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Assessing the Potential of Knowledge for Retention among Agro Entrepreneurs in Malaysia

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Abstract

The purpose of this study is to identify the types of knowledge that are needed to be retained when agro entrepreneurs depart from the organization. It also aims to examine the reasons and strategies for retaining knowledge among Malaysian agro entrepreneurs with various areas of

expertise. This study used qualitative method through face-to-face interview with three (3) agro entrepreneurs. The data were analyzed by using ATLAS.ti and presented in themes. It is identified there are five types of knowledge that are needed to be retained from the agro entrepreneurs which are marketing skill, analytical thinking, technical skill, managerial skill, and social networking skill. This study also highlights two main reasons for retaining the knowledge which are for long-term business and customers' loyalty as well as presenting preferred strategies to retain the knowledge through Community of Practice (CoP), training and coaching. This study is conducted in order to help entrepreneurs identify critical types of knowledge of entrepreneurs for the purpose of retaining it for future benefits.

Keywords: Agro entrepreneur, knowledge, knowledge retention, knowledge loss, knowledge management

1. Introduction

It is very important for any organization to manage their knowledge effectively as it is regarded as their intellectual capital that can help them achieve competitive advantage. Knowledge is generally divided into two types: tacit (intangible) and explicit (tangible). Knowledge however, is mostly seen as tacit knowledge which involves ones skills, understanding, and expertise with the accumulation of experiences. It also concerns the "know-how", "know-what" and "know-why" of specific objects, events, and processes (Eucker, 2007).

There is a concern highlighted by Joe et al. (2013) in their study which stated that not all employees are aware of their functionality and knowledge management is not incorporated into the culture of the organization. This leads to losing of valuable knowledge that they have with them. Loss of knowledge in an organization will result in the decreased of capability for effective decision making (Bairi et al., 2011). It will also lead to loss of clients due to low quality of products and other reasons (Joe et al., 2013). Daghfous et al. (2013) in their study found that different organizations are exposed to different factors of knowledge loss. Few research has been conducted to identify the types of knowledge that is in need to be retained among entrepreneurs especially in the Malaysian context. Therefore, this study was conducted to assess to the potential of knowledge to be retained and thus prevent from losing it. This study also focused on the reasons for retaining the knowledge of the Agro Entrepreneurs as well as the preferred strategies to retain it.

Three research questions were developed to answer the issues of this study.

1. What are the types of knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs to be retained before they leave the organization?
2. What are the reasons for retaining the knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs?
3. What are the preferred strategies to be used to capture and retain the knowledge?

2. Agro Entrepreneurs in Malaysia

Agriculture has played a significant role in the development of the Malaysian economy. This is proven when in the Ninth Malaysian Plan (RMK9), where the agriculture sector will be developed as the third driving force that contributes to the country. The Department of Statistic Malaysia is an agency under the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry (MOA) responsible in realizing the farmers to be agro entrepreneurs as well as implementing the government policies related to the agro sector (Muhammad Abi Sofian Abdul Halim et al., 2011). Agro entrepreneur is also known as agropreneur by which it combines two terms, agro (agriculture) and preneur (entrepreneurship). Agro entrepreneur as stated by Muhammad Abi Sofian Abdul Halim et al. (2011) is the entrepreneur who desires to be successful in the farm business. They diversify their business which can expand their farm income and allow them to survive. In 2003, the Ministry of Agriculture and Agro-Based Industry spent RM500 million for the purpose of turning the traditional farmers into visionary agropreneurs (Abdul Halim, Alias, Che Hamid & Zakaria, 2011).

2.1 Knowledge Retention in entrepreneurs

Retention of knowledge helps in stabilizing the economy of the organization and it takes less time in training new employees. Walsh and Ungson (1991) stated that there are three main activities involved in the knowledge retention process; knowledge acquisition or capture; storage; and retrieval. Knowledge acquisition concerns with obtaining or capturing knowledge of individuals within the organization for future use. Knowledge acquisition can be done through sharing and transferring of knowledge via best practices such as face-to-face storytelling, mentoring and coaching, and peer assist. Storage includes the process and facilities which are used to hold the valuable knowledge or information until it is needed and retrieved. It includes memory or knowledge of individuals, groups or teams (human capital), structural capital and others (Bairi et al., 2011). Knowledge retention helps in the process of retrieving knowledge and to be used or reused for new situation or environment. It helps in bringing the past or previous knowledge to help in the current situation for decision making and problem solving.

