

3. Scope of the Study

This study covered the aspects of exploring and analyzing the knowledge transfer mechanisms in place among the CSOs mainly based in Colombo. Knowledge transfer for an organization is two-fold: internal and external (Cummins, 2003). This study focused mainly on knowledge sharing practices within organizations. Information

Technology (IT) plays a major role in knowledge management and a study of this kind can only focus on this aspect (Holsapple, 2005). In essence, the scope of this study was mainly on 'people' and treated IT as one element of knowledge transfer. Further, knowledge sharing in an organization can be looked at as operational or conceptual knowledge and this study looked particularly at conceptual knowledge. These decisions were made based on the basic characteristics of the sector. CSOs generally work on complex social issues which need a conceptual knowledge base that should be built and shared within the organization. The human touch is very much important in this type of work. This is why intra-organizational, people based conceptual knowledge sharing practices were focused in this study.

4. Research Question

Based on the preliminary literature review, the following research questions were formulated:

1. Does the organization culture influence the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of CSOs in Sri Lanka?
2. Does the organizational structure influence the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of CSOs in Sri Lanka?
3. Does Information Technology influence the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of CSOs in Sri Lanka?

5. Research Objectives

The objectives of the study were to:

1. Identify the existing knowledge sharing practices of Sri Lankan CSOs.
2. Discover the factors that determine and influence the present knowledge sharing practices and nature (positive or negative) of these influences.
3. Make recommendations for CSOs in Sri Lanka to enhance their intra-organizational knowledge sharing.

6. Literature Reviews (In Brief)

Knowledge in an organization is the collection of expertise, experience, and information that individuals and work groups use in the execution of their tasks (Vasconcelos et al., 2005). Guzman & Wilson (2005) view organizational knowledge as socially constructed templates (concepts, methods, routines, techniques and tools) and also as technical processes. They further explain that organizational knowledge involves both people and context. It possesses invisible "soft" features, which are embedded

within individuals and the organizational structure. Explicit knowledge refers to the knowledge available in a documented form, with the provision for easy codification. Tacit knowledge means the knowledge the individuals possess that is hidden inside their "black boxes" (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995).

Knowledge management refers to a range of practices and techniques used by organizations to identify, represent and distribute knowledge, know-how, expertise, intellectual capital and other forms of knowledge for leverage, reuse and transfer of knowledge and learning across the organization. The knowledge management framework consists of the components such as identification, acquisition, development, dissemination and use of knowledge (Debowski, 2006).

Knowledge sharing is a set of behaviours that involve the exchange of information or assistance to others. It is separate from information sharing, which typically involves management making information about the organization (e.g. financial statements) available to employees at every level (Connelly & Kelloway, 2003). Knowledge sharing is about making knowledge available to others within the organization.

Guzman & Wilson (2005) identify three key factors that determine knowledge transfer. First, the complexity of social processes that is individual interpretation, cognition and behaviour, which is shaped by the broader contextual rules and resources. Second, organizational structural factors. Third, the degree of abstraction in which the organizational knowledge is packaged. When the organizational concepts are complex, the level of abstraction needs to be high to capture a whole idea.

Ipe (2003) argues that four major factors determine knowledge sharing: motivation to share, opportunities to share, nature of knowledge and the organizational culture. Heo & Yoo (2002) identify two different perspectives in relation to knowledge sharing. One perceives knowledge as an object and suggests a codification approach to knowledge sharing. The other one sees knowledge as socially constructed and collectively held and suggests a personalization approach to knowledge sharing.

Cummings (2003) identifies five contexts that affect knowledge sharing practices in an organization: the relationship between the source and recipient, the form and location of the knowledge, the recipient's learning pre-disposition, the source's knowledge sharing capability and the broader environment.

Sun & Scott (2005) identify barriers to knowledge transfer at four levels of learning in an organization: individual, team, organizational and inter-organizational. Through learning individuals bring new knowledge to the organizations that challenge the current norms and assumptions of the organization.

