

# Managing Knowledge Against the Tide: Barriers to Knowledge Management in the Chilean Social and Cultural Context

Gregorio Pérez-Arrau

Universidad de Santiago de Chile, Chile

[gregorio.perezarrau@usach.cl](mailto:gregorio.perezarrau@usach.cl)

**Abstract:** In recent years, knowledge management has become increasingly relevant in Chile, with a growing number of organisations adopting policies and practices in this area. Despite this growth, it is known that many of the new initiatives in the field of KM do not thrive or face difficult start-up challenges, limiting the number of successful initiatives in this country. In this context, the aim of this research is to identify the main barriers faced by managers and practitioners in the implementation of KM initiatives in the context of Chilean organisations and to describe the ways in which these problems are addressed by them. This study was based on the review of twenty-six cases of knowledge management initiatives implemented between 2010 and 2022 in Chile, which were described and analysed using qualitative methodology. Among the main findings, it was found that the most important barriers to carrying out these initiatives coincide, to a large extent, with some of the characteristics of Chilean culture and society described in the literature of organisational studies, such as: lack of trust; large power distance in the organisational structure; lack of communication skills; paternalistic organisational culture, to mention a few. Also, one aspect worth highlighting is the traditional business culture that tends to focus on a "low cost" strategy and exploitation of raw materials, rather than investing in innovation. Scarce resources, problematic performance measurement and lack of knowledge management training for employees and managers were also mentioned as adverse factors. The relevance of this study lies in the fact that it provides insight into the main barriers faced by knowledge management initiatives in developing countries, specifically in a region such as Latin America, thus contributing to the development of this field in this region.

**Keywords:** Knowledge Management, Barriers, Context, Chile

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## 1. Latin America in the Global Research Blind Spot

In recent decades, the world has undergone profound technological, economic and social changes, especially in countries with high levels of social and productive development, moving from a predominantly industrial economy to one in which intangible assets such as knowledge, social capital, intellectual capital, among others, play a major role in the production process. As a result, many label the modern economy as a knowledge economy (Hadad, 2017). In this context, organisations have gradually begun to recognise knowledge as a critical and differentiating resource, which can become a competitive advantage for companies and countries (Schwab, 2017).

When reviewing the development of knowledge management at the global level, it is undeniable that both the fundamental theoretical conceptualisation and subsequent progress in this field have been carried out almost exclusively in developed countries, while the reality of developing or non-Western countries has tended to be barely addressed (Santos et al., 2020; Gaviria-Marin et al., 2018). The consequences of this fact may be relevant, especially if we take into account the weight of the social and cultural context of the Latin American region and the fact that it is highly likely that the way in which knowledge management is understood and carried out in the countries is different from the way in which it is understood in developed countries (Mohsin & Syed, 2018).

A first review of the literature developed in emerging economies shows that the research carried out in these countries tends to concentrate mainly on empirical studies whose purpose is generally to validate existing conceptualisations, with few original contributions based on the way in which knowledge management takes place in these countries.

In a recent bibliometric study developed by Gaviria-Marin, Merigó and Popa (2018), which analyses trends in publications over the last 20 years in what is considered the most prestigious scientific journals in the field of knowledge management, it was found that only two Latin American universities appear on the list of the most influential institutions in the world, within a list of fifty institutions and, of course, not in the top places. In the same study, when analysing the list of the most influential countries, considering the authors who have published in the *journal* and the institutions to which they belong, four countries appear on the list: Brazil (22), Mexico (24), Colombia (41) and Peru (48). This trend is confirmed by the studies of Serenko (2021), Centobelli et al (2022) and Farooq (2022), which reaffirm the tendency of Latin American countries, their universities, and experts to be almost absent from the current debate on knowledge management.

Chile, like most other Latin American countries, does not show much development in this field, although, as we will see below, there are signs of growing interest over the last decade. Recently published studies show that

knowledge management in Chile is in an embryonic state, with few initiatives in medium and large companies (Pérez-Arrau, 2016, 2015, 2010; Pérez-Arrau & Valdivia, 2016; Liberona & Ruiz, 2013; Obeso & Sarabia 2018). Research shows that some organisations develop practices related to knowledge management without necessarily "labelling" it under that specific concept (Acevedo & Diaz-Molina, 2023).

In a study recently presented at the European Conference on Knowledge Management 2022 (Perez-Arrau, 2022), a set of initiatives carried out in Chilean organisations was described and the main trends found in them were analysed. For example, it was found that the first initiatives labelled knowledge management emerged approximately a decade ago; that in recent years a community of practice related to knowledge management practices has developed, with more than thirty public and private organisations; that there is at least one postgraduate programme related to this subject taught at a university; and that there is also a number of research projects related to the subject.