As for entrepreneurs, most of them acquire knowledge or skills through formal education, experience, functional skills, training and self-confidence (Omerzel & Antoncic, 2008). Eucker (2007) also added that if the experience is failed to be contributed to information, then the knowledge especially the tacit one is not effective.

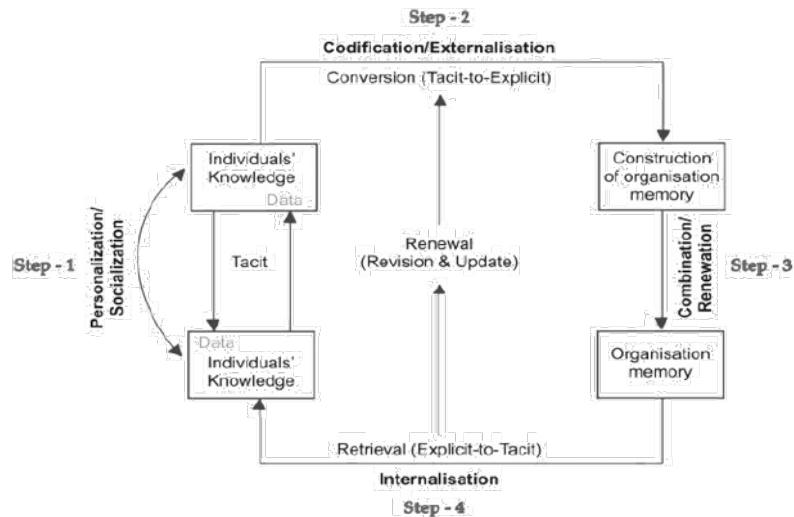


Figure 1: Model of Knowledge Retention Process (Arif et al., 2008)

2.2 Types of knowledge for retention

There are types of knowledge owned by employees of an organization that are crucial to be retained. Knowledge of relationships and social network is essential to the organization as it helps to maintain and improve rapport among employees across the organization as well as stakeholders and customers. Losing of employees will cut off the established social relationships (Pennings et al., 1998) which directs to negative impacts on the intellectual capitals. Knowledge of social network involves know-who as guide to build and maintain wide-range of professional network of professional individuals (Leonard et al., 2014). Knowledge of relationships possessed by the employees allows them to be able to place the right contacts and refers to the right source (Joe et al., 2013).

Whenever having problems, one of the primary steps is to look for individual who has solved the same problems previously (Eucker, 2007). This is where knowledge of problem solving is needed. Cross (2006) as cited by Eucker (2007) mentioned that quality and scope of network of an individual provides extensive impact on the ability of the individual to solve problems. Older employees are those who have work for a long time with the possession of vary experiences of projects, routines, processes and others. The experiences gathered provide them valuable knowledge that is crucial especially in handling problems in the organization.

DeLong (2004) pointed out that losing of knowledge causing the reduction of capacity for effective actions and decision making in a particular environment of the organization. Knowledge of decision making relates to an individual's judgment towards a certain area that he is employee in. Employees judge or decide on something through distinction that cannot be seen by the inexperience employees. A wild-land fire employee explained on how he understand local flora in order to handle burning to control bushes in particular areas. He stated that less new hires are able to make such decisions and it frustrated most of wild- land fire employees (Leonard et al., 2014).