Riege (2005) says barriers to knowledge transfer may appear at three levels: individual, organizational and technological. Osterloh & Frey (2000) show that explicit knowledge sharing is stimulated by both extrinsic and intrinsic motivators, while tacit knowledge sharing is stimulated by intrinsic motivators only.

Culture influences knowledge sharing in four ways (Jewels, Underwood and Heredero (n.d)). It shapes the attitudes for determining what knowledge is and which knowledge is worth managing. It defines the relationship between individual and organizational knowledge. It creates the context for social interactions and relationships among individuals, which determines the use of knowledge in a particular situation. It determines the process of creating, legitimating and disseminating new knowledge. Under the purview of culture, several factors are identified as influencing knowledge sharing practices of an organization. Among these, willingness, trust, relationship and social network can be cited as important.

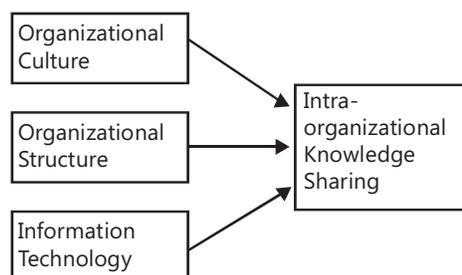
Kim & Lee (2004) point out that organizational structure has often had the unintended consequence of inhibiting collaboration and sharing of knowledge across internal organizational boundaries. According to Connelly & Kelloway (2003), hierarchical organizations are not likely to fully engage the skills and knowledge of all employees. The level of knowledge sharing can be improved by adding the dimension of flexibility to the formal hierarchical structure (Kim & Lee, 2004).

Technological infrastructures are viewed as crucial factors that determine the knowledge sharing process (Riege, 2005). Holsapple (2005), in his study of the relationship between knowledge management and information technology, discuss three perspectives on knowledge management, namely, the exclusive perspective, identification perspective and the inclusive perspective, and concludes that Information Technology is complementary to knowledge management. Holsapple (2005) further discusses the growth of knowledge management and Information Technology, both in the decade of the 1990s. Connelly & Kelloway (2003) see Information Technology as a factor that facilitates knowledge sharing, particularly among employees who are so shy or very busy that they avoid face- to- face interactions.

7. Conceptual Framework

Based on the literature review, the following model is proposed.

Figure 1: Conceptual Framework



8. Hypotheses Proposed

Based on the conceptual framework, the following hypotheses are proposed:

- H1: Organizational culture positively influences the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of Sri Lankan CSOs.
- H2: Organizational structure negatively influences the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of Sri Lankan CSOs.
- H3: Informational Technology positively influences the intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices of Sri Lankan CSOs.

9. Operationalisation

The concepts associated with the study were operationally defined for the study as follows:

Culture: The shared knowledge and schemes created by a set of people for perceiving, interpreting, expressing, and responding to the social realities around them.

Structure: Something made up of a number of parts that are held or put together in a particular way

Information Technology: Any equipment or interconnected system or subsystem of equipment that is used in the automatic acquisition, storage, manipulation, management, movement, control, display, switching, interchange, transmission, or reception of data or information.

Knowledge Sharing: The process through which one unit is affected by the experience of another.

Willingness: Readiness or eagerness to share/gather knowledge with others without any objections.

Trust: The belief, confidence or willingness to believe that one can rely on the goodness, strength, and ability of somebody.

Relationship: A particular type of connection existing between people related to or involving mutual dealings with each other.

Social Network: The social fabric that connects people and organizations, the personal or professional set of relationships between individuals. Social networks represent both a collection of ties between people and the strength of those ties.

Centralization: Activities of an organization, particularly those regarding decision-making coming from a central authority, the act of consolidating power under central control.

Formalization: Making an arrangement, the status of somebody or something official, the act of making a formal arrangement by stating formal rules.

