

# THE PROCESS OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT UNITS

**Malgorzata Kuraś, Piotr Kuraś**  
Czestochowa University of Technology  
Faculty of Management  
Poland

## Abstract

*Satisfying the needs of citizens is the basic task of the units functioning in the sector of public administration. The expectations concerning quality, effectiveness and efficiency referring to satisfying these needs are constantly increasing. These units are to face the necessity to make changes in the way of their functioning. The paper refers to the issues concerning knowledge management in the units of public administration as the concept allowing for the improvement in the efficiency of their functioning.*

*In the first part of the paper there are presented the selected definitions of knowledge management and the benefits brought about due to the implementation of this concept in public administration. There are also presented the difficulties created by the specificity of the discussed sector. In the following part of the paper, there is characterized one of the basic elements of knowledge management which the process of sharing knowledge and its spreading is. There are indicated the barriers to the development of this process appearing in the units of public administration. The final part of the paper includes the results of the survey concerning the barriers to knowledge sharing in the units of public administration and the conclusions coming from the conducted research.*

**Keywords:** knowledge management, knowledge sharing, barriers to knowledge sharing, public administration, local government.

## Introduction

Knowledge management is a relatively young discipline but the rapidly developing one. It is acknowledged as the most innovative, creative and the most significant management concept which appeared more than a quarter of a century ago. A multitude of discussions held in the field of knowledge management undoubtedly proves its significant role for the development and operation of business entities. However, this issue is discussed relatively rarely with regard to local government units. In these units, knowledge management takes on a special meaning in the context of improving the effectiveness of accurate decision-making, proper planning, improving performance or optimizing the operation time.

One of the key elements of knowledge management is the process of sharing knowledge and its dissemination among the members of an organization. It is particularly important from the point of view of creating organizational knowledge. However, the transfer of knowledge frequently poses a serious problem in organizations. The main reason is psychological barriers and constraints associated with organizational culture.

The aim of the paper is the analysis of the process of knowledge sharing in local government units taking particularly into account the factors hindering this process. The paper includes the research results concerning knowledge sharing in the surveyed companies. The research data come from the survey conducted among the employees of municipalities in the area of the Silesian Voivodeship.

## Knowledge management in the units of public administration

Knowledge management is an ambiguous term which is interpreted in many different ways. For Skyrme, knowledge management is the specific and systematic management of knowledge, which is significant for the organization, and the related processes of creation, storage, organization, diffusion and operation, developed to achieve the objectives of the organization (Skyrme, 1999, p. 39). Similarly, K. Wiig (defines knowledge management as the systematic, clearly specified, intentionally developed and repeated application of knowledge to maximize the effectiveness of the enterprise and to achieve the revenue from the possessed knowledge resources (Pavesi, 2003, p. 37). Also, the practitioners make attempts to define the term of knowledge management. Among them, the most numerous group is consulting companies which, in their activities, most of all, refer to using knowledge as the main source of competitive advantage.

For example, one of the leading consulting companies, PricewaterhouseCoopers, defines knowledge management as a kind of art (capability) of processing information and intellectual assets into the lasting value both for the clients and employees of the specific organization. On the other hand, according to BearingPoint Inc., being one of the largest consulting companies in Europe in the field of management and modern technologies, knowledge management is the systematic and organized attempt to use knowledge inside the organization to process the capabilities of its storage and use of knowledge into market effects (Klak, 2010, p. 21).

While regarding knowledge management in the process-based approach, there can be distinguished, depending on the specific concept, a different amount of processes. T. Davenport and L. Prusak, in their model, distinguished three basic processes: creation, codification and transfer of knowledge (Skrzypek, 2003, p. 399). Also, three processes of knowledge management are proposed by M. Sarvay who, in his concept, distinguishes the process of organizational learning, knowledge production and knowledge distribution (Mikuła, Pietruszka-Ortyl, Potocki, 2002, p. 73; Lemańska-Majdzik, Tomski, Kuraś, 2014). In turn, D.J. Skyrme identifies the processes of creation, storage, organization, diffusion and operation of knowledge (Skyrme, 1999, p. 39). All of the presented concepts, irrespective of the amount of the specified processes, emphasize the significance of the creation and use of knowledge and its dissemination. These processes occur in each of them although they are called differently by their creators. Therefore, they constitute the foundation for knowledge management and they play a decisive role in the enterprise development.

