Institutionalising knowledge sharing in an organisation: A case of a selected organisation in the Western Cape, South Africa

The aim of this article is to explore the social determinants for the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing within an organisation. The article uses the concept of duality of structure of Giddens’ Structuration Theory as a theoretical lens. The reason for the focus on institutionalisation is because of its stabilising benefits and contribution to nurturing a culture of knowledge sharing. Systematic sharing of knowledge cannot take place unless there are procedures, policies and guidelines for knowledge sharing. The research, engaging an interpretive case study, reported on the major findings from the qualitative study with manager, professional, technician and intern staff members working within the development information and geographic information system department of a selected municipality in the Western Cape, South Africa. The perception is that organisational structure, policies and processes, corporate governance as well as technology have been identified as major enablers for the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing in an organisation. Management support and organisational culture were also recognised as social factors for knowledge sharing institutionalisation. New strategies for reinforcing efforts to nurture and invigorate the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing within an organisation were generated and presented as a general framework.

Introduction

The aim of this article is to explore the social determinants which will enable the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing within an organisation. After an in-depth review of current literature, it was discovered that the success of knowledge management within any organisation is contingent on knowledge sharing. It was also discovered that knowledge sharing is often seen as problematic because of a lack of guidelines on what to share and how to share it, as well as the willingness of people to share. These discoveries have been because of a lack of an organisational culture for sharing knowledge (Twum-Darko & Harker 2014). Continuous knowledge sharing, knowledge renewal and knowledge creation cannot occur efficiently and effectively without an established organisational culture, infrastructure and procedures for knowledge sharing (Abdul-Jalal et al. 2013; Malhotra 2004; Marabelli & Newell 2012) that is institutionalising knowledge sharing.

Institutionalisation plays an important role in enabling an organisational culture for sharing knowledge and providing a systematic approach to sharing knowledge (Orlikowski 2000), thereby enabling the effective and efficient sharing of knowledge (Twum-Darko & Harker 2014). Nielsen, Mathiassen and Newel (2014) define institutionalisation as:

the recursive intertwining of practices that encourage the travel of ideas across a field and within individual organizations. Ideas are created, transformed and legitimized over time, and take on different linguistic and material forms across organizational settings. (n.p)

Thus, in the context of this study, the entrenchment of knowledge means sharing practices. The challenge, then, is to explore the determinants for institutionalising knowledge sharing, using structuration theory.

Given the importance of structure and a culture for knowledge sharing as well as the positive influence that institutionalisation can have on knowledge sharing, systematic sharing of knowledge cannot take place unless there are procedures, guidelines, policy and an organisational culture nurtured for knowledge sharing (McDermott & O’Dell 2001;76; Riege 2005; Ruppel &
Harrington 2001). The importance of organisational culture lies in its ability to have a direct effect on employees’ knowledge sharing behaviour as well as an indirect effect through influencing managers’ attitudes towards knowledge sharing (Wang & Noe 2010). In addition, the lack of appropriate infrastructure supporting knowledge sharing and formal and informal spaces to share, impact the effective sharing of knowledge in an organisation (Riege 2005:25–26).

Institutionalisation is important not with regard to systems and structure, but also culture and the influence of management. Therefore, the problem is one of knowledge sharing not being adequately institutionalised in many organisations. This was observed after realising the importance of structure and culture for knowledge sharing as well as the positive influence that institutionalisation can have on knowledge sharing. The challenge, then, is to explore the social determinants for the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing. Knowledge sharing cannot be efficient and/or effective unless it is institutionalised. Furthermore, institutionalisation should be considered from all perspectives to determine how knowledge sharing can be entrenched in an organisation.

**Duality of technology and enactment of knowledge sharing-in-practice**

Anthony Giddens (1986) describes the duality of structure as constituting two pillars of duality: the dimensions of structure and the processes of interactions. The duality of structure concept is depicted in Figure 1.

The signification structure relates to organisational interaction using different kinds of interpretative schemes (Giddens 1986). Signification, therefore, can be used by agents for communicating, understanding and providing the meanings for different types of activities (Mauerer & Nissen 2014). The domination structure deals with various ways of exercising power over different types of resources (Mauerer & Nissen 2014). Domination involves controlling and using allocative and authoritative resources, along with power, over other people or resources (Giddens 1986). Also, the legitimisation structure deals with the institutionalisation of norms, standards and values (MacKay & Tambeau 2013).

