

Working across boundaries: advantages and disadvantages



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This paper examines the perspective of working across boundaries from the lens of Human Resource Management. The paper is split into four main parts. The Introduction which provides the background to working across boundaries as it applies in HRM today. A definition section that examines the different aspects of working across boundaries i. e. social, physical, knowledge and mental. Further examination of some theoretical perspectives including the work of Heracleous. The reason that modern organisations need to work across boundaries together with consideration of strategy and leveraging capabilities. A section that looks at the advantages and disadvantages of working across boundaries with a focus on the public sector including healthcare organisations and local authorities. The conclusions summarise the key points.

DEFINING WORKING ACROSS BOUNDARIES

During the last decade, the concept of working across boundaries has become a popular concept. The basic premise is that individuals and organisation need to traverse boundaries if they are to achieve their goals. Essentially earlier concepts of fixed organisational demarcation lines no longer apply in modern day business concepts. Within the organisational framework the concept of boundaries can become a reasonably complex issue. There still remains an active debate as to whether the definitions of boundaries are realistic, objective or imagined. The concept has become more complex with the use of outsourcing and Public/Private partnerships in terms of lines of demarcation and authority. (Bishop, 2003)

The concept of boundaries within organisations takes on different shapes and forms. Much of this has to do with social and knowledge boundaries. The <https://assignbuster.com/working-across-boundaries-advantages-and-disadvantages/>

explosion in technological and communication advances has simplified the concept of working across boundaries. Despite the fact that organizations still are challenged to collaborate and share information, nevertheless individuals seem much more liberated in this regard with advancement in social media. Russ Linden is one author who has investigated this, with particular focus on Public sector organisations. (Linden, 2003).

The old fashioned concept of organizational design was the creation of silos or departments where functions, roles and responsibilities would be clearly defined within the context of a hierarchical matrix. For example Sales, Finance, Production would each be self-contained units within the organisation and clearly defined lines of demarcation within the business. The Heads of these Departments would be Senior Managers and expected to collaborate with one another but not trespass into the other domains. The holistic business strategy relied upon each unit to fulfil its role within the overall strategic plan. As organisations involved in size and complexity this model posed serious shortcomings and new thought processes were required. This required improved leadership thinking and more collaboration across boundaries. (Stevens, 2006).

Working across boundaries remains an important part of Public Sector relationships and impose significant challenges to business operations but they create distinctive value sets and improved goals in the business relationships (Sullivan, 2007)

Concepts of working across boundaries

In management terms boundaries are often classified as lines of demarcation that often impose constraints. Those items that determine managerial effectiveness. For example: how a business works within the confines of a specific environment; the concept of specific leadership styles and the influence on organizational behaviour. It was Heracleous[1]who pointed out in 2004 that both organisations and the environments they function in are inter-related. They create structures and social orders that assist in the definition of the business and its purpose. (Heracleous, 2008)

Understanding social boundaries

This essentially relates to the relationships that are formed between groups of individuals within an organization. Heracleous maintained that boundaries have remained central to the thinking of social scientists in the establishment of social boundaries between groups and individuals.

Particular reference made to that of transactions costs and how modern technology like sophisticated communications and the internet have had a profound impact here. It has directed whether the boundaries have either diminished or enlarged and the effect on production costs has influenced important decisions like that of outsourcing or internalisation of specific tasks. (Heracleous, 2004). Understanding social change can be studied by the adoption of Lewin's Forcefield Analysis. There are numerous models that you can adopt to examine the impact of Change to the Organization. One common method approach is that of Lewin's Forcefield Analysis. Fig 1 provides an example of the model.

Figure Force field Analysis example This enables you to examine both the driving and restraining forces that emerge as a result of the proposed changes. The model is particularly good for identifying forces that are considered to be ' polarized' i. e. a change in one condition creates an equal and opposite effect in the other. The model was designed by Lewin to assist the Process Analyst to guide people through the unfreeze, move and refreeze stages of business process analysis. It is also an excellent means of demonstrating the dynamics that are in play. So by completion of the Force field Model you have acquired the data in order to complete Lewin's Three Step Model. In the Unfreeze you examine the status quo and those driving forces for change. You can decrease the resisting forces against change. The move element involves taking actions and moving people. The freeze means make the changes permanent and establish new ways of doing things. Introduce concept of ' rewards' for achieving the desired outcomes.

Understanding knowledge boundaries

The sharing of knowledge has both an internal and external boundary. For example in the internal model it is desirable for information to be shared between the Sales and Marketing departments. This empowers both department to do a better job. Externally, there is the sharing and collaboration of knowledge and information between allies. For example a UK based company and its overseas subsidiary.

