Study of Information Technology Support to Knowledge Sharing in Social Enterprises

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Abstract : Information technology (IT) facilitates the management of knowledge in organisations through the effective leverage of collective experience and knowledge of employees. This supports information processing needs, as well as enables and facilitates sense-making activities of knowledge workers. The study of IT support for knowledge management (KM) has been carried out mainly in larger organisations where resources and competitive conditions can trigger the use of KM. However, there is still a lack of understanding on how IT can support the management of knowledge under different organisational settings influenced by: constant tensions between social and economic objectives, more focus on sustainability than competiveness, limited resources, and high levels of democratic participation and intrinsic motivations among employees. All these conditions are presented in Social Enterprises (SEs), which are normally micro and small businesses that trade to tackle social problems, improve communities, people's life chances, and the environment. Thus, their importance to society and economies is increasing. However, there is still a need for more understanding of how these organisations operate, perform, innovate and scale-up. This knowledge is crucial to design and provide accurate strategies to enhance the sector and increase its impact and coverage. To obtain a conceptual and empirical understanding of how IT can facilitate KM in the particular organisational conditions of SEs, a quantitative study was conducted with 432 owners and senior members of SEs in UK, underpinned by 21 interviews. The findings demonstrated how IT was supporting more the recovery and storage of necessary information in SEs, and less the collaborative work and communication among enterprise members. However, it was established that SEs were using cloud solutions, web 2.0 tools, Skype and centralised shared servers to manage informally their knowledge. The possible impediments for SEs to support themselves more on IT solutions can be linked mainly to economic and human constraints. These findings elucidate new perspectives that can contribute not only to SEs and SE supporters, but also to other businesses.

Keywords : social enterprises, knowledge management, information technology, collaboration, small firms