Twum-Darko (2014) refers to it as moral code, leadership, understanding and endorsement for human interaction which ultimately produces legitimation.

Drawing on the work of Giddens, Orlikowski (2000:407) used enactment of technology-in-practice (ETiP), which has been adapted in Figure 9 below for knowledge sharing to further elaborate on the two notions of emergent structures and enactment. Orlikowski asserts (op.cit.):

structures are embodied in technologies to be appropriated by users and indeed differently over time and space to share knowledge. That is, rather than starting with the technology and examining how actors appropriate its embodied structures, this view starts with human action and examines how it enacts emergent structures through recurrent interaction with the technologies at hand.

Therefore, Figure 2, which is based on Giddens’ duality of structure, represents Orlikowski’s argument of technology appropriation.

Barley and Tolbert (1997) define institutionalisation as shared rules and typifications that identify categories of social actors and their appropriate activities or relationships. The process of institutionalisation includes the concept of ideals, discourses, techniques and controls. This implies basic ideas, ways of defining and acting upon reality, using elaborate systems of measurement and documentation for controlling action outcome (Dambrin, Lambert & Sponem 2007). The dynamics of institutionalisation are adequately addressed by Orlikowski’s enactment of technology-in-practice and have been used as a lens through which to conceptualise the problem.

Given the underpinning theory to enact knowledge sharing-in-practice, the research problem has been conceptualised and illustrated as in Figure 3 below to address knowledge sharing challenges in an organisation. Institutionalisation cannot take place unless there are knowledge sharing strategies that are driven from policies leading to guidelines to implement procedures (Twum-Darko & Harker 2014:290). The institutionalisation of knowledge sharing is driven by the implementation of knowledge management strategies.
These strategies, informed by the determinants for the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing, determine the kind of corporate support that the organisation requires to drive knowledge sharing.

The process of institutionalisation is achieved through the monitoring and evaluation of knowledge sharing, which serves to inform knowledge management strategies for improvement. Consequently, recommendations are made to management on how to improve the effectiveness of knowledge management strategies, which include the determinants important for the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing.

**Literature review**

**Introduction**

Ruppel and Harrington (2001) argue that knowledge management has received significant focus in literature as a result of the numerous advantages that it can bring to an organisation. Knowledge management manages the activities of knowledge workers, which is achieved through facilitating,
motivating, leading and supporting knowledge workers by providing or nurturing a suitable working environment (Gao et al. 2008:12). Furthermore, Wiig (2004) indicates that knowledge management is a social communication process. Thus, he (Wigg 2004) argues that the communication process is enabled by collaboration and cooperation support tools. It is therefore agreeable that knowledge management could make organisations act intelligently to make them viable and succeed to realise the value they can derive from knowledge assets (Wiig 2004).

Knowledge management in an organisation involves certain processes, which include the creation, transfer, storing and using of knowledge (Bhatt 2002). Similarly, Massingham (2014) declares that the:

goal of knowledge management is to capture, store, maintain and deliver useful knowledge in a meaningful form to anyone who needs it in any place and at any time within an organisation. (p. 1077)

Indeed, knowledge, as suggested in the literature, can be either tacit or explicit. Becerra et al. (2008) argue that tacit knowledge refers to the knowledge that we keep in our minds or our personal experience. However, Clarke and Rollo (2001) have suggested that explicit knowledge is knowledge existing in physical forms such as manuals and documents, or codified knowledge. Knowledge is derived from information. Information is data in context that can be used for decision-making (Clarke & Rollo 2001:207). Knowledge is information possessed in the mind of individuals (which may or may not be new, unique, useful or accurate) that is related to facts, procedures, concepts, interpretations, ideas, observations, and judgements (Alavi & Leidner 2011:109).

Knowledge is therefore an organised combination of data, assimilated with a set of rules, procedures and operations learnt through experience and practice (Bhatt 2001:70). Knowledge management has become a key component of an organisation as it helps the organisation to improve performance and achieve a competitive advantage (Lindner & Wald 2011).

