ESTABLISHING A KNOWLEDGE CULTURE IN THE CIVIL SERVICE

By

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ABSTRACT

The writer discussed the necessity to establish a culture of knowledge in the Malaysian Civil Service. However, with the increasing sophistication of demands and expectations of an informed and knowledgeable society as well as in line with the objectives of vision 2020, it is clear that a knowledge culture in the Civil Service is imperative rather than a necessity.

INTRODUCTION

In his much-acclaimed book Megatrends, Naisbit (1992) propagated the following notions about the information society:-

• The information society was an economic reality;
• Communications and computer technologies will revolutionize the way we produce our goods and services, and the way we conduct our trade and businesses, domestically and with our foreign partners; and
• Information society is a literate society, a knowledgeable society, and hence the paramount importance of knowledge, ideas, concepts and thoughts.

The rapid development in information technology and globalisation over the last two decades has become so pervasive and extensive, that its impact is felt not only in regions and countries all over the world but also in institutions and individual homes. The immediacy and extensiveness of electronic communication is rapidly and surely transforming the world into the proverbial 'global village'.

In Malaysia the government has made a bold move to meet the challenges of this phenomena heads on by introducing the highly ambitious and awe inspiring Multimedia Supercorridor (MSC) Project with its seven flagship applications, including the Electronic Government. Despite the economic downturn, the government is fully committed to ensuring the success of this project under the stewardship of the Multimedia Development Corporation (MDC). With the shift of the administrative capital from Kuala Lumpur to Putrajaya located within the heart of the designated Supercorridor area, the Malaysian Civil Service is poised for its transformation into a 'high-tech paperless administration' with global access to information and potentially high capability for managing the 'information explosion' and creation of knowledge. Well in keeping with global trends, the MDC itself has already forecasted the need for knowledge workers albeit IT biased, for Malaysia. Two of the MSC flagship applications projects, Smart Schools and Multimedia University will be among the potential suppliers. In this prevailing and impending circumstances, it is perhaps more appropriate to ask not if it is necessary to establish a knowledge culture in the Civil Service but can we afford not to acculturate knowledge in the Civil Service?

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KNOWLEDGE CULTURE

To conceptualise a knowledge culture, it is necessary to differentiate the meaning of ‘data’, information and ‘knowledge’. Although related, data, information and knowledge are not interchangeable. Knowledge is derived from information as information is derived from data. Data can be described as a set of discrete, objective facts about events which are important to organisations, largely because it is essential raw material for the creation of information. Information is a message usually in the form of a document or an audible or visible communication. Unlike data, information has meaning, relevance and purpose. Data is transformed into information in various ways, all of which require human input but which can easily be assisted by computers. For information to become knowledge, humans must virtually do all the work in the transformation processes. These include making comparisons with previous knowledge or experience, connections with related applications, rationalising implications or consequences of information on decisions and actions and clarifying what other people think about that information. These processes illustrate the importance of human input in creating knowledge. Knowledge creating activities take place within and between humans. While data is found in records or transactions, and information in messages, knowledge is obtained from individuals or group of knowers, or sometimes in organizational routines. It is delivered through structured media such as books and documents, and person to person contacts ranging from conversations and discussions to various forms of apprenticeship.

Culture is a particular form, stage or type of intellectual development or civilization. It reflects the way of life or way of doing things in a particular group or society. The acculturation of a particular form of type of intellectual development such as knowledge, involves the acceptance, adherence, practice and internalisation of knowledge values of a particular group or organisation by its members.

A knowledge culture would entail its actors in actively acquiring, creating, managing, structuring, documenting, sharing and disseminating knowledge as part of everyday practice or routines, and as an integral part of the organisations processes. The environment in the organisation also create opportunities and are conducive for the above activities to take place and for individuals to continually build up expertise through added information and knowledge, to search for new ideas and ways to improve organisational products and services. In a knowledge culture too, contributions to organisational knowledge are appreciated and encouraged and is an integral part of the reward system. The meaning and characteristics of knowledge must be clearly understood, so as to be able to conceptualize policy, set objectives and send out clear messages of what is expected to be achieved from knowledge creation and management.

To a lesser greater extent, there already exists in the Civil Service many of the activities strongly resembling those that one envisage in a knowledge culture. National policies and reform efforts have brought about an awareness of the importance of reading and information which to some extent has been translated into programmes and activities such as the setting up of libraries and information centres in government departments and creation of professional posts to manage these libraries. There has also been an increase in publishing activities among civil servants and activities which create learning opportunities and avenues for exchange of information such as talks, seminars and forums and training courses. The creation of home pages and websites by government also improved speedy access to information, although some failed to realise the need to update this information. More and more civil servants are becoming familiar with navigating information on the internet and using electronic mail for communication.

However, it would be misleading to construe these developments as the existence of a knowledge culture in the Civil Service. Practically all of these efforts are government or agency driven and are implemented as long as there is stringent monitoring by central agencies. Once monitoring eases up or discontinues many fail to sustain these efforts and they die a natural death when new policies or reform efforts are introduced. Despite years of reading promotion campaigns, most civil servants find reading a chore and few habitually read to improve their work performance or widen knowledge about their work.
Creation of knowledge bases are few and not well-planned and information sharing is minimal even among peers, except among personal contacts or friends. The acculturation of knowledge among has begun but needs to be reinforced and developed into and accepted and sustainable way of life among the critical mass of civil servants.