## **2. Barriers to Knowledge Management**

Barriers to the successful implementation of knowledge management initiatives is a topic that has been studied since the beginning of the discipline in the 1990s, using multiple angles, levels and dimensions. For example, it has been studied from the organisational, team/group and individual perspective (Bollinger and Smith, 2001); also from the internal and external perspective (Zyngier, 2002); from the dimensions: organisation, environment and staff (); it has also been observed through micro and macro levels, the latter also differentiating between objective and subjective barriers to analysis (Rivera-Vasques et al., 2009). Research has also addressed the conceptual and cultural barriers (McCann III and Buckner, 2004) that affect organisations in the implementation of knowledge management initiatives, as well as looking at the problem from the categories of culture, leadership and education (Mason & Paullen, 2003), to mention only the best known.

Within the literature on barriers to knowledge management, organisational culture has played a prominent role. It has been seen by many as the main dimension that determines the success or failure of knowledge management (De Long and Fahey, 2000; Chase, 1997). Power distance, level of collectivism, femininity and uncertainty avoidance, future orientation, understanding of the environment, low context, importance of acquired status, lack of ownership of the problem and deviance of staff, focus on partnership and informality have been said to be determinants of willingness to share and therefore critical to the success or failure of a knowledge management initiative (Hauke, 2006; Singh & Kant, 2008).

Also, within the culture domain, other barriers mentioned are, for example, lack of communication in the organisation; a culture that is results-oriented, but not sharing; lack of motivation of superiors to share knowledge; intolerance of mistakes; prior and status given to knowledge holders; language barriers that emerge from the national culture; emphasis on the individual rather than the collective, among others (Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009; Ford and Chan, 2002; Kant & Singh, 2008).

Culture is a critical factor in this field. Many of the failures to implement knowledge management initiatives can be explained by a lack of determination in cultural change (Storey & Barnet 2000). While much of the literature on knowledge management has highlighted the value of technology in developing knowledge management practices, changes in attitudes and work practices are critical to the success of knowledge management initiatives (Kumar et al., 2014).

Along with culture, another determining variable in the success or failure of initiatives is leadership. Leaders have a huge responsibility in promoting the necessary actions for knowledge management, through a consistent, reliable and plausible discourse towards their subordinates (Disterer, 2001). In this area, the lack of management commitment has been mentioned as a fundamental determinant in the development of the process (Kant & Singh, 2008; Ford and Chan, 2002; Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009; KMPG, 1998).

Related to leadership and culture, there are a number of variables described in the literature as relevant, as their absence or presence can become a barrier to the implementation of knowledge management projects. For example, lack of resources to evaluate and acquire knowledge (Oliva & Kotable, 2019); lack of funding (KPGM, 1998); pressure for results in a short period of time (Oliva & Kotable, 2019); resistance to storage and evaluation of knowledge; excessive bureaucracy and top-down hierarchy; avoidance of conflict (Disterer, 2001) have been mentioned.

Similarly, it has been mentioned that aspects such as trust (Ardichvili et al, 2003), group-specific jargon (Disterer, 2001), rewarding knowledge "owners", frames of reference; the broad view on productive work, places and times to meet, and the absence of the "not-invented-here", the non-existence of social networks (Ford and

Chan, 2002), lack of time (Kant & Singh, 2008; KPMG, 1998) and even emotional intelligence (Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009), have been identified as some of the critical variables for the success or failure of knowledge management initiatives.

In another area, closer to the field of human resource management, we find the absence of financial incentives (Kant & Singh, 2008; Hauke, 2006; Disterer, 2001; Ford and Chan, 2002), job instability (Ford and Chan, 2002; Rivera-Vazquez et al., 2009), the absence of a staff retirement system (Kant & Singh, 2008), and the work environment are also important barriers to knowledge management.

Also, the absence of adequate structure, absence of processes and lack of infrastructure have been mentioned as barriers to knowledge management (Kant & Singh, 2008). In this area, the absence of appropriate technology is one of the main barriers mentioned in the literature (Dalkir, 2005; Singh and Kant, 2008). The problem of demonstrating results or impact has also been identified as one of the problems faced by those responsible for implementing knowledge management initiatives (Ruggles, 1998).

Finally, several studies have pointed to the importance of preparing a suitable environment. Davenport et al. (1998) has pointed out that the success of a knowledge management initiative depends on the existence of a knowledge environment that supports the practices. Within this "knowledge environment" it is necessary to include the preparation of people, mainly in terms of understanding what knowledge management is and means, as well as its results and benefits (KPMG, 1998). Lack of awareness is considered one of the most important barriers to the successful development of these initiatives (Bullinger et al., 1998).

