

Old vs. Young- Who can Absorb More Knowledge? : An Empirical Study on Male Beneficiaries in NGOs

Dr. Sheikh Shamim Hasnain
sheikh.hasnain@anglia.ac.uk

Abstract

[This article examines the impact of different age groups on knowledge absorption among the NGO (Non-Governmental Organisational) male-beneficiaries in Bangladesh. Knowledge transfer is a crucial element of Knowledge Management (KM) process. Successful knowledge absorption by the recipients means a successful knowledge transfer. The NGO-beneficiaries are the main actors who are engaged in receiving and absorption of the knowledge transferred by the NGOs. So it is imperative to know the knowledge absorption capacity of theirs (the beneficiaries). This study follows multi-staged sampling procedure. 14-NGOs (7 large and 7 small of the NGO Affairs Bureau enlisted NGOs) from each administrative division (there are seven administrative divisions in Bangladesh) of Bangladesh are purposefully selected. 54-semi-structured interviews consisting of top, middle and lower levels based on the salary grades (18X interviewees from each level) were interviewed. Simultaneously, 35 questionnaires among the beneficiaries were also administered (5 from each administrative division, e.g. 5X7=35). Content analysis technique is used to analyse the interview transcript. The study finds that age group 36-55 years has more knowledge absorption capacity than those of below 20 and 21-35 years groups. Future researchers may conduct similar study in a different country]

Key Words: Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Absorption, NGOs, Bangladesh

Background

NGO activities started in Bangladesh after the liberation war of 1971 (Rahman, 2006; Lewis, 1997; Devine, 2006; Karim, 2001; Karim, 2008), although one or two NGOs had been operating as missionary organisations before this time. CARE, a US based NGO was pioneer in starting activities in 1949 in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. NGO activity intensified in this area after the cyclone disaster of November 1970. A cyclone injured nation and the liberation war of 1971 paralysed the country's socio-economic conditions. Many local and foreign NGOs came forward to rescue the country from the privations of social and economic devastation. Supply of relief goods, distribution of medicine, healthcare, construction of shelters and rehabilitation were the main agenda of the NGOs at that time. The number of NGOs in 1980s accelerated in an experiential fashion with multidimensional activities such as education of rural people, health and medicine, poverty elevation, and family planning. NGOs' contribution to the socio-economic development of developing countries has been widely acknowledged. The contributions of NGOs in various aspects of human lives such as poverty alleviation, education (Ahmad, 1999), family planning, employment, relief operations in natural calamities (Rahman, 2000), and health (Gauri and Galef, 2005) and infrastructure development for the poor, have made this sector indispensable in modern society. In many areas, the NGO sector could supersede the public and private sectors. Stiles (2002) finds that, "NGOs, by virtue of their relatively independent character, their non-profit making status, and their link to the poor communities that they have generally served well, offers donors a relatively safe and convenient means of avoiding both public and private sector and all their dangers" (p.836). So this sector is addressed as the third sector, while public and private are named as first and second sectors (Panda, 2007; Lewis, 2005), and it works as supplementary to the other two in any country. NGO activities may be broadly categorised as, income generation programmes, provision of social services and social organizing (Buckland, 1998). Najam (1996) identifies the beneficiaries/clients, the donors/patrons and the NGO itself/employees are the most vital stakeholders in the NGO sector. In the NGO sector knowledge transfer mainly occurs between the NGOs and their beneficiaries. So it is crucial for the NGOs to know the impact of age of the beneficiaries on knowledge absorption.

According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2009), the total population of the country is 140.6 million (male population: 72 million; Female population: 68.6 million), out of which 34.6 million people (24.61%) live in rural areas. 50.62 million (36%) of the population live in poverty (World Development Report, 2002). The literacy rate of the country is 43.1% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). From the above statistics, it is clear that more than 40% of the population live under the level of poverty. More than 50% of the population is illiterate. 35% of the country's population is enjoying the benefits of the NGOs (Devine, 2003) as more than 22,000 NGOs are providing their services to the people in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2006). It may be mentioned that a huge number of country's illiterate population are the NGO-beneficiaries. The illiterate beneficiaries find it difficult to absorb knowledge transferred by the NGOs.