Generally, knowledge management is commonly believed to be very important for the development of different types of business units. On the other hand, there is relatively little concern for this problem with reference to the units of the public sector, and the organizations functioning in the framework of broadly understood public administration are, like business units, the organizations based on knowledge. The efficiency of their functioning in the field of holding the public mission depends on the effectiveness of storing, processing and transferring specific information and knowledge both to external stakeholders (clients of institutions, supervisory authorities, cooperating units) and employees of the specific unit. It is obvious that the grounds for and the benefits from knowledge management in business entities are different from the ones appearing in the units of public administration. In the other ones, the effect of good knowledge management should be an increase in the efficiency of operation of offices by means of an increase in the effectiveness of good decision-making, appropriate planning, increasing performance or optimizing the operation time. Potential benefits coming from the implementation of knowledge management in the units of the public sector are presented in Table 1.

**Table 1. Benefits from knowledge management in public institutions**

Benefits from knowledge management	Internal benefits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Improvement in the quality of the operation of public institutions in the dimension of: economy, efficiency, responsiveness, transparency, accountability;</li> <li>2. Strengthening the ethos of public service;</li> <li>3. Change in the organizational culture of public institutions</li> </ol>
	External benefits	<ol style="list-style-type: none"> <li>1. Strengthening the capability of the State to control development processes and increasing its capabilities to affect the decisions taken internationally;</li> <li>2. Creating space for social and economic projects of the citizens and their unions;</li> <li>3. Reducing transactional costs of economic and social projects;</li> <li>4. Creating the conditions for an increase in competitiveness and innovativeness of the economy;</li> <li>5. An increase in social and economic and spatial cohesion of the State;</li> <li>6. Creating and developing accurately addressed policies and public programs;</li> <li>7. Improving the quality of public services;</li> <li>8. Increasing trust for public institutions;</li> <li>9. Participating co-governing based on the principles of partnership, autonomy and subsidiarity.</li> </ol>

Source: Mazur, 2008, p. 56.

In spite of, undoubtedly, many benefits coming from the implementation of knowledge management in the discussed units, it is not an easy task to implement since it requires the creation of the system of knowledge management infrastructure whose aim would be to strengthen human, cultural and technological capital, being the basis for the systems open to knowledge (Mazur, 2008, p. 51).

The specificity of the discussed units creates the difficulty, which impedes the optimization of the undertaken activities in the field of knowledge management. Most of all, these organizations are characterized by rigid organizational structure, dominated by hierarchical dependencies, discouraging employees from conceptual work (particularly the ones of the lower level). Bureaucracy functioning in the units of the public sector brings about the routine performance of activities and impedes the adjustment to the complex environment, requiring great flexibility (Możdżeń, 2011). The problem is also the process of cultural changes in the organizations of public administration. These changes are characterized by low dynamics resulting from conservatism of these units, their inclination and capability to defend the existing condition of their functioning (Mazur, 2008, p. 52). Another issue impeding the implementation of changes and provision of their continuity is the temporality of holding managerial posts resulting from the periodicity of local elections or parliamentary elections. The change of the head of the unit results not only in the personal or professional issues but also some specific political preferences.

In spite of many difficulties and reluctance resulting from the conservative approach to changes in the units of public administration, creating resources of knowledge and its effective use slowly becomes the necessity, also for this type of units. It is the requirement of both the international and domestic environment. The example can be the international pressure on the implementation of the solutions in the field of e-government to facilitate the communication between the citizens and bodies of the State. In turn, aiming at the effective use of public funds in individual states enforces the necessity to increase the performance and efficiency of the activities in the field of services provided by these units. Finally, the growing awareness of stakeholders as to their rights and requirements towards the institutions of public administration, affects the necessity to expand the knowledge of clerks and to increase the proficiency in dealing with citizens' affairs.

### **Problems of knowledge sharing in local government units**

In the context of knowledge management, the issue of sharing knowledge constitutes one of the key elements of this process. It is the phenomenon taking place through interactions between people with the help of different communication channels. Generally, it is assumed that the process of knowledge sharing has positive impact both on the organization itself and the people employed there. From the point of view of the employee, among the benefits of gaining new knowledge it is possible to indicate, e.g. the possibility of solving problems which could not be explained before, faster and/or better implementation of tasks or satisfaction with the possessed knowledge. This influences an increase in employees' motivation and self-esteem. In turn, the person transferring knowledge finds recognition and prestige among other members of the organization. They may also take pleasure in contributing to its development and expect to be given the financial or non-financial reward for undertaking activities connected with knowledge sharing (Rudawska, 2013, p. 98).