Knowledge sharing

Knowledge sharing is the cornerstone of a knowledge management strategy as better and purposeful sharing of useful knowledge translates into accelerated individual and organisational learning and innovation (Riege 2005). Knowledge sharing ensures that knowledge is distributed and made available to all employees across an organisation (Wang & Noe 2010). At the same time, knowledge management can only be sustained through continuous sharing of knowledge (Twum-Darko & Harker 2014:282).

Knowledge sharing, however, has become a crucial area of concern (Ghobadi 2015). Concerns arise from the observations that knowledge sharing is not efficiently performed because of many factors. According to Riege (2005) and Carmeli et al. (2013), this could be attributable to a lack of leadership and managerial direction regarding clearly communicating the benefits and values of knowledge sharing practices. The lack of accessible knowledge, lack of effectiveness and efficiency of knowledge sharing processes, and a lack of social cohesion can also negatively impact knowledge sharing performance (Wickramasinghe & Widyaratne 2012). Alavi and Leidner (2001) assert that communication processes and information flows drive knowledge transfer in organisations. It is therefore important to address the issue of institutionalisation as an enabler for knowledge sharing, as the uptake of knowledge sharing to sustain knowledge management is crucial for organisations (Twum-Darko & Harker 2014:3).

Knowledge sharing strategies

Knowledge sharing plays an important role in implementing and executing knowledge management (Cao & Xiang 2012). The success of knowledge sharing is driven by its strategies and approaches. Enhancing trust, social cohesion and organisational culture can be useful for the effective transfer of knowledge. Riege (2005) states that motivation, encouragement and stimulation of individual employees to purposefully capture, disseminate, transfer and apply existing and newly generated useful knowledge is a way of reinforcing knowledge sharing in an organisation. Moreover, according to Chumg et al. (2015), it is important to develop a trust-based social network in the organisation as it will generate social cohesion. Trust can impact on the knowledge sharing processes as the more people trust each other, the more they are open to sharing and distributing their knowledge (Finn 2011). Riege (2005) emphasises this view by noting the importance of developing an organisational culture for knowledge sharing. This includes organisational structures that facilitate transparent knowledge flows, processes and resources that provide continuous learning, organisational culture and clear communication of the company’s goals. Clarke and Rollo (2001), Riege (2005) and Alavi and Leidner (2001) further note the use of technology as a strategic approach for knowledge sharing. In this context, implementing a knowledge management system would be useful for the organisation as knowledge can be shared more effectively (Alavi & Leidner 1999). Based on these observations, it can be concluded that knowledge sharing strategies and approaches may impact positively on knowledge management performance (Chumg 2015).

Corporate support for knowledge sharing

The literature on corporate support for knowledge sharing recommends many tools and techniques for supporting knowledge sharing within an organisation. One of these tools is technology. According to Jones and Karsten (2003), using software tools such as a knowledge management system can impact positively on knowledge sharing. This opinion is supported by Hendriks (1999) and Alavi and Leidner (2001) who assert that information and communication technology are crucial for knowledge sharing. This is because technology
makes the exchange of knowledge easier and more frequent (Connelly & Kelloway 2003).

Moreover, Wickramasinghe and Widyaratne (2012) added that interpersonal trust, openness from employees, team leader support, rewards or incentives and knowledge sharing mechanisms can have a positive impact on knowledge sharing. Sánchez et al. (2013) contend that motivation, commitment, rewards, identification of competencies which need to be changed or optimised at the individual, team and organisational level, are all techniques that can be used to share knowledge more effectively and efficiently. This entails the implementation of proper knowledge sharing governance mechanisms such as motivation, and the creation of knowledge sharing opportunities, reward systems, internal training, leisure activities, reinforcing social activities, organisational design and culture, intrinsic and extrinsic rewards – all of which are important for employees’ willingness to share knowledge with their co-workers, especially tacit knowledge (Huang et al. 2013). According to Twum-Darko and Harker (2014:289), organisational culture, management support and technology are reported to hold a significant influence on enabling and sustaining knowledge. In that context, it is implementing processes, incorporating a structured, systematic platform, and using technology to offer support and standardisation that will indeed ensure order and uniformity in the context of knowledge sharing (op. cit.). It is, therefore, important for an organisation to foster a relationship amongst employees and to cultivate mutual trust in the workplace. Having governance structures for knowledge transfer such as exchange, entitlement and leadership can create a knowledge sharing culture (Wanyama & Zheng 2010). This would create a connection between sharing knowledge and practical business goals. McDermott and O’Dell (2001) are of the opinion that knowledge sharing efficiency is linked to the core values of an organisation. This would facilitate the creation of a human network and solicit the support of people to share ideas and insights. In that respect, ensuring that positive social cohesion exists, along with technology and knowledge governance, can be enhanced. the performance of knowledge sharing within an organisation (Akhavan et al. 2013; Connelly et al. 2007; Dell et al. 2003; Dell et al. 2003).