Management communities around the world have recognised and valued knowledge management (Scarborough et al., 2005). Knowledge Management is progressing into a new paradigm (Takeuchi, 2001). Its popularity has increased significantly, especially since 1995, and it has become the elementary theme of both management philosophy and management tools (Edvardsson, 2006), with multi-dimensional and advanced approaches (Chae and Bloodgood, 2006). Knowledge management is comparatively new (Schütt, 2003), promising (Jashapara, 2004; Prusak, 2001; Beckman, 1999) and is a popular segment in the dictionary of management (Nan, 2008). Organisations could realise the importance of managing knowledge nowadays. It deeply focuses and relies on a strong culture of cooperative, sharing and supportive, social community, with a view to achieving organisational strategic requirements (Debowski, 2006). Knowledge Management ensures superior and excellent productivity (Fireston and McElroy, 2005). Several theorists and researchers (Gamble and Blackwell, 2001; Zuckerman & Buell, 1998; Jasimuddin et al., 2006) have mentioned elements of the Knowledge Management process. For example, Gamble and Blackwell (2001) find identifying, organizing, transferring and using to be some of these elements. Zuckerman and Buell (1998) identify collection, storage, sharing, and linking as part of the process. Jasimuddin et al. (2006) describe identifying capturing, storing, retrieving, and transferring as the important elements of knowledge transfer. Heavin and Neville (2006) find capture, storage, dissemination, and creation are the crucial ingredients of knowledge management process. So various elements of the knowledge management process have been proposed by the researchers (Holsapple and Jones, 2006). The phases may be fragmented, and divided into various sub-phases. The major elements of the knowledge management process are: creation, storage, transfer and use.

Among them knowledge transfer is receiving wide attention (Argote et al., 2000) as it is essential for the survival and prosperity (Wathne et al., 1996) of the organisations. Learning and implementations of others' experiences for social and organisational benefit necessitate the relevance of the concept of knowledge transfer. New knowledge may promote organisational learning and innovations in new methods and practices, which may also be absorbed into routines and culture (Darr and Kurtzberg, 2000). Out of the new knowledge all stakeholders of the organisations may be benefitted. Knowledge transfer provides value (Hogberg and Edvinsson, 1998) and force (Hall, 2001) to the present knowledge stock of the organisations.

In a different context Staudinger (1999) investigates on the relationship between age and wisdom (20-75 years age range). Hardly any knowledge management guru (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Chae and Bloodgood, 2006; Hasnain, 2012; Jashapara, 2004; Prusak, 2001; Hasnain and Jasimuddin, 2012; Argote, Ingram, Levine and Moreland, 2000) has investigated the impact of age on knowledge absorption in the male beneficiaries in the Bangladeshi NGO context. Chowdhury, Butel, Hakki and Ismail (2009) argue "transfer of knowledge includes two actions; one is transmission which means sending knowledge to potential receiver, and another is absorption meaning that knowledge must be incorporated either by a person or a group" (p. 53). So Knowledge transfer is useless if it is not absorbed by the knowledge recipient (Davenport and Prusak, 2000). The gradual expansion of the NGOs has made this sector a powerful and strong industry in Bangladesh. Due to their activities in human resource development, they could earn an inseparable entity in the culture of the country. NGOs transfer knowledge on microcredit (Rahman, 2006a), social awareness (Ahmad, 1999), health (Mahamud, 1998), education (Buckland, 1998), agriculture (Lewis, 1997), income generating skills (Begum, 2008), disaster management (Rahman, 2000) etc. in Bangladesh. Thus they could reach the doorsteps of millions with new hope, where government activities have yet to start (Ahmad and Townsend, 1998). Presently NGOs in Bangladesh are at the top in respect of contributions to the country's development (Devine, 2003).