### **3. The Research**

This research seeks to describe the problems and barriers to the implementation of knowledge management initiatives carried out in medium and large organisations in Chile between 2010 and 2022. The methodological approach of this proposal is purely qualitative, and is framed in the tradition of multiple case studies (Baxter, P., & Jack, 2008; Vasilachis de Gialdino, 2006).

Twenty-four public and private organisations of different economic sectors, ownership and size were studied. The sample of companies was not selected on a probabilistic basis, but for theoretical convenience, through different professional and academic contacts.

For the study, professionals and experts developing knowledge management projects in public and private organisations were interviewed, as well as consultants in this field. The cases were constructed through the development of one or more interviews, in which they were consulted about the initiative, its objectives, its stages, the tools used, with special emphasis on the problems encountered and the solutions to these problems. The analysis of the cases was carried out using NVIVO software.

### **4. Main Barriers Found**

A first difficulty for the implementation of knowledge management lies in the fact that in Chile there are very few professionals trained in this field. This leads to two problematic situations; the first is that in the absence of experts in the field, many organisations fail to distinguish knowledge management issues and instead tend to associate them with more familiar areas such as human resource management or ICTs. In the research there was a clear case of knowledge management interventions labelled as an "advanced training". There was also the case of a public institution that "intuitively" developed a proposal called "knowledge management", without any certainty among the team members that it actually corresponded to that field, a question that was clarified later with an expert in the field.

On the other hand, it was also found that the absence of knowledge management experts led some of the organisations to start their knowledge management initiatives without trained staff, with the consequent cost of learning in terms of mistakes, delay and lack of an appropriate plan. The most interesting case here was a public sector institution that started its knowledge management project with an untrained team. As a result, the first months of implementation were extraordinarily slow, although after a while they obtained satisfactory results. The lack of training in this field is not surprising considering that the supply of this subject in Chilean universities is extremely scarce, with only a few undergraduate and postgraduate courses on the subject and only one postgraduate programme offered on a regular basis since 2016.

Another striking finding in this research is the fact that most of the organisations studied received support from a single consultancy firm, developing a similar knowledge management strategy among them. In that sense, we found little diversity in objectives, processes and tools among the organisations studied. Perhaps for this reason,

some organisations started to develop their own tools in a self-taught way, looking for solutions that were better suited to their specific needs.

Nevertheless, some consultants interviewed in this study reported that companies intuitively recognise the need to rationally manage their critical knowledge, although they are unaware of the contributions that this discipline offers them. One of them reported that in their meetings with potential clients, it was enough to ask a few questions related to knowledge and learning in their organisations for them to realise the urgent need to address the rational management of their critical knowledge. In that sense, it is clear that organisations recognise the need for knowledge management when presented with this field of knowledge.

Another difficulty encountered by the leaders of these knowledge management initiatives relates to the lack of time for their development. This problem was expressed in two ways; on the one hand, the workers involved found it difficult to allocate time to participate in knowledge management practices because they were generally under pressure with urgent tasks and deadlines to meet.

On the other hand, while senior management generally explicitly supported initiatives, in practice the time commitment of senior executives tended to be ambiguous. There were several interviewees who noted that, while their companies' management committed to initiating a project in this area, in day-to-day practice not all actions necessary to make it successful were taken. For example, the knowledge management manager of a water supply and sanitation company indicated that, despite explicit support to the knowledge management project, she found it difficult to get senior management to devote time to project meetings, slowing down the progress of the initiative.

In addition to the senior executives mentioned above, the fact that many of the others involved in the projects, i.e. professionals, technicians and the shop floor, said they did not have time for these types of activities was also reported as a difficulty. One of our interviewees said: "...people are always busy and say they don't have time for these things...". The interviewees' responses suggest the need for the initiatives undertaken to be accompanied by change management interventions, with special emphasis on culture management, leadership, in addition to some transformations in structure, processes and human resource management systems.

Interviews also indicated a lack of resources to develop the projects, both in terms of investment in human capital and technical tools. Many of the cases described in this study had only one professional in charge and, in some cases, an assistant. Many of them reported a "A mammoth amount of work", in the sense of having to achieve an ambitious goal with little or no resources. Despite the adversity, the vast majority were satisfied with the results obtained and almost all of them planned to continue developing in this field.

From the interviews, problems were also noted in expressing successful experiences and mistakes that occur in organisations, experiences that in some way form the raw material for organisational learning. In the first case, the difficulty of recognising success and accessing those involved was noted, due to the characteristics of the organisational culture and workforce in Chile. Recognising a successful practice means, in Chilean organisational culture, that this person is 'deserving' of a salary increase or promotion. Perhaps for that reason, in addition to the fact that knowledge management practices are rarely initiated with adequate preparation in the work environment, many managers prefer not to recognise a worker's merits. One mining company professional described how a community of practice that was created to operationally improve production processes and reduce costs failed because workers "...talked about anything but improving production processes".

