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Role of Knowledge Management in Empowerment of Agriculture Organization's Experts in Ilam Province, Iran

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Abstract

The purpose of this research was to determine knowledge management in the empowerment of the experts of Agricultural Organization in Ilam County of Iran. The statistical population was composed of all employees with the organizational positions of expert or higher in Agricultural Organization of Ilam (n=150). A self-designed questionnaire was used as data collection tool whose face and content validities were confirmed by a panel of experts and whose reliability was estimated to be 0.89 by Cronbach's alpha. Data were analyzed by SPSS20 in two groups of descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean and standard deviation) and inferential statistics (Spearman correlation and multiple regression analysis). Results of regression analysis showed positive, significant relationship of knowledge exchange, knowledge generation, and number of training courses with people's empowerment so that they, together, accounted for 40% of the variations of dependent variable.

Keywords:
knowledge management, empowerment, experts, Agricultural Organization, Ilam County

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INTRODUCTION

In today's economy, knowledge and expertise are the basis of wealth. Future will see a revolution whose driving force will be rooted in people's thoughts. The modern age is undoubtedly the age of organizations; organizations that are operated by people, who can move organizations ahead thanks to their most important source of power – thinking. In highly changing, developing and competing atmosphere of the new age, what gives organizations a competitive advantage is their high-quality, innovative, dynamic people. Thus, knowledge-based human resource is the main capability of the organizations to gain competitive advantage and is its most important intangible asset (Abtahi & Mousavi, 2010). People should be regarded as the golden key for the improvement of the quality and efficiency of all organizational processes. In fact, the exploitation of human, intellectual and information capitals is the factor that guarantees long-term superiorities of organizations and nations. An organization or firm that fails to adequately motivate its people for sharing their knowledge will lose a great deal of its knowledge. Therefore, the management of people's knowledge is of crucial importance for exploiting their capabilities towards organization goals. Organizations in which knowledge management is practiced possess features that distinguish them from other organizations. "These organizations continuously adopt and produce knowledge, continuously process, refine and store the adopted and produced knowledge, and evidently share and distribute knowledge and use it in all organizational processes". Some researchers believe that knowledge-based organizations can reach capabilities that enable them to make a huge power out of small force (Balogun et al., 2004). Therefore, it can be said that knowledge and skill can lead to empowerment provided that they are managed in a sound way. Empowerment satisfies both organizational needs for people's higher performance and people's demands for independence and recognition. People's empowerment affords them a lot of chances to exercise their creativity, flexibility and authority.

Rezaei et al. (2014) reported that knowledge management and its components including creation, acquisition, registration, transfer and exploitation of knowledge had positive, significant impact on organizational performance at the 0.99 confidence level.

Hashemi (2014) studied the relationship between knowledge management and efficiency in Islamic Azad University of Lamerd in Iran and concluded that knowledge management was a positive, significant predictor of organizational culture in the studied university.

Hassanzadeh et al. (2014) studied the relationship between knowledge management and human resource development from staff's viewpoints and found a positive, significant correlation between them.

In an examination of the influence of knowledge management and psychological empowerment on people's creativity, Moosavi et al. (2014) concluded that knowledge management and its components as well as psychological empowerment and its components were positively and significantly correlated with people's creativity. The regression analysis revealed that knowledge management and psychological empowerment accounted for 0.99 of the variations of the dependent variable (creativity).

Madhoushi and Noornejad Vanoush (2013) investigated the impact of knowledge management enablers on people's empowerment in SMEs considering the mediating role of knowledge management process and found that in SMEs in the east of Mazandaran Province, knowledge management enablers had direct, significant impact on staff's empowerment and indirect, significant impact on knowledge management process. Also, they stated that knowledge management had direct, significant effect on people's empowerment, and knowledge management enablers on knowledge management process.

In an analysis of people's psychological empowerment and its relationship with knowledge management, Salajeghe et al. (2014) revealed that knowledge management was significantly related to psychological empowerment and its components (*i.e.* the feelings of autonomy, dignity, effectiveness, meaningfulness, and con-

fidence). Regression analysis showed that 'the feeling of autonomy' had the strongest and 'the feeling of meaningfulness' had the weakest role in explaining dependent variable.

Ali Ahmadi et al. (2011) studied the role of knowledge management tools in people's empowerment using fuzzy AHP and found that among seven studied tools, 'grouping experienced people with newcomers' and 'on-the-job training' had the highest and 'job rotation' and 'post-operation review' had the lowest impact on people's empowerment.

Zaied et al. (2012) found that all components of knowledge management including knowledge acquisition, storage, maintenance and utilization had positive, significant relationship with the performance of private and public organizations in Egypt.