IT Application and Usage: Availability and usage of Information Technology tools and techniques.

End user Focus: Accessibility, user friendliness and familiarity with the available IT applications, which serve the particular need of the customer.

Interaction: Communication or interpersonal contact between people with the purpose of exchanging information, ideas, and opinions.

Coaching: Supporting people to achieve their goals, helping a person to find their own solutions by asking questions, giving feedback that give them insights into their situation, providing guidance and direction to ensure successful performance.

Codification: Representation of day-to-day situations using photographs, drawings, words, process of collecting and arranging systematically usually by subject.

Documentation: The systematic collection, classification, recording, storage, and dissemination of specialized information, generally of a technical or scientific nature.

Dissemination: The systematic distribution of information or knowledge through a variety of ways to potential beneficiaries. The purpose of a dissemination activity is to assure that information/knowledge is useful in reaching decisions, making changes, or taking specific action and is available to those who can most benefit from it.

Collaboration: The process by which people/organizations work together to accomplish a common mission. A partnership approach that relies on an open exchange of information. It is dependent on mutual respect, and is aimed at supporting service users to gain some control in decision making.

10. Methodology

A predominantly quantitative methodology was used in this study. The main reason for this was to get an overall picture of the sector including a large number of organizations within a short period. A qualitative component was also included in order to capture the data in a more comprehensive manner. The research instrument comprised a structured questionnaire with a few open-ended questions.

A convenient sampling technique was used to select 42 CSOs. based on the following criteria:

Reach: Working in more than three regions

Stability: Established and running for more than five years

People: Having more than 15 staff members.

From each organization two to four people representing different professional layers were selected as respondents. Accordingly, 92 responses were collected. The unit of analysis was considered as the individual respondents.

In addition to the survey, seven in-depth interviews with selected leaders of the CSOs, covering both local and international, were conducted. These CSOs were selected based on aspects such as functional area, capacity, portfolio, leadership, number of employees, outreach, etc. in order to ensure representativeness.

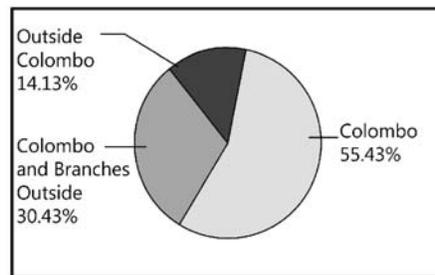
Secondary data was also gathered by accessing organizational documents, database, system and practices, in order to identify the knowledge sharing culture and practices.

11. Presentation of Data

Approximately 83% of the sample represent locally owned organizations and 17% represent international organizations. Over thousand CSOs now exist in Sri Lanka, of which international organizations are very few. Thus the proportion based on international and local organizations in the sample is fair enough to generalize the findings to the population.

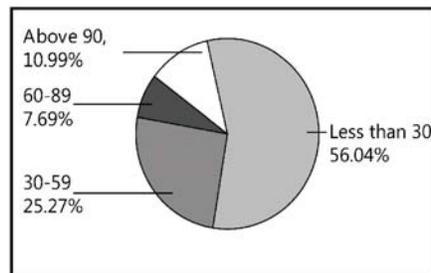
The geographical base of the CSOs is depicted in Figure 2.

Fig 2: Geographical Base of the CSOs



Source: Survey Data

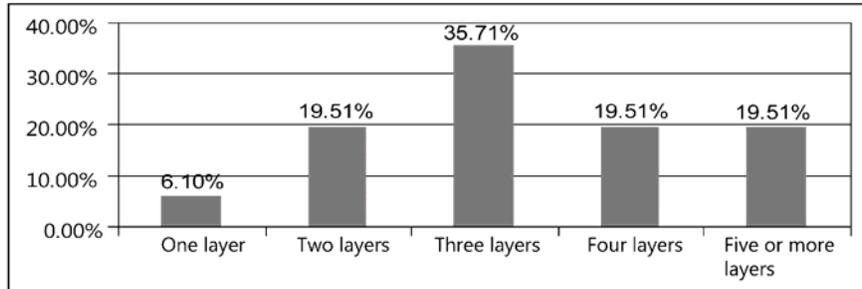
Fig 3: No. of Employees



Source: Survey Data

Among the respondents, 73% were the programme staff directly involved with project implementation and the rest were the administrative staff.