The consideration of corporate support in the uptake and sustaining of knowledge sharing is important. Management support is a very important factor, as leadership is seen to be important for the promotion of the value of knowledge management, identifying opportunities to share and developing metrics for assessing the impact of knowledge sharing (Twum-Darko & Harker 2014:289).

**Research approach**

**Introduction**

Because of the sensitivity of this study, and the contribution made to depict matters of knowledge sharing and its institutionalisation, the choice of research approach is therefore fundamental. The ontological position of this research was a subjective one and, as a result, an interpretivist approach was adopted. The intention is to provide an in-depth and interpreted understanding of the social phenomenon by learning about experiences, perspectives and social and material circumstances (Ritchie & Lewis 2003:3) of knowledge sharing in an organisation.

Data on perceptions and insights on knowledge sharing enablers, which are important for institutionalisation in an organisation, were collected through a face-to-face focus group discussion with seven staff members operating within the Development Information and Geographic Information System (DI and GIS) department of the selected organisation. Focus group discussion was found to be important in the identification of cultural norms and the understanding of the issues of concern within a group of the affected population (Acaps 2012:10). The focus group was useful to obtain certain types of information as it was difficult to collect the relevant data across diverse groupings and departments using other qualitative techniques (Grafton Lillis & Mahama 2011:10). In addition to the focus group discussion, semi-structured questions were used in a way that did not restrict the flow of information amongst group participants. Thus, according to Welman and Kruger (2002:161, 187), the use of semi-structured questions for interviews as well as focus group discussion are useful when the topic is of a very sensitive nature and when the respondents come from divergent backgrounds, offering a versatile way of collecting data.

Therefore, since this study entailed direct interaction with the units of analysis, being the Development Information and Geo-spatial Information Systems department of a public local government organisation in the Western Cape, South Africa (Pozzebon et al. 2005), the research was empirical in nature.

**Sampling and population**

Purposive sampling, which is a non-probability sampling method, was used to enable an enhanced understanding of an information-rich case (Sandelowski 2000:248). Thus, participants were selected with informative characteristics, useful insights and ideas which were relevant for the purpose of this study (Anderson 2010:4; Bricki & Green 2007:9). The study focused on one department, ‘DI & GIS’, because it is a highly intensive knowledge area and knowledge sharing is a major component of this department and, as such, cannot function without the knowledge sharing activity. A focus group comprising seven staff members (manager, professional, technician and interns) working in the DI and GIS department and operating across the six branches of this department was conducted to obtain insights and perceptions about the matter of the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing. The DI and GIS department comprises a total of 6060 staff members from which 7 employees representing the branches were selected for the focus group (qualitative study). This is depicted in
Findings and interpretation

Introduction

The fieldwork was conducted at a selected municipality in the Western Cape, South Africa, and the units of analysis were employees working in the Development Information and Geographic Information System (DI & GIS) department. The analysis was on the identification of determinants that could influence knowledge sharing institutionalisation in an organisation. A general framework based on the conceptual framework is recommended to effectively institutionalise knowledge sharing in an organisation. The data collected through the focus group discussion with seven staff members operating within the six branches of the DI and GIS department were analysed using content analysis and interpreted by taking into consideration the concept of the duality of structure of structuration theory. The outcome of the analysis guided the development of the general framework that is envisaged to nurture the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing at an organisational level.