In a study on the effect of knowledge management practices on organizational performance in public organizations of Pakistan, Qaisar Danish and Munir (2012) found a positive, significant relationship between management and organization performance.

In a study on knowledge management and human resource development, Robin (2011) found a significant relationship between them.

Suzana and Kasim (2010) reported a positive, significant relationship between knowledge management and the performance of government departments in their study in Malaysia.

Ward (2006) examined the application of management knowledge in supporting executive decision-makers in a military environment and found that knowledge management initiatives do not manage knowledge directly.

Ingi (2003) studied knowledge management and creative human resource development and revealed that knowledge sharing, knowledge reuse, and benefits systems were the decisive factors affecting human resource development.

Thus, given the fact that Ilam Province possesses features appropriate for the development of agriculture sector – in terms of regional capacities – and that human resource empowerment can play an undeniable role in the development of agriculture in this province, the present study aims at examining the role of knowledge management in the empowerment of experts in Jahad-e Agriculture Organization of Ilam County.

MATERIALS AND METHODS

The present study is an applied, descriptive-correlation study aimed at determining the role of knowledge management in the empowerment of experts in Jahad-e Agriculture Organization in Ilam County, Iran. The statistical population was composed of all people having expertise or higher organizational position in the target organization that totaled 150 people. They were studied by consensus method. Data were collected by a self-designed questionnaire including closed-end items at Likert scale (1=very low, 2=low, 3=fairly, 4=high, 5=very high). The face and content validity of the questionnaire was confirmed by a panel of experts, and its reliability was estimated to be 0.89 by Cronbach's alpha. Research variables were in two categories of independent and dependent. Dependent variable was people's empowerment including the levels of self-effectiveness (with five items), self-autonomy (with seven items), work power (with seven items), meaningfulness (with five items), status (with five items), decision-making (with five items), personal acceptance of results (with five items), professional growth (with five items), and confidence (with five items). The independent variable was knowledge management with four aspects: knowledge generation (with five items), knowledge organization (with six items), knowledge exchange (with seven items), and knowledge application (with five items). Data were described by descriptive statistics (frequency, percentage, mean, standard deviation, and coefficient of variations) and were analyzed by inferential statistics (Spearman test and multiple regression analysis) using $SPSS_{20}$.

RESULTS

Descriptive statistics

The studied sample was composed of participants in the age range of 23-55 years, of which 43.8% were in the age category of 41-50 years. The participants mostly had bachelor's degree, most of which (53.8%) in agriculture-related disciplines. 77.7% of participants were male.

Table 1
Frequency Distribution of Statistical Sample in Terms of Their Personal and Profession Characteristics

Variable	Category	Frequency	Percentage
Age (year)	20-30	21	16.2
	31-40	44	33.8
	41-50	57	43.8
	>50	8	6.2
Education level	Diploma and associate degree	15	11.5
	B.Sc.	59	45.4
	M.Sc.	48	36.9
	Ph.D.	8	6.2
Field of study	Agriculture	70	53.8
	Non-agriculture	60	46.2
Gender	Male	101	77.7
	Female	29	23.3
Work experience (year)	1-10	41	31.5
	11-20	32	24.6
	>20	57	43.9
Organizational position	Expert	103	79.2
	Manager	16	12.3
	Office supervisor	11	8.5
Number of training courses	1-5	19	14.6
	6-10	15	11.5
	11-15	7	5.4
	16-20	15	11.5
	>20	74	56.9

43.9% had job experience of over 20 years, mostly in an expertise-related organizational position. 56.9% of participants had attended in over 20 training courses (Table 1).

Ranking of items related to knowledge management aspects

According to the ranking of the items related to knowledge management aspects in terms, the items "the employees of this organization mostly tend to describe organization issues to others with the help of objective analogies" and "the employees in this organization attempt to learn one another' experiences that are based on thought, beliefs and information" were ranked as the most and least important items as compared to other items related to knowledge application aspect. With respect to knowledge exchange, the item "the employees in this organization are motivated to use network and web (information technology) to do their job" was ranked as the most important item, and the item "the employees in this organization tend to share their personal information with each other" was ranked at the lowest importance level. Among items related to knowledge organization, "the employees in this organization use their personal experiences for understanding new concepts and comparing them with their experiences" and "in this organization, the ideas are discussed and the results are organized in formal meetings" were ranked as the most and least important items. In knowledge generation aspect, "the employees in this organization tend to use examples and simulations to help the understanding of subjective and ambiguous concepts in the training of others" and "development and entrepreneurship are emphasized in this organization" were ranked as the most and least important items (Table 2).