Fig 4: Structuredness of the CSOs



Source: Survey Data

12. Analysis of Data

Data analysis covered hypotheses testing, regression testing, cross-tabulation and Cronbach Alpha calculations.

Testing of H1

The associated variables were culture (C1) and knowledge sharing (C4). SPSS ver. 13 provided the details as shown in Table 1.

Table 1: Correlation Details of C1 and C4.

		C1	C4
C1	Pearson Correlation	1	0.295
	Significance (2-tailed)		0.005
	N	92	88
C4	Pearson Correlation	0.295	1
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.005	
	N	88	88

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

According to the above Table, there is a statistically significant (weakly positive) relationship between C1 and C4. Therefore, H1 was not rejected at the 0.01 significance level. According to the sample, it seems that culture (willingness, trust, relationship, social network) positively influences the knowledge sharing practices of civil society organizations.

Testing of H2

The associated concepts were structure (C2) and knowledge sharing (C4). SPSS ver. 13 provided the details as shown in Table 2.

Table 2: Correlation Details of C2 and C4.

		C4	C2
C4	Pearson Correlation	1	-0.117
	Significance (2-tailed)		0.276
	N	88	88
C2	Pearson Correlation	-0.12	1
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.276	
	N	88	92

According to the above Table, there is no statistically significant relationship between C2 and C4. Therefore, H2 was rejected and the null hypothesis was accepted. According to the sample it seems that structure does not have a strong influence on the knowledge sharing practices of civil society organizations in Sri Lanka.

Testing of H3

The associated concepts were Information Technology (C3) and knowledge sharing (C4). SPSS ver. 13 provided the details as shown in Table 3.

Table 3: Correlation Details of C3 and C4.

		C4	C3
C4	Pearson Correlation	1	0.224
	Significance (2-tailed)		0.037
	N	88	87
C3	Pearson Correlation	0.224	1
	Significance (2-tailed)	0.037	
	N	87	90

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

According to the above Table, there is a statistically significant (weakly positive) relationship between C3 and C4. Therefore, H3 is not rejected at the 0.05 significance level. The relationship identified is again weak positive. According to the sample it seems that Information Technology (IT application, end user focus) positively influences the knowledge sharing practices of CSOs.

Regression Analysis

The Coefficient of Determination (R^2) in relation to culture and knowledge sharing was found to be .087. This implied that 8.7% of the variation in knowledge sharing practices is explained by the culture of the organization.

In the case of IT and knowledge sharing, R^2 was found to be 0.05, indicating that 5% of the knowledge sharing is explained in terms of IT.

Supplementary Analysis

Cross tabulations were done using SPSS ver. 13 in order to obtain further insights. Accordingly, 76.4% of the local organizations fall into the category of "Less than 0.20", which shows that the local organizations do not adopt sufficient knowledge sharing practices compared to the international organizations. Interestingly, none of these organizations, either local or international, are grouped beyond the index 0.60.

Further, the cross tabulation analysis showed that there is not much difference between local and international organizations in the matter of a favourable culture for knowledge sharing. It also showed that the international organizations have a more centralized and formalized structure, have more IT facilities and have more knowledge sharing practices than the local organizations.

Validity and Reliability of Data

The thoroughness of the literature review was assumed to support the internal validity of the data. Care in selecting the sample was expected to satisfy the external validity of the data. Face validity was established through careful designing of the questionnaire.