Research Question: What is the impact of male-beneficiaries' age on knowledge absorption in the NGOs in Bangladesh?

Research Methodology

This study carried out semi-structured interviews for the NGO-employees and questionnaire survey for the NGO-beneficiaries simultaneously. Multi-staged sampling as described by Saunders et al., (1997) is followed. The whole Bangladesh is geographically divided into seven administrative divisions. From each division a single district, from the selected district a single Thana, from Thana an union and from the selected union 5 beneficiaries were randomly selected for questionnaire survey (5X7=35). Drop and collect (e.g. in person) technique was applied as the respondents (the NGO-beneficiaries) needed a detail explanation about this study and questionnaire. Further, this technique (drop and collect) is supported by many researchers (Brown, 1987; Hair, et al., 2007; Ibeh, Brock and Zhou, 2004). This technique is also fast, reliable, cheap and suitable to those who are having the resource constraints (Brown, 1987). Out of listed 2445 NGOs (excluding the cancelled memberships) 14 NGOs (out of which (i) 7- large NGOs and (ii) 7- small NGOs) were purposefully selected for the interviews. Total 54-semistructured interviews consisting of their top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each) employees were selected for the semi-structured interviews. The field works of this research were carried out in Bangladesh. This research went for qualitative investigation (e.g. semi-structured interviews) and quantitative

study (e.g. survey questionnaires) simultaneously. Some scholars (Creswell, 1994; Creswell and Clark, 2007) emphasis on simultaneous and sequential triangulations. In the simultaneous triangulation, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used equally, separately and usually results are examined to cross-validate the findings (Steckler et al., 1992; Creswell, 1994). The present study needed a detail view of the topic under study and a solid validity. The researcher here studies the subject in the natural setting (Bangladeshi NGO-scenario). The interviewees had the chances to explain their views and experiences on the subject matter, while the questionnaire-respondents help in finding the validity of the interview findings and vice versa. In research, it is the use of multiple but independent measures (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) in a same phenomena or programme (Patton, 1990) under study. More comprehensively, Denzin (1978) finds triangulation as “combination of methodologies in the study of same phenomenon” (p. 291). In fact, it is the art of employing of one method to cross-check the results of another (Jankowicz, 2005).

Regarding the qualitative data analysis techniques Jankowicz (2005) finds “the main technique associated with semi-structured interviews is called content analysis” (p. 270). Now-a-days content analysis technique is popular to academics, commercial researchers and communication practioners (Neuendorf, 2002). For this research all interviews (recorded and interview notes) are transcribed. This research makes an endeavor to extract final emerged themes from the study. This study borrowed the procedural guidelines to tabulate and present the content analysed data from Jankowicz (2005, p. 272-73). The data categories are put as per the research issues of this study.

Three copies of the coding sheet were prepared. To check the coding, two coders were requested. They were given the hard copy of the coding sheets. Firstly, this researcher coded using the symbol tick (✓) in a sheet, Coder-A used the symbol star/cross (* / X) in a sheet and Coder-B used circle (o) in a sheet. The coding sheets of coder-A and B were collected. Now the differences of the coder-A from this researcher are transferred to the sheet of this researcher. Further, the differences of the coder-B from this researcher are transferred to the sheet of this researcher. At this stage, both the coders’ percentage agreements with this researcher is calculated separately (e.g. Neuendorf, 2002). [add up the number of cases that were coded in the same way by two coders and dividing by the number of cases. For example: Number of cases agreed=12. Total number of cases=16. So % agreed=12/16=75%]. For this study the coders had an excellent rate (e.g. above 90%) matching with this researcher. The minimum level of 80% is usually treated as normal (e.g. Riffe, Lacy and Fico, 1998). Here the rating is higher. So the other researchers may also draw the similar conclusion.