According to mean scores, "belief in capability to do job and tasks" was rated in the highest rank of importance to self-effectiveness of experts. The items "commitment for doing job was ranked as the most related to self-autonomy. Among items related to personal acceptance level, "enough knowledge and skills for doing jobs was ranked as the most important item, respectively, and among those related to meaningfulness, "precision in doing jobs and activities" was ranked as the most important. Respondents

Table 2
Ranking of Items Related to Knowledge Management Aspects

Aspect	Item	SD	Rank mean
Knowledge application	The employees of this organization mostly tend to describe organization issues to others with the help of objective analogies.	0.863	3.19
	People are motivated in this organization to exchange their ideas and beliefs about their profession and job.	0.984	3.15
	Morale, cooperation, collaboration and improvement are emphasized in this organization.	1.115	3.06
	The employees in this organization attempt to learn one another' experiences that are based on thought, beliefs and information.	1.041	3.01
Knowledge exchange	The employees in this organization are motivated to use network and web (information technology) to do their job.	1.055	3.23
	In this organization, knowledge exchange with others helps works to be done better	1.104	3.11
	In this organization, intra-organizational networks are used for information sharing and exchange.	1.074	3.03
	In this organization, sharing work-related personal knowledge is a part of people's duties.	1.003	3.00
	In this organization, people are encouraged to share their professional knowledge with newcomers.	1.034	3.00
	The people in this organization cooperate with others having different expertise via research teams.	1.113	3.00
Knowledge organization	The employees in this organization tend to share their personal information with each other.	1.093	2.85
	The employees in this organization use their personal experiences for understanding new concepts and compare them with their experiences.	1.049	3.31
	In this organization, information is clearly organized to support decision-making.	1.059	3.13
	In this organization, the vital regulations and standards are recognized and well-stored.	1.127	3.12
	The obtained results are officially registered and documented in this organization.	1.150	3.09
	In this organization, the summary of experiences and stuff taught to relevant managers are documented in written form.	1.111	2.92
Knowledge generation	The employees in this organization tend to use examples and simulations to help the understanding of subjective and ambiguous concepts in the training of others.	0.949	3.19
	Creativity and novel ideas are regarded invaluable in this organization.	1.229	3.09
	In this organization, people often share their perceptions of issues to other	1.083	3.06
	people in expertise and technical frameworks (e.g. reports, papers, technical	1.048	2.96
	workshops, etc.).		
	In this organization, people tend to recognize targets by objective examples.	1.161	2.87
	Development and entrepreneurship are emphasized in this organization.		

showed that they believe "participation in critical decision-making in organization" was the most important items among those related to confidence, respectively. The most important item among those related to professional growth was found to be "Making opportunities for life-long learning". Among items asking about work power, "Capability to do own tasks" was, ranked as the most important the most important items among those related to decision-making was found to be "Expressing interest to others" respectively. (Table 3).

Inferential statistics

Results of Spearman test of correlation between independent and relevant dependent variables are summarized in Table 4. The variables of knowledge generation, exchange, application, and management were positively and significantly related to people's abilities, but there was no significant relationship between knowledge organization and people's abilities.