In order to check the internal reliability the Cronbach alpha was calculated using SPSS Ver. 13.0. The value obtained was 0.789, which can be taken as satisfactory.

Key Themes that Emerged through the In-Depth Interviews

Based on the data gathered through the seven in-depth interviews conducted with the leaders of the CSOs, the following key themes emerged.

Table 4: Key themes that emerged through the in-depth interviews

Leader's role as a people developer in equipping them with job-specific knowledge
Leader's role as a communicator in sharing the strategic direction of the CSO with the employees
Leader's role in creating a culture that fosters knowledge sharing
Leader's role in promoting the usage of IT
Leader's role in building social networks in connecting multiple stakeholders
Leader's role as information disseminator, linking global knowledge with local realities
Leader's role as a coordinator in capturing innovative ideas from employees and collectively using them for meaningful purposes

The above Table is a clear indication of the contribution leadership provides in intra-organizational knowledge sharing. The key themes that emerged reinforce the conceptual framework.

13. Findings of the Study

Among the findings of the study, the common knowledge practices captured from the CSOs are of importance. Table 5 contains the details.

Table 5: Common knowledge sharing practices captured from CSOs

Codification Approach
Documentation, reporting, proposal writing and publications
Website
Maintain a resource centre, library, database etc.
Training manuals, curriculum development
Use internet, email and intranet to share documents
Seminars
Personalization Approach
Reflection sessions on past events and projects to learn from experience and mistakes
Monthly discussions, meetings
Strategy planning and annual work plan meetings
Trainings, workshops and brainstorming sessions
Coaching, mentoring
Exit interviews
Internet based discussion forums
Mixing seniors and juniors in work and annual retreat sessions
In-house presentations
Cross programme work
Budget preparation
Induction package
Reading and discussion groups
Brown bag lunch - Discuss a topic over lunch

Source: Captured Data

Comparatively, international organizations and the Colombo- based high profile CSOs have more good practices and a greater concern for knowledge sharing than the local low profile organizations. For the local low profile organizations, survival is the major issue.

Generally, Sri Lankan CSOs, to a large extent, depend on foreign funds and sustainability is the crucial issue for them. Their inefficiency in raising local funds is another issue of concern. When these organizations have to constantly struggle for existence, knowledge management and knowledge sharing are not prioritized.

As the R2 values reveal, the independent variables selected for the study did not adequately explain the knowledge sharing practices of the CSOs. The following additional factors were captured through the secondary data analysis and reconnecting to the literature.

Table 6: Other factors affecting knowledge sharing in the CSOs

Factors affecting Knowledge sharing practices	Explanation
1. Individual capability	There is high intellectual gap among the staff. Lack of ideology and weak cognitive progress is the main challenge for knowledge sharing Cummings (2003) , Guzman & Wilson (2005).
	Linguistic differences make this gap wider. Incapable of lateral thinking.
	Non organizational factors affecting the propensity to communicate effectively (personal problems, etc).
	Lack of incentives or motivation to engage in knowledge sharing practices Ipe (2003).
	For knowledge sharing to take place the person who possesses knowledge should get involved in a conscious process which needs skills. These skills are lacking.
2. Time	Though there are systems developed for knowledge sharing, there is pressure to meet the job targets. Thus people get busy with their work Riege (2005).
3. Nature of the Job	Contract based / project based job is one challenge and means that new projects often engage new staff .
	Compartmentalism of work according to projects, clusters and teams, Territoriality about one's work .
4. Donor dependence	Highly donor dependent, not financially stable. Thus, the priority is always for completing the project. They hire consultants with the needed expertise for task completion, leaving no space for the staff to learn or share.
5. Organisational capabilities	There is not much focus on organizational development. Lack of management efficiency. Sun & Scott (2005)
	Lack of organizational cognitive process, Guzman & Wilson (2005)
	Geographical and spatial issues
	Low emphasis is placed on documenting and writing about experiences. Project managers are most concerned about contract and project management. Therefore, there is no consistency in knowledge transfers.
6. Nature of the Knowledge	Concept of the work is not easily understood. Lack of understanding among actors (external and internal) of the basic organizational mandate, vision, etc. Cummings (2003) Guzman & Wilson (2005)

In summarizing the above table, nature of the knowledge and capabilities can be identified as the two main factors influencing knowledge sharing.