On the other hand, among the effects of the process of sharing knowledge, for the organization itself, there can be listed: improvement in the cooperation between individual departments, mutual learning, development of the existing resources of organizational knowledge or stimulating the creation of new ideas (Zhou & Li, 2012, p. 1091). However, the proper functioning of the process of knowledge sharing appears to be a real problem for many organizations. Inappropriate organizational culture and wrong management of human resources may be the reason of unwillingness of employees to share knowledge.

Effective knowledge sharing, most of all, involves the change in the mentality of employees and creating the favorable atmosphere enabling the free flow of knowledge in an organization (Suchodolski, 2015, p. 183). In case of the units of public administration, it is much more difficult task to perform than in case of business units. The centralized and hierarchical structure, occurring in these units, is characterized by cultural conservatism determined by the system of stimuli discouraging from any innovative activities. Rewarding the behavior oriented towards following the procedure and not achieving the result or solving the problem, do not positively influence the willingness to acquire new knowledge and share it with co-workers (Mazur, 2008, p.p. 63-64). Organizational culture in offices and different public institutions is, therefore, favorable for accumulating knowledge at the individual level. There is lack of knowledge, capabilities, habits and incentives for team work. Unwillingness of office workers to share knowledge can be also connected with the fear of loss of employment. They regard possessing knowledge as the source of advantage over other employees and, at the same time, providing themselves with guaranteed workplaces. Therefore, in the units of public administration, a lot of attention should be drawn to creating such organizational culture which would be based on team work and mutual trust between employees. However, it should be remembered that the units of public administration, on account of the specificity of their activity, possess less autonomy and control in the field of the decision-making process and management of human resources than it happens in case of business units. This constitutes an additional barrier to building good atmosphere for knowledge sharing.

The stimulator for knowledge sharing is, undoubtedly, the appropriate system of rewarding employees for undertaking activities in this field. These may be all kinds of financial and non-financial encouragement, awareness of self-fulfillment and recognition of the role of an employee in the enterprise, awareness of usefulness of knowledge as well as creating positive image of those sharing knowledge.

In the era of fast development of modern technologies there must be mentioned the opportunities created by them to increase the effectiveness of knowledge sharing. The application of modern IT networks, allowing for the access to data, enabling dialogue, creating knowledge bases and using expert systems is an indispensable element of the efficient course of the discussed process.

### Discussing the authors' research results

To identify and establish the barriers to knowledge sharing in the units of public administration, the authors of the paper conducted the survey among the randomly selected local government units. The research was carried out in February and March 2015 in 10 municipal offices in the area of the Silesian Voivodeship.<sup>1</sup> The questionnaire was filled in by 170 people, which amounts to 42% of all the employees of the municipalities being the subject to the research.

The first part of the research aimed at establishing if and to what extent there are barriers to knowledge sharing in the municipalities at the individual level. As it has been indicated in the previous considerations, it is a very important element of this process since this is the unit that decide on whether the acquired knowledge will be disclosed and transferred. The summary of the research results is presented in Table 2.

Table 2. The barriers to knowledge sharing in the surveyed municipalities at the individual level

Specification	Share %
Lack of time to transfer knowledge to other employees	<b>68</b>
Fear of making a mistake	<b>51</b>
Poor written and oral communication; no interpersonal skills	36
Lack of social/informal ties among employees	42
Lack of trust for others	45
Lack of trust/conviction as to own abilities	16
Lack of trust for knowledge coming from an unknown and untested source	<b>72</b>
Ignorance of employees as to who is in possession of the information they search for	40
Ignorance of employees as to the fact that their experience can be useful for others.	36
Aversion to outstanding employees among the others	36
Fear of the threat of job loss (fear that knowledge sharing (loss of expertise) will cause that the employee will be no longer irreplaceable)	45

Source: Authors' own study.

As the results in Table 2 indicate, the respondents identified the lack of trust for knowledge coming from unknown and untested source as the major barrier to knowledge sharing. The occurrence of this factor was indicated by as much as 72% of the respondents. On the one hand, the positive phenomenon is not using or spreading knowledge which is not confirmed. However, on the other, the organization should make sure that employees have no doubt as to the credibility of the sources of knowledge they use since this brings about significant objections concerning its transfer to others. Another factor significantly limiting the process of knowledge sharing is lack of time for its transfer (68%). Possibly, it is connected with the excessive burden on employees, which results from reduction in the number of posts in public administration. It may also be the result of inappropriate personnel policy or poor organization and low performance. Relatively high percentage of the respondents indicated that they do not share knowledge since they are afraid of making a mistake (51%), they do not trust others (45%) they fear of losing a job (45%).