Policies and regulations as interpretive schemes

The outcomes suggest that policies, processes, procedures, organisational structure, people and knowledge sharing systems constitute enablers for encouraging the line of communication for knowledge sharing amongst coworkers in the organisation. This was supported by the DI and GIS manager who commented as follows:

Since we came to the Unicity, there was a realisation that knowledge management had a place in the organisation, they realised the importance to have a corporate structure, a body that would have the mandate of ensuring knowledge management and aspects of knowledge sharing. We then had to come up with policies, framework, people and strategies that will address the issue of knowledge sharing that would sort of set the map for how this happens. (DI & GIS Manager)

Despite acknowledging the fact that policies effectively tackle knowledge sharing challenges, standard operating procedures can play a reinforcing role with regard to motivating people to share what they know in the organisation. Reflecting on this point during the focus group discussion, one professional officer asserted:

What is intended is to move toward the implementation of standards operating procedures that would have more effective translation into the compliance of knowledge sharing in the organisation. (xxx)

Governance and organisational culture as norms

Furthermore, governance, being legally mandated by legislation, gives the type of power that would drive knowledge sharing institutionalisation. The observation is reflected by the comment of one of the participants who said:

The department has shown that we have a very high level knowledge management steering group or type of governance structure that ensured frameworks, policies take form. This was never formalised into the standing governance committee that should look after the implementation of policies that would guide knowledge sharing. We need to have governance, a set of senior stakeholders of the city to come together. It is a structure that has been identified but has not been formalised and put in place. It is definitely a task that our department is aiming for in the next few months. In the context of our department, we can only show them the importance of knowledge sharing. If we were mandated, we would have the power to indicate and direct how knowledge should be shared in the organisation as a whole. (Participant of the study)

Organisational culture and management support constitute very important attributes needed to drive knowledge sharing activities by fostering the type of norms, values and culture for its effectiveness and efficiency. This view is supported by one of the professional officers who agrees that:

In terms of enhancing knowledge sharing, management support which means having a dual reporting line pushed by management will definitely motivate people to share knowledge more effectively. (Participant of the study)

The findings furthermore reveal that employees operating within the DI and GIS department were not aware that organisational culture was entrenched in the organisation. This was asserted based on the comment of the manager in the department who said:

Table 1, which outlines the population of the DI and GIS department from which the sample was taken.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Department</th>
<th>Branches</th>
<th>Level of Management</th>
<th>Selected for Focus Group</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>DI &amp; GIS</td>
<td>Information &amp;</td>
<td>Manager</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Knowledge Management</td>
<td>Senior Professional Officer</td>
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<td></td>
<td>Technician</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Intern</td>
<td>1</td>
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<tr>
<td>DI &amp; GIS</td>
<td>Development</td>
<td>Manager</td>
<td>0</td>
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<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Information</td>
<td>Senior Professional Officer</td>
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<tr>
<td>DI &amp; GIS</td>
<td>Knowledge Resources &amp; Support</td>
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<td>Senior Professional Officer</td>
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<td>Intern</td>
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<tr>
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<td>Manager</td>
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<td>DI &amp; GIS</td>
<td>Spatial Data</td>
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<td>Intern</td>
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<tr>
<td>DI &amp; GIS</td>
<td>Record Management</td>
<td>Manager</td>
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<td></td>
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<td>Senior Professional Officer</td>
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Source: The department of Development Information and Geographic Information Systems, City of Cape Town
DI, Development information; GIS, Geographic Information Systems.
We can propose new strategy to enforce knowledge sharing from a cultural point of view but the reality is that in the ideal world, everyone in an organisation is supposed to share what they know. However in the real world in which we are living, we need to have some reasons that make our whilst to share. (DI & GIS department manager)

Another view in this context emerged from one professional officer when he stated that:

I am not even sure that we are trying, in terms of our knowledge strategies, is to create a culture ... where professionals genuinely share their knowledge, help each other. No I do not think so. (Participant of the study)

According to Alavi, Kayworth and Leidner (2006:194), culture, being the entrenchment of practices, is engendered using different mechanisms, processes and procedures in place in an organisation. Therefore, in the context of this study, these mechanisms such as the implementation of knowledge sharing systems, organisational structure, governance procedures, policies, processes, facilitating the willingness for employees to share their knowledge, all constitute a culture for knowledge sharing in the organisation.