Findings and Discussion

It is mentioned in the research methodology section that this study interviewed 54-NGO officials consisting of top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each). Table-1 exhibits the results of the interviews.

Table-1: The NGO-employees’ opinion on the male knowledge absorption capacity (N=54)

Age Groups	0-20 Years	21-35 Years	36-55 Years	Above 55- Years	No comments and others*	Total
Numbers	0	04	08	01	41	54
Percentages (%)	0%	7.40%	14.81%	1.85%	75.92%	100%

14.81% NGO-employees think that 36-55 years age group of males is capable to absorb more knowledge while 7.40% for 21-35 years and 1.85% was for above 55-years respectively.

About the age and knowledge absorption, an NGO-field worker says,

“Middle aged persons who are between 35-55 years old they can absorb and implement knowledge properly”.

It is observed that no interviewee has supported age group: 0-20 years of male. In this regard an interviewee reports,

“...actually 0-20 years clients are not matured enough to absorb knowledge. At the age of 20, you may expect some maturity from them. They tell us that they could receive our knowledge, but when you go to see their projects, it is very frustrating”

It is also mentioned in the research methodology section that this study administered (5X7=) 35 questionnaires for the NGO-beneficiaries covering the whole Bangladesh. It followed multi-stage sampling. Table-2 exhibits the results of the questionnaire survey.

Table-2: The beneficiaries’ opinions on the male knowledge absorption capacity (N=35)

Age Groups	0-20 Years	21-35 Years	36-55 Years	Above 55- Years	No Comments and Others	Total
Numbers	0	02	07	0	26	35
Percentage (%)	0%	5.71%	35%	0%	74.29%	100%

5.71% of the beneficiaries think that 21-35 age groups of males are capable to absorb knowledge while 35% for 36-55 years and 0% was for above 55-years respectively. So 36-55 years beneficiaries absorb more knowledge than those of other groups.

The triangulation of the findings in respect of the opinions of NGO-employees and the beneficiaries exhibit a comprehensive picture. A side by side study of the findings depicts that both cases, age group 36-55 is supported by the interviewees (e.g. NGO-employees and the beneficiaries), while age group 0-20 years was not at all supported by both NGO-employees and the beneficiaries. Both NGO-employees and their beneficiaries believe that age group 36-55 years old male group of beneficiaries may absorb more knowledge than those of the other groups. In a different study Lynn and Kanazawa (2011) reveal that after the age of 16-years males start to develop higher IQ. 7. But at the age of 16 the boys get an IQ point of 1.8. Further, Standinger (1999) finds that between 20 and 75 years, age does have a zero relationship with wisdom related knowledge and judgement. However, this study finds- the male beneficiaries’ age group between 36-55 years have more knowledge absorption capacity than those of other groups.

Summary and Future Research

The NGOs and their beneficiaries are the main actors in this sector and knowledge transfer mainly occurs between these two stakeholders. The beneficiaries’ successful absorption of knowledge indicates that the knowledge transfer was an effective one. If the transferred knowledge is not absorbed by the beneficiaries properly- it indicates that the entire NGO mission is a failure one as the NGOs are created for the socio-economic development of the beneficiaries, and there is no substitute to knowledge transfer for the socio-economic development of the poor and the deprived. So it is imperative to know the impact of the demographical variables (specially, the age) on the knowledge absorption capacity of the beneficiaries. Bangladesh is selected as the context of this study as the highest number of NGOs is in operation here. More so, the positive contribution of the NGOs to the socio-economic development of Bangladesh is highly documented. The study finds the similar results from the interviews and the questionnaire survey. The triangulated result of the interviews and the questionnaire survey on the NGO-beneficiaries presents that age group of 36-55 years is capable in absorbing more knowledge than other groups (e.g. groups: 0-20 years, 21-35 years, 36-55 and above 55 years). Future researchers may conduct similar study in a different country of the world.

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