Marketing knowledge is essential as it increase the employees or entrepreneurs' ability to seek for external opportunities by attracting customers to consume their products as well as increasing the growth of economy (Burgers et al., 2008). Researchers are now focus on two specific types of knowledge which are marketing and technical knowledge as they are important in achieving desired outcomes of entrepreneurs and organizations. Shane (2000) stated that technical knowledge focuses on products, technologies, and processes involved in the organization while marketing is acquired by interacting with manufacturer, customers, and suppliers (Zhao & Wang, 2015). Due to increase of competition and complexity in market, entrepreneurs find it is difficult for them to acquire resources and promote their products. Therefore, some of them prefer to develop new routines and competencies in facilitating the accessibility of resources.

2.3 Strategies for knowledge retention

Previous researchers have suggested few strategies that can be taken by organizations in retaining their knowledge assets especially related to tacit knowledge of an employee. Argawal and Islam (2015) stated that Hayward-Wright (2009) lists two types of strategies for knowledge retention which are system-based knowledge transfer and people-based knowledge transfer strategies. People-based knowledge transfer strategy concerns in retaining tacit knowledge through social interaction and experiences. The strategies that can be taken to retain knowledge includes mentoring, coaching, shadowing, joint decision making, interviews, storytelling, networking, think tanks, forums or community of practice (Daghfous et al., 2013). Further study conducted by Mustapa and Mustapa (2014) also suggest similar strategies that is through organization's meeting, establishing an open communication environment, instilling mentor protégé relationship, exit interview implementation, establishment of company intranet and also through community of practice.

Mentoring is one of the strategies that are mostly implemented in the entrepreneurship industry by which the talented and experienced one guides the new and young entrepreneur. Coulter (2003) suggested that training can help to keep the employees or entrepreneurs who are well trained. The training can be in three categories which are technical, interpersonal and problem-solving training. Coulter (2003) adds that in retaining the entrepreneur, another strategy that can be taken is through providing compensation and benefits which include merit pay, profit sharing and others. This strategy is done to

attract and retain the entrepreneurs with talents to help the organization in achieving its goals.

Rothwell (2004) as cited in Argawal and Islam (2015) also suggested strategies that focus on knowledge retention which include process documentation, critical incident interviews or questionnaires, employee systems, job aids, information exchanges and best practices studies. Understanding the importance of knowledge retention helps organizations to be able to access the vital knowledge and expertise owned by their employees as well as acknowledging the role of knowledge management in the organizations which helps in developing their competitive advantage as well as gaining profits.

3. Methodology

This paper is an explorative case study that seeks to identify the potential of knowledge that can be retained among three agro entrepreneurs in Malaysia. The data collection was conducted through face-to-face interview. This study focused on the purposive sampling in which the samples were the agro entrepreneurs from entrepreneurship industry. They are the entrepreneurs who have been involved in entrepreneurship sector with ten (10) to thirty (30) years of professional experiences and possessed a broad area of knowledge specifically entrepreneurship and business. There were three (3) agro entrepreneurs interviewed by the researcher. Rather than choosing new entrepreneurs, those who acquired more experiences have more knowledge and expertise in handling business cases or issues. The interview sessions were taken at their working place (farm and office). Semi-structured interview script is prepared as an initial point to lead the conversation between the interviewer and interviewee. The aim is to capture as much as possible the respondent's thoughts about a particular topic or a practical task. The questionnaire constructed for this study is based on the objectives to be achieved. The researcher only conducted the interview, collected data and analyzed them without interfering the routine functioning of the entrepreneurs. This study was conducted in a non-contrived setting called as the field study.

4. Findings

Table 1 shows the participants' profile. The participants are the entrepreneurs in the agriculture sector which are also known as agro entrepreneurs that have extensive experiences in this sector.

Table 1: Respondents' profile

Participant	Age	Experiences (years)	Area of Expertise	Past Background
AGP1	51	30	Poultry	Businessman
AGP2	59	20	Goat	Chemistry and biology teacher
AGP3	37	10	Goat, Deer, Cattle and Fish	Technician in DRB Hicom Defence Technologies (Deftech)

4.1 Types of Knowledge to be retained

Based on the interviews conducted, it was identified that there were five (5) types of knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs that are needed to be retained and they are marketing skills, analytical thinking, technical skills, managerial skills, and social skills.