<sup>1</sup> The research is the pilot study in nature .

Lack of trust for others can be a derivative of lack of informal ties among employees, which was indicated by 42% of the respondents, though it would seem that the share of this factor should be lower in smaller communities.<sup>2</sup> On the other hand, the minor barrier to knowledge sharing is lack of trust or conviction of employees as to their own capabilities. This factor was indicated by only 16% of the respondents.

Another part of the study referred to the barriers at the organizational level, i.e. the area connected with creating friendly atmosphere for knowledge sharing. In this case, as many as five out of eleven suggested factors constituted the barrier to knowledge sharing at the level of more than 60%. The summary of the results of this part of the study is presented in Table 3.

Table 3. The barriers to knowledge sharing at the organizational level.

Specification	Share %
Lack of financial and non-financial system of rewarding the efforts connected with knowledge sharing	<b>74</b>
Insufficient motivation on the side of superiors to share knowledge	<b>65</b>
Lack of formal space to share knowledge (e.g. the conditions to hold meetings, training)	49
Lack of informal space to share knowledge (e.g. place to have meals together during breaks)	<b>67</b>
Transfer of knowledge and communication is limited only to one direction (top down)	45
Hierarchized organizational structure	57
Internal competition between individual units (divisions, departments)	35
Communication only within departments/divisions	53
Promoting the results of the unit and its knowledge over sharing and experiences	38
Lack of organization of internal training	<b>69</b>
Lack of work in teams consisting of employees of different levels and departments	<b>66</b>

Source: Authors' own study.

The major barrier to knowledge sharing at the organizational level is lack of the system of rewarding employees for the activities in this field. This barrier was indicated by as much as 74% of the respondents. A significant barrier is also insufficient motivation to share knowledge on the side of the superiors (65%). These results seem to confirm the scarcity of encouragement to spread knowledge applied by managers. As far as in the first case, this may be the result of the limited autonomy in this field (particularly, in case of financial rewards), appropriate motivating employees to share their knowledge results from individual characteristics of individual employees. At this point, there should be emphasized a positive note influencing the fact that employees are not particularly encouraged to accumulate the possessed knowledge. This is indicated by relatively low percentage of the respondents' answers for promoting the results of the unit and the knowledge possessed by it over sharing knowledge and own experiences (38%).

Hierarchized organizational structure, communication taking place only within divisions and departments and top down transfer of knowledge and communication are another group of barriers, which is a derivative of too centralized and hierarchical structure occurring in the surveyed entities. The major from among the listed ones is hierarchized organizational structure, which was indicated by 57% of the respondents.

A lot of respondents indicated lack of organization of internal training in the surveyed entities (69%), which significantly brings about knowledge dissemination in the organization and are a frequently applied method to exchange views in business units. This fact is slightly surprising since, on account of the variety and variability of different kinds of legal regulations and procedures, this method seems to be very helpful in acquiring knowledge essential for correct performance of tasks.

The answers of the respondents also confirm lack of team work habit. The existence of such a barrier was indicated by 66% of people. Such a work method is particularly important for knowledge sharing and is extremely valuable in case when teams are created by employees from different departments and functional areas of the organization. Unfortunately, it is used only marginally in the surveyed institutions.

<sup>2</sup> The number of workers employed in individual municipalities was in the range of 25-50 people. Such an amount brings about that practically all the employees know each other which, theoretically, should facilitate informal contacts.

While analyzing the obtained research results it is not possible not to refer to the issues of creating the sites in the offices where employees, most frequently in an informal way, can exchange the possessed knowledge. Lack of such space was indicated by as much as 67% of the respondents. While combining this result with the fact that, in the first part, lack of time to transfer knowledge to others was an important barrier, the existence of places of this type would allow for informal exchange of knowledge without additional involvement of time.

The last, third part of the study referred to the barriers to knowledge sharing at the technological level. The summary of the results is presented in Table 4.

Table 4. The barriers to knowledge sharing at the technological level

Specification	Share %
IT system unfriendly towards users	45
Insufficient training of employees in the field of the IT system maintenance	<b>59</b>
Lack of compatibility between IT systems and processes	51
Lack of connections in the IT system between individual departments	<b>55</b>

Source: Authors' own study.

