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## Knowledge management in the not-for-profit sector: introduction

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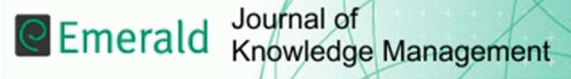
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## Knowledge Management in the Not-For-Profit Sector: Introduction

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Knowledge Management in the Not-for-profit Sector: Editorial

The drive to increase competitive advantage and improve efficiency has, understandably, triggered a plethora of knowledge management studies in the private and public sectors. While research in these two sectors has generated useful insights, the not-for-profit sector has the potential to do so too. There is evidence of some interest in knowledge management in the not-for-profit sector (e.g. Lettieri *et al*, 2004; Hurley and Green, 2005; Hume and Hume, 2008; Ragsdell, 2009; Ragsdell and Jepson, 2014; Ragsdell *et al*, 2014; Stadler *et al*, 2013) but it does not yet mirror the massive attention paid to the other two. So, it is with great pleasure and pride that this special issue of Journal of Knowledge Management is introduced to you.

Background

Not-for-profit organisations have particular characteristics that can present extreme challenges for managing knowledge therein. For example, the transient nature of their volunteer workers means that knowledge retention can be difficult; the lack of opportunity to plan strategically, perhaps due to financial insecurity, can prevent long-term investment in initiatives that require technological support; and the lack of formal contracts for volunteers means that knowledge activities are not determined by job descriptions and formal rewards. The other side of the coin reveals a set of characteristics that can support effective knowledge management practices. For example, not-for-profit organisations operate within a particular ethos that can more readily trigger the development of types of trust that are not obvious in the workplace setting; additionally their behaviour with respect to knowledge is likely to be influenced by motivators that are not common in a place of employment.

The challenges of contemporary private and public sector organisations would appear to be aligning more closely with longstanding ones of the not-for-profit sector as outlined above. And with the increased complexity and uncertainty of funding that some not-for-profit organisations are facing, of necessity, they are adopting a more competitive stance than in previous times. It would therefore seem reasonable to suggest that there is much to be learned from not-for-profit organisations *per se* but, in terms of this issue, with respect to their knowledge management practices.

Variety of Papers

This issue is a collection of nine papers that reflect the current landscape of knowledge management research in the not-for-profit sector; it brings together the work of established researchers and new researchers alike and, in doing so, illustrates the value and variety of studies to date.

It is encouraging to see the chosen range of theories and frameworks that the authors relate to as they uncover *what* they researched. It is also inspiring to realise the wide variety of research approaches that the authors took in their investigations and to appreciate the unorthodox and innovative methods that they introduce to the knowledge management arena. There can be a tendency for researchers to attempt to solve knowledge management problems. However, approaches that more overtly attempt to explore and understand organisational and human behaviour are included in this issue. In particular, ethnography and hermeneutic phenomenology are presented but not to the exclusion of more positivist approaches and the value that they also bring to *how* research is undertaken.

The variety of countries in which authors have undertaken research is also inspiring. Although the UK and Australia lead in this respect, three other countries – The Netherlands, Mexico and Canada – add to the international dimension of this issue.

Structure

The papers that were selected to be included herein triggered consideration of options for the issue's overall structure; different grouping and sequencing of the papers would have brought equal levels of coherence to the issue. Possible criteria for clustering papers included their emphasis on particular

research paradigms, methodologies and types of data. Additionally, knowledge-related questions such as 'what?', 'how?' and 'why?' might have been used to shape the issue, or the particular knowledge process or theory under scrutiny. As will be seen, the papers have been arranged to take the reader on a journey through the different levels of focus that the authors chose.

So, the reader begins their journey with a paper from Ferguson who has studied the content of an online knowledge sharing community that comprises around 4000 members across the world. Within the context of international development, Ferguson identifies trends in the topics that were debated by development practitioners over a 15 year period. Similarly, Rath, Given and Forcier's study was large-scale with around 4000 respondents and they, too, undertook investigations from an international perspective. By identifying knowledge requirements of not-for-profit organisations in Australia and Canada, they were able to develop an evidence based model of knowledge needs for the sector.

The next pair of papers focus on the contribution of knowledge management to operational efficiency and effectiveness of the not-for-profit sector at a national level – the first paper focuses on knowledge activities across a range of community and service organisations in Australia while the other compares organisations with a local and national presence in Mexico. Merchant and Downs adopted a post-positivist stance as they analysed over 500 responses to an online survey that aided their exploration of the extent and effectiveness of knowledge management in community and service organisations. Meanwhile, Zapata and Mondragon used a number of data collection techniques to identify organisational and personal enablers that support knowledge generation and transfer in a range of Mexican not-for-profit organisations.

Case studies were a natural choice by which to explore knowledge management practices at an organisational level. Corfield and Paton were able to take a longitudinal approach as they investigated the relationship between knowledge management and culture in three international development charities. While Corfield and Paton's case studies were based in the UK, Hume and Hume bring us back to an Australian context as they report on the investigation of the requirements of a knowledge management process in smaller not-for-profit organisations. To close this trio of papers, Bloice and Burnett's contribution is based on an in-depth single case study of an organisation from third sector social care. Following on from a knowledge audit, Bloice and Burnett employed semi-structured interviews and questionnaires to identify barriers to knowledge sharing for Scottish Autism.

The final pair of papers, from Stadler and Fullagar, and from Clayton, offer findings from the specific context of festivals. Not only do they share a common research context (albeit in Australia and the UK respectively), these authors have adopted a similar stance that is in contrast to the problem solving approach often adopted within the knowledge management arena. Both sets of authors aimed to understand human behaviour rather than to explain or measure it. Stadler and Fullagar's paper draws from experiences of an ethnographic study in which the first author was working as a volunteer at a music festival while Clayton's paper was influenced by hermeneutic phenomenology as she sought to investigate parallels between conditions that support knowledge activities and that characterise a conducive environment for an optimum volunteering experience.

### The Future

This issue has put a stake in the ground to mark the current position of research in knowledge management in the not-for-profit sector. It is an example of the excellent work that has been undertaken by researchers across the world who have been motivated to overcome the specific challenges of researching in this sector, and who have, as a result, been able to share both practical and theoretical advancements. The number of papers that are based on PhD studies is an indication of the maturity of the field and a very encouraging sign of the increasing interest in it.

With increasing recognition of the importance of the not-for-profit sector to society and to the economy, it is anticipated that more research in this sector will be invited. In addition, as not-for-profit sector organisations come under pressure to become more 'business-like', then the introduction and support of effective knowledge management practices will become vital. So, there are exciting times ahead for practitioners and researchers that this special issue might inform.

In closing, a huge ‘thank you’ is sent to all the authors who submitted papers to the call for papers, and to the reviewers who so kindly gave of their time and expertise to support the development of this issue. Many thanks also go to the Chief Editor for encouraging this issue to go ahead, and to him and the Production Team who helped to make it happen.

Dr Gillian Ragsdell  
School of Business and Economics  
Loughborough University  
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