Anecdote-based Elicitation Method for Knowledge Audit

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Extended Abstract

Economic prosperity rests upon the useful application of knowledge. Although increasingly organizations gradually committed to knowledge management (KM) projects for the sake of corporate sustainability, many KM projects eventually failed. These failures attribute to the ignorance in performing knowledge asset assessment prior to the formulation of a KM strategy. Knowledge audit shall therefore be recognized as the first critical step in any KM initiative. Realizing the criticality of knowledge audit, the Knowledge Management and Innovation Research Centre (KMIRC) of the Hong Kong Polytechnic University started conducting research on knowledge audit research in 2006. While the research team has gained remarkable success in launching knowledge audit for structured business processes, the team continues to extend the existing knowledge audit methodology to cover unstructured business processes.

Current business landscape is encountering a paradigmatic shift from structured to unstructured business processes. Instead of following standardized daily routines, knowledge workers are required to deal with ad hoc tasks and contingencies in daily basis. There are numerous agents, which continually interact, learn and adapt with one another and with the externals. In face of such paradigmatic shift, existing knowledge audit tools shall be reviewed in two aspects. On one hand, the applicability of existing knowledge elicitation methods such as interviews, questionnaires and focus group in unstructured business process shall be explored. These methods usually require the researchers to pre-define the questions to be asked in the knowledge elicitation process. While the researcher usually has insufficient understanding about the unstructured processes, the pre-defined questions may not elicit much in-depth and contextual response. On the other hand, existing knowledge representation methods for knowledge audit, namely the knowledge map and knowledge inventory could not visualize and detect the patterns emerged from unstructured business processes. Existing methods, including knowledge map and knowledge inventory, are merely snapshots of the knowledge assets. Although they tabulate and record the knowledge assts identified from knowledge audit, they do forbids pattern detection and reflection amongst individuals members in teams and organizations.

To address the research gaps, a knowledge audit tool was developed and implemented in a reference site namely the Hong Kong and China Gas Company Limited (Towngas). A complex and unstructured process, namely the development, launch and revision of policies and guidelines was selected. The implemented knowledge audit tool has two major differentiating characteristics from existing knowledge audit methodologies. Firstly, anecdote circle and sense-making were employed as the knowledge elicitation methods. With these approaches, knowledge assets emerge from a bottom-up manner while respondents share their daily experiences in the anecdote circle. The researcher would neither have to pre-define

questions nor investigate areas to probe into during the knowledge elicitation process. Secondly, a new knowledge representation method, known as knowledge-activity map, has been developed. The knowledge-activity map not only visualizes the sophisticated and complex relationship amongst knowledge assets, agents and activities, it also aids pattern detection in the unstructured business processes. Acknowledged the patterns in the unstructured work, individual team members under investigation could better manage the complex and unstructured processes. Learning could be facilitated while the team members reflect and adapt to the changing patterns and business landscape.

The case study in Towngas revealed that the adapted knowledge audit methodology could not only lead to traditional knowledge audit results and findings such as ratio of implicit- explicit knowledge, critical implicit and explicit knowledge, critical knowledge owners and customers, and gaps analysis, but also leads to new findings, including the analysis of the knowledge-activity map, generating patterns for the team's reflection and learning. For example, an identified pattern reveals that two involved teams in the selected business processes, including the Hong Kong and China teams were lack of a systematic knowledge transfer scheme. This undesirable pattern is recognized by the respondents whom have decided to take destabilizing actions against the pattern. In addition, other patterns such as the high risk of knowledge loss, the differentiating amount of efforts from Hong Kong and China teams, the lack of knowledge items in supporting critical activities were identified. The identification of pattern was acknowledged and valued by the respondents. The case study of the developed knowledge audit tool provided empirical evidence that the knowledge audit tool is practical and feasible for use in unstructured business processes.

The research has, to date, achieved significance in the introduction of new knowledge elicitation and knowledge representation methods in producing knowledge audit results for pattern detection. However, as the developed knowledge audit tool is relatively new in the literature, further work to establish its robustness, validity and predictability is required.