In order for an organization to be successful it must manage its' four pillars of knowledge. These being Leadership, Organization, Technology and Learning. Information Technology (Pillar 3) has achieved an amazing impact in the promotion and dissemination of knowledge in the business
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environment. Unfortunately Technology has had a greater influence on guiding the strategic planning of organizations, as opposed to the other way round. One example being that of Enterprise Planning Systems like SAP and J. D. Edwards One World system. Organizations have re-engineered their knowledge base and business processes in order to meet the integrated demands of the software application. (Bixler, 2002)

Knowledge Managers need to understand that despite the many advantages Information Technology (IT) has to offer the workplace it is not a magic utopian panacea. Equally any Information Technology application that undervalues Knowledge Management will equally fail in the business place. (Mohammed). If Knowledge Management is to be considered effective with IT in business it must be treated as its equal partner. Knowledge Managers have criticised IT as being lacking in areas like tacit knowledge. Hence there is a need to incorporate items of behavioural consideration and cognitive function. (Bixler, 2002)

There is an increasing demand and challenge being placed upon the CIO's of business organizations and as such Managers need to become more vocal about their expectations and use the ' four pillars' as a framework in order to further improve the integration of knowledge in the organization.

Understanding physical boundaries

The concepts of boundaries are important because it is these that represent challenges which organisations must overcome. Although organisations are essentially construed as open systems and these providing a continued interface with their environment. Many academics still believe that it is

management that defines the physical boundaries and how you differentiate between internal and external items. (Schnieder, 1987). In reality it is difficult for management to define these boundaries as organisations have multiple stakeholders; such only by the integration of the combined needs can you truly obtain an understanding of the organisational identity. AS such those members of the organisation are of a precarious nature and there are many different ways in which they may be depicted as being inside or outside of the organisational composition. (Lane, 2000).

Understanding Mental boundaries

Mental boundaries essentially relate to individual perception of what is considered to be internal or external to the organisation. This being what is considered to be acceptable and that which goes beyond this to the realm of external control. It is this form of cognitive schema that helps individuals to create and understand the different social boundaries within an organisation. These differentiations often create perceptions of attitudes related to “ us” and “ them” and the formation of symbolic boundaries that enable distinctions to be drawn. (Heracleous, 2004).

The need to work across boundaries

Essentially the need to work across boundaries relates to that of collaboration with other entities in order to help the development and growth of the organisation. This may range from that of strategic business alliances, creation of partnership arrangements, developing business networks and other forms of collaboration and communication in order to benefit the business. Further, the concept of business transformation and organisational change can promote the need to work across boundaries. Hence regardless <https://assignbuster.com/working-across-boundaries-advantages-and-disadvantages/>

of the barriers created, being real or imaginary, we are almost compelled to work across them.

Advantages and Disadvantages of working across boundaries

Advantages of working across boundaries

There are numerous advantages to working across boundaries, particularly within the Public Sector environment. Briefly, these may be enumerated as follows:

- Increase in working collaboration
- Integration of partnerships with the Private Sector
- Reduction of costs and process improvements
- Expanding networks and building knowledge
- Response to complex public policies
- Leveraging strategy and operational capabilities
- Aligning organisations and cultures
- Improvement of leadership capabilities – balancing risk and reward

(Blackman, 2010).

Increase in working collaboration

Historically the concept of collaborative working was rarely recognised as having any strategic importance. Silos were created in both Public and Private sector organisations and many of these departments functioned self-autonomously. In modern day context this has all changed and it is recognised that collaborative working both inter and intra the organization has significant benefits. In particular the organisation is better equipped for:

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- Dealing with business transformation and change
- Ability to provide better service levels and customer support
- Optimization of resources and cost reduction strategies
- Ability to innovate and create by improved knowledge acquisition
- Easier to transition to new change requirements
- Increased flexibility and ability to share successes and failures

The concept of collaboration is an enabling function that allows you to bring people together with different views and opinions. This concept of diversity enriches the decision making process and improve the dynamics in business working relationships. This has been successfully introduced in the Health Sector in Wales. Here different local authorities were required to formulate med-long term strategic plans. Direct collaboration between the authorities enabled the sharing of knowledge and ideas which facilitated rationalization and a more improved overarching holistic result. (Sullivan, 2007).

Another example of collaboration is the ability to bring key stakeholders together in a collaborative environment. This has been effective in both local and central government projects. Bringing the stakeholders together creates greater synergy and improved policy implementation with the organisational setting. Collaboration has extended into areas of joint policy making, as opposed to just sharing information. Geoff Delamare from Surrey County Council states there are some distinct learning points from collaborative working i. e. Creating the level of trust between partners, ensuring transparency in communications and sharing knowledge; admitting mistakes, creating a collaborative environment and not imposing a ruling regime. (McCann, 2012).