**CHALLENGES FACING THE CIVIL SERVICE IN A KNOWLEDGE SOCIETY**

The Malaysian Civil Service of all departments and agencies in the conduct and administration of all matters relating to the Government at the Federal and State level. It has the biggest number of employees estimated at around 600,000 (excluding the armed forces). Essentially, the Civil Service is responsible for the well being of the people and to interpret and implement laws and policies to facilitate economic growth and create an environment which will contribute to peace and national unity.

Due to the multitude of functions and wide ranging scope of Civil Service activities, it is not surprising that government agencies build up information and knowledge bases on an extensive range of subjects. In the national information and knowledge infrastructure for example, the Civil Service would account for a considerable portion of the knowledge-based institutions including R&D Institutions, libraries, museum, broadcasting and television, government departments and institutions of higher education and training institutions. These knowledge bases need to be managed, structured and developed in order to facilitate access and retrieval of information for knowledge creation, sharing and dissemination.

There has been dramatic changes in the way the Civil Service operates in the last three decades. These changes include the type of clients, workers, the private sector, information systems and use of technology. Civil Service clients have become better educated and more sophisticated and have therefore higher expectations of quality, efficiency and effectiveness of public services. They have more aware of their rights to the provision of fair and reasonable services from government agencies. They need fast and accurate information on the requirements and conditions which need to be fulfilled to obtain a particular service including the time frame needed to fulfil these requirements and conditions. The challenge of the Civil Service is to provide the information required in the time that information is needed. In the Civil Service, the management of information resources is becoming increasingly challenging particularly with the information explosion and the introduction of Electronic-Government. This project is aimed at establishing a fully computerised and networked public service. Civil servants will have to be equipped with the necessary skills and competencies in managing information electronically. The implementation of the Electronic Government will provide the impetus for the establishment of a knowledge culture and the creation of knowledge workers in public sector organisations.

Existing knowledge bases in the Civil Service at present constitute its most valuable assets which needs to be structured, managed and developed. To some extent there already exist an awareness of the need to structure knowledge bases in priority or job-related areas to facilitate retrieval. But more often than not, the importance of structuring knowledge is overlooked at the planning and even implementation stages. It becomes an issue when the knowledge base becomes too big for information to be retrieved quickly without search aids or guides. A knowledge culture in the Civil Service is necessary to ensure the correct approach to creating knowledge bases and retrieving its contents and sharing of this knowledge to assist and improve decision and policy making.

Another challenge facing the Civil Service is the rise of the technocrat politicians, who are highly qualified and technologically literate or competent. With enduring political stability in Malaysia, politicians have an increasingly longer tenure in office, sometimes even much longer than civil servants. This reversal of previous patterns create a situation where politicians will in some instances be more knowledgeable than civil servants about matters relating to their particular portfolio, having been in office in some cases more than a decade. If this situation becomes the norm, it may well render civil servants redundant or reduced to being told what to do and worse, even how to do...
their jobs. The civil service needs to address this emerging scenario to ensure its continued relevance and importance of its role in the administration of government. An obvious strategy and pre-requisite is to ensure that the civil servant knows his or her job better than anyone else, which means being knowledgeable, continually look for ways and means to improve work performance including benchmarking, and able to contribute to knowledge in job-related areas and to organizational knowledge.

**RECOMMENDATIONS**

To establish a culture knowledge in the Civil Service, the following measures are recommended:

- There must be a national policy objective to inculcate a knowledge values and culture in all levels of society from kindergarten, in homes and at the workplace. People must be taught to appreciate the importance of knowledge and being knowledgeable and to be able to contribute to knowledge in all aspects of life but more particularly in national priority areas. This policy should be aimed at achieving the objectives of Vision 2020 as an extension of the concept of an informed and information-rich society. As a start, it should be spelt out in the 8th Malaysian Plan policy objectives.

- There must be recognition for the need to create knowledge workers in the Civil Service. Knowledge workers in the context of the Civil Service need to be defined. In the interim period, the MDC definition which includes those with IT qualification and experience as well as those with higher degrees in any discipline, may be applied. The important thing is to ensure that their tasks and role are clearly defined and that there are the necessary motivation and incentives built into the reward system, infrastructure support and a conducive environment in the workplace. Clarity of purpose and objectives by top management in defining the organisation’s knowledge policy is essential.

- The national human resource development policy should incorporate programmes and policies for the creation of knowledge workers, including the transformation of existing potential resources within the Civil Service organisations through training and retraining and other change processes. National training institutions such as INTAN and Institute Aminuddin Baki for example, as well as training departments within the organisation all have to play their role to propagate knowledge values and practices.

- Existing knowledge bases in Civil Service organisations must be properly managed and structured to facilitate access and retrieval by the entire civil service and in this way enable sharing and maximum utilisation for decision and policy making in government as well as for the creation of knowledge. Towards this end there must be trained and qualified personnel in every government department to manage and structure information and knowledge databases.

**CONCLUSION**

The inculcation of knowledge values and culture in the Civil Service is essential to enable it to respond to customer needs and increasing expectations for public services, to harness the existing knowledge bases and facilitate and maximise its utilisation, ensure the continued relevance and importance of the role of the Civil Service in government and to fully realise the objectives of Electronic Government and Vision 2020. These efforts has to be part of a national policy objective to inculcate knowledge values among all levels of Malaysian society in line with efforts to create a reading and knowledgeable society as well as an information-rich society. The acculturation of a knowledge culture in the Civil Service thus becomes imperative rather than a question of necessity in order for it to be an effective facilitator of this social transformation.
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