Regression analysis

Stepwise multiple regression test was used to

Table 3
Ranking of Items Related to Factors Affecting People' Empowerment levels

Aspect	Item	SD	Rank mean
Self-effectiveness	Belief in capability to do job and tasks	0.892	3.96
	Competence required to do tasks successfully	0.799	3.71
	Finding a way to face new challenges	0.916	3.71
	Coping with obstacles of doing jobs in organization	0.898	3.55
Self-autonomy	Commitment for doing job	0.97	3.93
	Accepting the responsibility for doing job	0.926	3.86
	Rapid initiation of works	0.97	3.73
	Controlling self-working space	0.95	3.71
	Full freedom of action in decision-making	0.994	3.36
	Right to choose methods and rate of doing jobs	0.076	3.34
	Having options in organization	1.126	2.95
Personal acceptance of consequences	Enough knowledge and skills for doing jobs	0.911	3.76
	Personal control on consequences of work	1.362	3.62
	Ability to make optimum changes	0.933	3.46
	Making effective changes in organization	1.061	3.19
Meaningfulness	Orienting organization with own desires	2.051	3.15
	Precision in doing jobs and activities	0.955	3.9
	Significance of job	1.078	3.87
	Belief in own activities in organization	0.962	3.79
	Worthiness of professional objectives and activities	1.028	3.52
	Influence on organization activities	0.97	3.23
Confidence	Participation in critical decision-making in organization	1.25	2.83
	Getting people's maximum participation in organizational decision-making	1.34	2.68
	Decision-making for enhancing organizational performance (outcome)	1.33	2.62
	Participation in budging and planning in organization	1.22	255
	Participation in people's selection and assignment	1.26	2.3
	Making opportunities for life-long learning	0.99	3.66
	Life-long development of knowledge and skills	0.93	3.625
Professional growth	Paving the way for professional growth and development	1.10	3.55
	Life-long self-learning	1.04	3.53
	Making opportunities for self-growth and development	1.06	3.52
Status	Coworkers professional respect for you	0.09	3.74
	Other respect for own knowledge and experiences	0.93	3.69
	Admiration by coworkers	1.05	3.56
	Increased support by others	1.06	3.39
	Promotion	1.17	3.23
Work power	Capability to do own tasks	1.01	3.89
	Accountability to clients	0.06	3.88
	Appropriate manual dexterity	0.99	3.82
	Ability to recognize work problems and attempts to solve them	.095	3.81
	Doing jobs with creativity and novel methods	0.99	3.7
	Adequate self-confidence	1.08	3.78
	Doing jobs as a team	1.02	3.54
Decision-making	Expressing interest to others	1.07	3.96
	Creating the morale of flexibility and honesty	0.98	3.93
	Growing cooperation and risk-taking of organization	1.07	3.96
	Interest to learning and self-organization	1.07	3.82
	Researching and studying morale	1.1	3.74

Table 4
Results of Correlation Coefficients between Research Variables of People's Empowerment

First variable	r	p-value
Knowledge generation	0.225*	0.010
Knowledge organization	0.168	0.056
Knowledge exchange	0.228**	0.009
Knowledge application	0.230**	0.007
Knowledge management	0.207*	0.018

** p < 0.01 and * p < 0.05.

Table 5
Coefficients of Variables Regression Equation included in

Variable	B	S.E.	Beta	t	p-value
Knowledge exchange	0.21	0.04	0.47	5.68	0.004
Knowledge generation	0.96	0.003	0.32	3.80	0.000
Number of training courses	0.38	0.12	0.25	3.04	0.003
Constants	3.52	0.96	-	-	-

$R = 0.65$; $R^2 = 0.42$, R^2 adjusted = 0.40; $F = 20.96$; $p<0.01$

analyze the role of knowledge management in Jahad-e Agriculture experts' empowerment in Ilam County and to determine the potential of independent variables in predicting dependent variable. All variables whose correlation with dependent variable was found to be significant were included in regression model. The regression model was stopped at third step. Multiple correlation coefficient, coefficient of determination, and modified coefficient of determination were found to be 0.65, 0.42, and 0.40, respectively. The F-value (58.345) at significance level of 0.01 shows that the model variables well accounted for the variations of dependent variable. Non-standardized beta coefficients revealed positive, significant relationship of knowledge exchange, knowledge generation, and number of training courses with dependent variable, i.e. people's empowerment, at the 0.99 confidence level. Standardized coefficients showed that knowledge exchange had the highest influence on determining total variance (Table 5).

DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Results showed significant relationship between the main variable of the study, i.e. knowledge management, and experts' empowerment, which is in agreement with Hassanzadeh et al. (2014), Rezaei et al. (2014) and Robin (2011). Also, it was found that knowledge application, generation and exchange were significantly related to experts' empowerment, which is consistent with what reported by Ingi (2003).

There was no significant relationship between knowledge management organization and experts' empowerment. It implies that the more the experts upgrade and improve their knowledge management, especially in knowledge generation, exchange and application, the more empowered they will be in their jobs. In other words, if these aspects of knowledge management are soundly planned, improvements can be expected in experts' capabilities. This finding is in disagreement with Robin (2011).

Also, no significant relationship was found between knowledge organization and experts' empowerment. Since knowledge management in general and experts' empowerment were significantly related, this finding may show experts' weak capability in organizing knowledge. In other words, experts should work more on organizing knowledge to be more capable in doing their jobs.

According to the findings of multiple regression,

the variables of knowledge exchange, knowledge generation and the number of training courses had significant impact on experts' empowerment, which is in agreement with Shahpasand and Bagheri (2011).

According to the results of the study, it can be recommended

• to design technical on-the-job training courses as per requirements, especially in the field of knowledge management, by personnel training department of Jahad-e Agriculture Organization,

• to hold joint workshops between provinces, and even in collaboration with foreign research centers, for knowledge exchange, and

• To use competent professors in designing curriculums of scientific courses in accordance with personnel's needs assessment.

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