4.1.1 Marketing Skills

The agro entrepreneurs stated that their knowledge was derived from their interests in agro sector and from their experiences in the business area. They shared the same concept and stated that marketing skill is needed for a successful entrepreneur especially in agro sector. They used various channels and platforms to market their products such as social media, printed magazines and newspapers as well as through agents from various places. In entrepreneurship field, creativity and innovation are critically needed as a way of boosting up the profits of the business, generate demands and holding the customers' loyalty. The most important thing is that they need to invest on effective strategies or techniques to promote the products. This includes vary the livestock into multiple products.

4.1.2 Analytical thinking

They stated that the problem solving is made based on their intuitions, experiences and from studies or readings. Often, they always encounter problems in many aspects including management, employees' commitment, demands issue, and external threats such as implementation of GST, drop of sales and diseases such as bird flu, as well as foot and mouth disease. To handle the issue, the agro entrepreneurs need to find and decide on appropriate ways or strategies to be used. The strategies include changing fodder system from releasing livestock in the field to feedlot system (providing grains in the fence), maintaining price of products, as well as seeking helps from other parties such as veterinary. According to Omerzel and Antončić (2008) stated that the failure of an entrepreneur to solve problems often become the main barrier for the entrepreneur to be successful. Not everyone can solve problems and not everyone has knowledge to deal with it. Those who have the ability to tackle the problems and decide on the best thing to do are people who acquire rich knowledge. Thus, that is the reason why it need to be retained.

4.1.3 Technical skill

Based on the findings, the agro entrepreneurs have the knowledge of building fences as well as handling machines and equipment's to process livestock and grains. The skill usually cannot be obtained through readings or story but through training and practical on field. AGP1, AGP2, and AGP3 always make sure to understand and be familiar with appropriate technologies and processes involved in the business especially dealing with their livestock. The ability to turn one product to another is something practical as it also involves calculations and measurements. They also have the knowledge in producing urea fertilizer which is acquired from the waste products. Technical skill is necessary to produce good products and services which includes operations, design, research and development, and environmental observation. Acquisition of technical skills differs one to another in which those who have the skill can survive in any condition by taking

risks. (Kutzhanova et al., 2009, Cooney, 2012).

4.1.4 Managerial skill

The agro entrepreneurs must know and understand diseases that are normally faced by the livestock such as bird flu, puru, pneumonia, and others. They need to periodically check on the livestock as well as learning to heal them. Involvement of a team in work is necessary in a business. They also always check and monitor their businesses' cash flows. In managing a team or employees, the agro entrepreneurs always

make sure that their employees are well trained and coached to conduct tasks in the right manner. Agro entrepreneurs should gain managerial skills in planning, organizing, leading and controlling the business. In fact, they have to know and understand things pertaining to finance, marketing, market development and competitions (Papulová & Mokroš, 2007).

4.1.5. Social skills

According to the findings gathered, the agro entrepreneurs always make sure to show good attitude and respond to customers' needs and demands. Providing feedbacks and good services can attract the customers to purchase the products and trust them. Joe et al. (2013) stated that knowledge of relationships and social networks enables them to locate right contacts as well as referring to the right source. This means that the entrepreneurs will be able to know and contact the sources such as customers, agents, and supplier pertaining to their business. Joe et al. added, knowledge of social network relates to knowing how a society interact which will help in business product and problem solving. Part of the strategies to build and maintain relationship with the customers is by joining and conducting promotional activities.

5. Reasons for retaining the knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs

It is found that there are two main reasons of why the knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs need to be retained

5.1 Long-term Business

One of the reasons of retaining the knowledge of the agro entrepreneurs is for long-term business. Knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs is valuable because it is acquired through broad experiences in business field. For the participants, the most important thing is interest. Their interests in agro-based business have led them to open their own business. Therefore, they do not have any plan to retire or leave the business because that is what they love to do. The entrepreneurs especially the first generation are those who work hard to establish and expand their business from the start. They know all corners in business industry and how they struggled to make their business success. The entrepreneurs found the opportunity of entering markets and promote their products. Previously, there are entrepreneurs who have to close down their business because they did not maximize the benefits of their knowledge. Knowledge such as marketing, analytical thinking, technical, managerial, and knowledge in social networking are among knowledge that is needed to be retained for benefits of the business' future development. An added value of an entrepreneur is that he must be able to create, look for opportunities, and

to have enthusiastic in business.