In case of the factors in the area of supporting knowledge sharing by information technologies, the results are at the similar level and there are not as significant differences between them as in case of the first two research areas. The most frequent barrier is insufficient employee training in the field of maintenance of the existing IT system. To the knowledge of the authors, a frequent (confirmed) practice is professional training of only the selected group of employees whose task is to transfer the acquired knowledge to their colleagues or subordinates. Unfortunately, repeatedly in case of expertise, such "further transfer" does not bring about the expected results since employees themselves are not able to acquire new knowledge properly and, moreover, they do not have proficiency in educating others. The obtained result of 59% confirms the conclusions coming from the analysis of the second part of the study on the necessity to organize a larger amount of training in the surveyed institutions.

The problem of efficient transfer of information and finding it is the issue of lack of connections in the IT system between individual departments. This factor impeding the exchange of information was indicated by 55% of the respondents. The barrier in this respect is also the applied systems which are not fully compliant with the processes and operations developed in the specific institution (51%).

The least frequently occurring barrier in the analyzed area is, according to the respondents, the IT system, unfriendly towards the users (45%).

The obtained responses seem to confirm that the support by modern technologies, to be effective and useful for dissemination of information and knowledge in the organization, must be adequate to the processes developed in the specific area. The software should be characterized by small degree of complexity since it discourages employees from using this type of solutions. The authors believe that training concerning the maintenance should take place not only at the moment of the implementation of individual programs but also periodically, during their use, particularly in case of changes and improvements.

## Conclusions

Public administration, operating efficiently and successfully, changes the quality of life of the citizens of municipalities, districts, countries. Therefore, in spite of the fact that the units of public administration have no necessity to compete with each other for the benefit of their further functioning, they should aim at providing satisfaction concerning the contact with them to their stakeholders.

Transformations, taking place in the social reality, force the units of the public sector to make changes in the previous way of functioning. The community increasingly wants to participate in public decision-making, expects an increase in the efficiency and effectiveness of the performed activities and improvement in the quality of service. Adjusting to these requirements enforces the necessity to introduce innovation by the units of public administration, in the field of management of knowledge as the basic resource of these organizations.

The research results presented in the paper, conducted in local administration offices refer to the process of sharing knowledge and spreading it among employees. The presented results indicate that, in spite of the changes which take place in the framework of the activity of the analyzed entities, there are still a lot barriers causing difficulties in the transfer of knowledge in these organizations.

The analysis of the conducted studies indicate that the major barriers occur at the organizational level, particularly in the area of the system of rewarding of efforts connected with knowledge sharing and motivating employees to share their knowledge. A significant problem is also the issue of inflexible and hierarchized organizational structure and the related difficulties in communication and flow of knowledge between employees of different departments and managers. There is also lack of organization of internal training and team work.

In turn, in accordance with the indications of the respondents, the smallest number of barriers occur at the individual level. In here, the main barrier proved to be lack of trust for knowledge coming from the source which is not confirmed and lack of time for the transfer of knowledge to others. Also, the fear of making a mistake or losing a job prevents employees from knowledge sharing.

In the field of barriers to knowledge sharing occurring at the technological level, the major barrier refers to insufficient training of the IT system maintenance and lack of connections in the IT system between individual departments.

According to the authors, the occurrence of a larger number of barriers at the organizational level confirms the considerations discussed in the paper, concerning the difficulties of public administration in undertaking activities connected with building appropriate organizational culture favorable for knowledge sharing. Certainly, at the level of municipal offices it is difficult to discuss the opportunities for radical organizational solutions. As S. Mazur indicates, "... the activities undertaken in Polish public administration for the benefit of fuller integration in the decision-making processes need to be assessed, by all means, as positive. However, it should be noted that there are still no system settlements which would provide the conditions for the consolidation of the dispersed initiatives connected with knowledge management and their recognition in the framework of general solutions (both at the level of government and local government) (Mazur, 2008, p. 69)."

In turn, the indications of the respondents, concerning the barriers to knowledge sharing at the individual level prove that, in favorable conditions, with appropriate stimuli and recognizing the benefits, they are willing to share the possessed knowledge and their own experiences.

### ***Małgorzata Kuraś***

She was awarded Ph.D. in the field of management in 2010. Since then, she has been working as an assistant professor at Department of Management – Czestochowa University of Technology, Poland.

Her main research include issues of strategic management, in particular management of knowledge, management of cost and management of human resources.

### ***Piotr Kuraś***

He was awarded Ph.D. in the field of management in 2003. Since then, he has been working as an assistant professor at Department of Management – Czestochowa University of Technology, Poland.

His main research include issues of strategic management, in particular strategies of enterprise development, strategic context of enterprise resources, management of enterprise value and valuation of assets.

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