Germany's knowledge management for business excellence

Germany defines knowledge management (KM) as "the building block of innovation." The primary objective of KM in Germany is to support the transformation from reliance on manufacturing to an economy centered on knowledge-creating enterprises. Knowledge-intensive service-sector skills (predominantly in SMEs) rather than cutting-edge, R&D-intensive technologies are visualized as the backbone of the German economy in the future. The APO organized a study mission to Germany on Knowledge-creating Enterprises, 27 April–1 May 2009, in partnership with the German Federal Government, Benchmarking Partnerships, BCS Management, Eureki, and the German Association of Knowledge Management (GfWM). Sixteen KM champions from nine member countries traveled on this mission to Germany.

On the first day in Bremen, a visit was made to Airbus Corporation, a KM award winner in 2007 and home of the Columbus Space Station, A380 aircraft production and the Beluga carrier. That was followed by a presentation by Atlas Elektronik on Ten Years' Experience Using the Knowledge Cha-cha-cha. Other sessions at Airbus featured lectures by and discussions with Airbus partner Pumacy Technologies and the Airbus KM team. A benchmarking exercise using the Airbus Expert Transfer Model was followed by an experiment on customizing the model for the Asian context. On the second day, the group travelled to Nienberg, near Gottingen, to the SME Burgel, a winner of the 2001 KM Award and pioneer in forming a collaborative network in the German bath and heating industry. The network focuses on the development of an apprenticeship and schooling system for plumbers, electricians, techni- etc. through vocational schools, associations, guilds, and associa- nationwide. This allows the industry through the generation of new talents craft while preserving the trade and skill standards.

On day 3, the Robert Bosch Car Multimedia GmbH in Hildeshiem demonstrated KM applications on a customized production line. The Bosch culture created an "expert taxonomy" of new techniques and solutions in a central database accessible to all employees. The mission spent that evening at the Goettingen town hall to learn how the KM tradition had it roots in antiquity. Goettingen University has produced the most German Nobel Prize laureates, and the city has long been a key political, trade, science, and technology center. The mission visited 2005 KM Award Winner Deutsche Gesellschaft fur Technische Zusammenarbeit (GtZ) GmbH on day 4 for a half-day workshop on KM in GtZ and a presentation by Siemens on KM for Merger and Acquisition Integration before traveling to Frankfurt to attend the German KM Workshop hosted by the German KM Society in the afternoon, where six presentations were made by notable KM practitioners and later an evening session for social networking called "Ba" was orchestrated. On the fourth day, three special lectures were given by Reinisch AG (a pioneer in KM application for SMEs), the Schaeffler Group, and Siemens highlighting their enterprise KM models. In the afternoon of the same day, an discussion on SMEs and KM applications using the "intellectual statement" development was conducted by the experts.

The final day was devoted to a workshop for APO participants, who divided into three groups to plan KM roadmaps for SME businesses, innovation-creating enterprises, and technology-creating enterprises, respectively. A debriefing session was conducted by lead expert Dr. Peter Heisig, followed by a wrap-up session by experts Bruce Searles and Terry Pilcher.

Germany's efforts to evolve its KM applications through systematic, business-focused, interdisciplinary approaches will allow its enterprises to maintain market leadership and lead to more job creation. Those efforts involve the development of tool kits, publication of trade journals, national KM research projects, and a national KM expert database. A tripartite arrangement allows KM champions within geographic and business clusters known as "knowledge regions" as opposed to traditional industry clusters to seek various forms of support from the federal and regional governments. This has resulted in a KM national network such as the Hessen Agentur network, BITCOM, GfWM, and WiMiP (a self-funded network of private-sector representatives, with the exceptions of academics and consultants). Regional and professional networks are available throughout Germany, which contribute to the formation of communities of practice for KM. Although the work in KM is substantive, there remains room for improvement in measurement, quantification of direct and indirect benefits, and quality assurance challenges, German models are consistently singled out for excellence and have been recommended as the basis for a common EU framework on KM, specifically the Fraunhofer or GPO-WM framework developed by Dr. Peter Heisig. They are also expected to transform the entire German economy to a knowledge-driven one based on the platform of KM as a driver of innovation and growth.

The APO Secretariat will examine and possibly exploit the German models observed for enterprises in member countries in the near future in collaboration with key German counterparts. This mission would not have been possible without the generous support of various German agencies. Participants found the mission timely, since KM practitioners in the Asia-Pacific now seek to refine their models to adapt to the changing socioeconomic environment.

Integrated German KM strategy/framework

Dr. Heisig, German EU model developer

Airbus's Beluga loading a section of the space station to send to NASA

Participants at the German KM workshop

Burgel Managing Director Eberhard Burgel

(Center photo) *Dr. Rolf Hochreiter, Federal Ministry of Economics and Technology of Germany*