5.2 Customers' Loyalty

Another reason for retaining the knowledge that is found in this study is for holding the customers' loyalty. Maintaining the customers' loyalty and trust helps the business to run for a long period of time. This is because the customers own the purchasing and bargaining power towards the products. Based on the findings, the agro entrepreneurs agreed that retaining their knowledge will also hold and maintain their customers' loyalty. This is because they know their customers well including their demands and needs.

According to the agro entrepreneurs, one way to keep their customers' loyalty is through marketing strategy in which they maintain the price and ensuring the quality of the livestock. Currently, numbers of entrepreneurs keep growing and the agro industry has becoming more competitive. In order to hold our customers, they have to meet each of the customer's needs and expectations (Mascareigne, 2009). When the customers satisfy and trust with their products and services, they will return.

6 Strategies for knowledge retention

Based on the interviews conducted, it is found that there are few strategies that are preferred by the respondent to capture and retain their knowledge and they are through community of practice, training and coaching.

6.1 Community of Practice (CoP)

Ardichvili (2006) stated that CoPs allow the dissemination of tacit knowledge which is difficult to be communicated (Nonaka, 1994; Polany, 1957) because it is mostly cited in a specific context. Based on the findings gathered, the agro entrepreneurs agreed that they gain their knowledge by interacting with a group of entrepreneurs in agro sector as well as breeders. The agro entrepreneurs also join societies such as Persatuan Penternak dan Pengusaha Ayam Kedah/Perlis and Persatuan Penternak Lembu dan Kambing Malaysia. The entrepreneurs always held meetings to discuss matters pertaining to agro sector as well as management of livestock. Other than that, social media also plays important role in gathering and creating CoP because they can share information among each other without face-to-face interactions. This is because people nowadays prefer to use technology or computerized applications to share and transfer their knowledge.

6.2 Training

The participants also conduct and attend trainings for the purpose of gaining and transferring knowledge with other entrepreneurs. Trainings are given to those who are interested in learning about managing of business and livestock. Most people will invite the participants to give talk and trainings. In fact, they also do the training on field in which the participants will learn through

practical activities such as slaughtering livestock and processing grains. Competencies such as honesty and punctuality are very important and should be acquired by entrepreneurs. Therefore, the employees and students of the agro entrepreneurs also are trained to have that competency.

6.3 Coaching

The participants also prefer coaching as the strategy to share and transfer their knowledge. By teaching and providing guides to their employees and students, the knowledge is transferred. The participants stated that they always make sure their employees know all processes and work flow of the business as well as their roles and responsibilities. They are coached on handling the livestock, managing customers, and healing the livestock. Retention of knowledge is needed for the purpose of ensuring the productivity of the SMEs while coaching is the driver for a quality business environment (Herman, 2009).

7. Conclusion

It is concluded that in retaining knowledge of the agro entrepreneurs, it is crucial for the organization to identify types of knowledge owned by the agro entrepreneurs that should be retained. The findings of this study suggested five types of knowledge that need to be retained from the agro entrepreneurs are; marketing skills, analytical thinking skills, managerial skills, technical skills, and social networking skills. Identifying the knowledge helps the organization to plan to capture, preserve, and share with other employees or entrepreneurs before they leave. This study also highlights the reasons for retaining the knowledge for the benefits of the organization and preferred strategies to be used in capturing and transferring the knowledge. The findings gathered are limited due to fewer numbers of participants because it only covers three participants to represent other agro entrepreneurs. However, it is believed that the findings of this study are sufficient to represent the population of agro entrepreneurs in Malaysia because they have the same nature in the business area.

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