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Integration of partnerships with the private sector

Partnership approaches have increased in popularity over the last decade. In the public sector they have obtained wide political support. This has been seen as a means of making process improvements whilst optimizing cost expenditures in order to provide improved value for money. The UK Audit Commission is an example of where they have crossed boundaries to embrace working relationships with counterparts in the European Union (EU). This has been effective in collaboration to help improve inter-governmental policy implementation. (McQuaid, 2000).

Reduction of costs and process improvements

In these difficult financial times both Central Government public sector bodies and local authorities have been faced with managing tight budgetary programmes and reducing costs. The latter meaning resource and cost optimization in order to show the best returns on investment for monies expended. This has focused attention on streamlining processes in order to create improved efficiencies and eliminate redundancies. In addition, concepts of outsourcing to reduce resource costs and capital expenditure. Local Authorities in the UK have been very active in this area. Barnet Council is implementing an outsourcing plan in order to save £120m . Others like Cornwall Council have been examining strategic partnerships to outsource both front and back office functions. IT departments remain particularly vulnerable because they are capital intensive and expensive to both operate and maintain. (Terry, 2013).

Expanding networks and building knowledge

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Disadvantages of working across boundaries

The main disadvantages of working across boundaries are enumerated as follows:

- Complexity and Commonality
- People, Culture and Leadership
- Power and Politics
- Performance Accountability and Budgets

Complexity and commonality

The success to working across boundaries is where sufficient empathy exists to recognise shared goals and values in order to predicate a desired outcome. Where there is a lack of sufficient commonality this can be a serious barrier towards attaining a successful outcome. The importance of shared or common goals is therefore of paramount importance in any collaborative venture. Trying to force collaboration in the wrong environmental setting will most likely incur resistance and ultimately force of costs and resource effort providing little return on investment.

One particular example in the Public sector relates to the large failure of IT projects that have often lacked sufficient commonality. In 2003 in the UK a poll stated that only one third of all IT projects were successful. Nearly 70% of all projects being severely challenged or failing in their entirety. (Post Report 200, 2003).

People culture and leadership

The people issue is extremely important when working across boundaries as it requires a structured but flexible work group that are able to collaborate over both hard and soft structure. In the public sector the staff need to develop cross-boundary skills in order to facilitate inter agency co-operation. These however can be highly influenced by both policy and political agenda. It has been argued that within the public sector the influence of Human Resource Management (HRM) groups have created significant barriers to cross-party working relationships.

Lack of good leadership skills in the public sector provided the inability for many senior leaders to work across boundaries and manage complex business transformation programmes. This prevented optimum leveraging of resources between different organisations. Good leaders are important enablers as they are important for leveraging resources, motivating people and ensuring that the work gets done. As such poor leadership constitutes a serious barrier in order to enable working across boundaries. This results in what has often been referred to as 'silo management style', the inability to progress beyond your own defined domain.

Power and Politics

The concept of working across boundaries may have a serious influence on the reshaping of power and politics within an organisation. This can be particularly potent where an area is perceived to be under threat. In this sense both politics and power are intertwined and political endorsements have the ability to create tremendous barriers. Ministers set the signals for civil servants to work across boundaries but this is often towards the attainment of specific political agendas. These can be very fickle and subject to change, hence the civil service has to be articulate in how this is both managed and interpreted.

Performance in accountability and budgets

Improved performance targets have been very popular in recent years. This has meant working across boundaries to optimise business processes and resource effort. Failure in the reconfiguration of performance systems can create significant barriers and a great deal of disruption in provision of

remedial action. Budget attainment has equally been criticised in terms of holding Managers responsible for achieving budget figures, despite the fact that cross border relationships have provided them with only limited control and influence over the finances. (Parton, 1998).

CONCLUSION

The concept of working across boundaries is not a new concept but one that has been with us for many decades. Technology has created more ‘enablers’ in terms of making this more operationally efficient and the ability to share information and knowledge. The reality of globalisation, struggling financial markets, the need for cost cutting and austerity measures have increased the need for more collaborative working. The use of sharing information in a collaborative environment often results in better outcomes and an improved managed risk portfolio.

Leadership skills have become of paramount importance and in particular the skills required to motivate and influence others in a collaborative teamwork environment. Local authorities have been particularly successful in working with private sector relationships in order to enhance service provision, increased efficiencies and implementation of cost reduction programmes.