Knowledge sharing systems as facilities

The outcome shows the importance of having technology infrastructure in place as drivers for knowledge sharing activities. These technologies included a knowledge sharing system, the use of the intranet (e.g. Microsoft SharePoint), and the Internet. In fact, one of the managers DI and GIS department stated:

Our ICT infrastructures are very strong and enable us to integrate and coordinate various departments in the organisation using knowledge sharing systems. It is an important tool for direct communication with core group users ... through our systems (knowledge hub) we realised the power of knowledge management and knowledge sharing taking all departments operating in silos and making them integrated. (DI & GIS departmental manager)

Similarly, one technician asserted:

Our knowledge sharing system being the Development Information Resource Centre ‘DIRC’ provides access to data, information and knowledge resources that relate to development within partnership with all municipality departments ... and that since the systems is located under the municipality intranet, it is therefore available to all staff. (Participant of the study)

The findings elaborated above draw on the concept of the duality of structure of structuration theory by being in accordance with the relationship between the modality, being policies and regulations, and governance and technology for the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing. Continuous institutionalisation of knowledge sharing to enact knowledge sharing-in-practice is mediated by interpretive schemes (i.e. policies, processes, people, standard operating procedure for communication), norms (which involve governance procedures on human behaviour and organisational culture), and facility (i.e. technology which deals with technology infrastructures such as hardware, software, e.g., Microsoft SharePoint, the Intranet and Internet, knowledge sharing systems), achieved through the influence of power (Orlikowski 2000). The interrelated agencies enacting knowledge sharing-in-practice institutionalise knowledge sharing. The above-mentioned is therefore presented as a general framework in Figure 4.

Conclusion and further research

The research contributes to the existing academic debate on knowledge sharing in an organisation and knowledge management in general. It offers new insights into the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing in organisations. Furthermore, this research is intended to drive new debate on new strategies for reinforcing efforts to nurture and invigorate knowledge sharing within an organisation. The results of the study are presented in Figure 11 as a general framework to drive the institutionalisation of knowledge sharing at the organisational level. As far as current academic literature is concerned, this is the first time that structuration theory has been applied in the study of knowledge sharing challenges. Therefore, this article provides new insights into how structuration theory can be used to study socially constructed phenomena with embedded sociotechnical processes.

For future research, it is suggested that similar intensive and sensitive studies should be conducted in other departments within the same or parallel municipalities or private organisations to validate the general framework developed during this research.

Ethical considerations

The ethical issues related to this study reside mainly in data collected via the focus group, which was subjected to the approval of the selected organisation to ensure that it does not violate the organisations’ privacy and confidentiality policies, and does not reveal any information that could hurt the reputation of the organisation.

Study limitations

Time constraints presented a limitation in the study. The availability of the respondents was a major challenge that necessitated a focus group discussion, rather than using one-on-one, in-depth interviews. The fact that a focus group was used in this study might have constituted a constraint regarding the quality and depth of data that could have been collected and the results that could have been generated, as compared to individual in-depth interviews. However, bearing this possible limitation in mind ensured that the researcher intentionally probed for deeper and more thoughtful answers from the respondents. A survey served as a way of supporting the data generated from the focus group to ensure that the views of the focus group were shared by the rest of the department. Given the fact that the data
were collected from a relatively small focus group, a survey would support the findings to extend the study to the rest of the department within a shorter timeframe. Furthermore, the selection of only one department (DI & GIS) as the unit of analysis presents a limitation about the generalisability of the findings. It is believed that perceptions gained from an individual or a department of an organisation do not necessarily mean that these perceptions extend to the rest of the organisation. As such, findings generated from one case could be applied to another setting for reliability and validity of a study of this nature (Anderson 2010:2). Despite this view, the intention of using the DI and GIS department as the case to ensure that rich, in-depth views could be obtained from a highly knowledge-intensive department engaging in knowledge sharing activities to share their experiences that would shed light on the phenomenon under study.

References