14. Conclusions from the Study

Within the scope of this study with the support of literature and quantitative and qualitative data analysis several conclusions were drawn.

More than the hard concepts such as structure and Information Technology, the influence of the soft concepts are high on knowledge sharing practices of the CSOs in Sri Lanka. Culture, organizational and individual capabilities and the nature of the knowledge are identified as the most dominant factors.

The state of the cultural elements such as willingness to share, relationship, trust and social network are almost the same across the sector, in spite of the local, international or urban, rural differences.

Generally, management perceives knowledge management and knowledge sharing as separate issues from the core organizational function. There is not enough awareness of knowledge management and its importance .

Intra-organizational knowledge sharing practices among the CSOs of Sri Lanka are mostly traditional methods adopting a personalization approach.

Knowledge sharing happens in an ad-hoc manner, on a needs basis, with a short-term goal. It is not embedded in the systems with a clear focus to contribute to the overall objectives of the organizations. Neither are these practices adopted with a proper understanding of the context and the need for them.

It seems that the capability issue mostly influences the knowledge sharing practices of the CSOs. There should be more concern on organization development, sustainability and management.

15. Limitations of the Study

Not reviewing adequate local literature due to their non availability was one limitation. Further, as a methodological limitation, adopting a predominantly quantitative approach might not have captured an adequate level of qualitative data. This was minimized by the incorporation of several in-depth interviews. As an empirical limitation, the sample contained more Colombo-based organizations.

16. Recommendations of the Study

Based on the findings of the study, the following recommendations can be made:

There are varieties of practices existing among Civil Society Organizations. However, a clear focus is lacking. CSOs should systematize these practices as complementing the strategic directions and project goals and overall objectives.

Knowledge management and knowledge sharing are not separate issues. This should be embedded into the systems and practices.

Due to the work nature of the sector, getting people motivated to learn and share is a challenge. One way of getting them motivated is to link knowledge sharing practices with their work. Getting involved in knowledge sharing practices should yield some outputs. These outputs should be some thing that the employees use to achieve their work related objectives.

Due to lack of time and motivation, knowledge sharing does not take place on its own, though the systems and practices are in place. Thus, there is a real need for constant facilitation. Management should shoulder this responsibility.

Civil Society Organizations should think about creative and innovative methods of knowledge sharing, where employees get engaged in debates and discussion in a more informal way. This could possibly enhance motivation and interest.

The methods adopted in a personalized approach, i.e., connecting people with a common purpose, should be done with a clear goal, proper agenda and good facilitation.

A good mix of a personalized and a codification approach having IT cutting through both approaches is recommended. The connecting approach should also have a codification part for future follow ups. There should be an output in the form of a document after discussions, meetings, workshops, etc. IT can be used to share the documents widely and create internet forums.

Looking at the organizational capacity, over reliance on IT is not possible. Connecting people is an essential requirement and there should be innovative ways of doing this. Listening to lectures or presentations is not always the best way for knowledge sharing. For knowledge sharing, internalization is crucial. To ensure this, it is always important to select the right people for the right jobs. It is also necessary to connect the bright people with a common focus or purpose for sharing knowledge. In other words connect the right people to the right knowledge.

17. Conclusion

From the discussions above, it can be concluded that assigning of the required capable people in a conducive culture with adequate IT infrastructure will ensure a satisfactory level of intra-organizational knowledge sharing in the CSOs operating in Sri Lanka. It is expected that the findings of this study will be of benefit not only to the CSOs but also to the community at large, whilst contributing to the existing stock of knowledge

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