Similarly, acknowledging mistakes was mentioned as one of the biggest challenges for knowledge managers. Some of the interviewees had to work for months to create the right working environment and develop the necessary competencies in their staff to get knowledge management processes underway that involved critical review of actions and decisions. However, two case studies reported that they were able to overcome this obstacle through adequate preparation of the environment and the active role of the organisation's leaders; one of these organisations was a public institution related to justice ministry and the other a building construction company. Both were able to develop successful after-action review processes, generating virtuous cycles of learning from past mistakes and successes.

Also in relation to the organisational culture, "territory of power" o "*parcelas de poder*" were mentioned as a greatest obstacle to the implementation of knowledge management initiatives. This refers to the fact that often people in high positions in the structure and middle management levels tend to limit the interaction of their subordinates with other units and to monopolise decision-making and information flow, in the style of "nothing happens here without my knowledge and authorisation". From a knowledge management point of view, this paternalistic management style creates an inappropriate working environment for intellectual work and

prevents the free flow of knowledge between organisational units. Plots of power are very typical of Chilean organisational culture, as they express the paternalistic working relationship in which the authoritarianism of "the boss" coexists with the protection of "the father" (Perez-Arrau et al., 2012).

In this context, it is evident that in Chilean society there is a latent social conflict, which generates social distancing and lack of communication, impacting negatively on knowledge management initiatives. A very peculiar situation was found in a large supermarket company, where internal conflict led to the knowledge management tool being sabotaged. The tool installed consisted of a suggestion box for continuous quality improvement, which functioned properly for a few weeks, but was gradually transformed into a mailbox for anonymous complaints, only to be destroyed by the company's employees, who, indignant at not receiving answers to their complaints, decided to put a violent end to it. This case makes evident an aspect rarely mentioned in the knowledge management literature, regarding the need for labour relationships and an appropriate working environment for collaboration.

Considering the prevailing organisational culture and paternalistic leadership, as well as the social distance mentioned above, the presence of high levels of interpersonal mistrust is not surprising. This was identified as one of the most difficult problems to deal with for those undertaking knowledge management initiatives. Some of the consultants interviewed noted how important it was for them to create threat-free environments before starting their interventions. One interviewee from a large mining company mentioned how difficult it was to initiate knowledge management in that organisation because some people did not want to acknowledge their need to know more about a specific topic related to their work, possibly due to fear of exposing their lack of knowledge. Many of the interviewees described the hard work they did to overcome such fears and mistrust in their organisations.

Another problem reported was related to the difficulty of expression at the more operational levels, in the sense of not having the basic communication skills, for example, describing a successful practice. This was a barrier mentioned by only a couple of the organisations studied, but given its rarity and criticality, this finding is interesting to highlight in this study.

Finally, in the public sector, a major barrier to the continuity of knowledge management projects was changes in government. In at least three of the cases described, this factor was mentioned as the main barrier.

## **5. Discussion and Conclusions**

A first aspect to highlight from this study is the finding that in Chile there is a shortage of human capital in the area of knowledge management, which has led to a very limited development of this discipline in the country. Considering the limited educational offer in the field, and the fact that there is an evident shortage of specialists in the labour market, as well as the limited supply of expert support through consultancy, it could be said that it is truly surprising that knowledge management initiatives are being developed in Chile. Considering the significant economic progress of this country in the last decades, it is reasonable to think that there is a high growth potential for this area at present.

In relation to this fact, it is striking that in the literature reviewed in this article this barrier has not been mentioned as one of the problems faced by organisations wishing to implement knowledge management. This could presumably be because the articles reviewed were developed in the context of developed countries, where the educational offer in this field is robust and more abundant. This finding suggests that this could be an original barrier specific to Latin American countries or emerging economies, and therefore an interesting theoretical gap to explore in the future. Latin American countries, due to their history and the characteristics of their economies, are generally oriented towards the production of raw materials and other low value-added products, and are clearly lagging behind in the development of many of the fundamental areas of the knowledge economy.

The slow development of this discipline in the Chilean organisational environment could be the origin of the little attention it has received from companies and other organisations, which in turn could be the cause of the low allocation of resources to carry out initiatives in this field. It is also to be expected that a country whose economic development has been based on the export of low value-added raw materials, as well as sustaining a competitive advantage based on low labour costs, would view with relative scepticism and distrust the investment of organisational knowledge, which resides mainly in the minds of people. This paradigm present in the Chilean business world could be a powerful structural barrier to further investment in this field in the coming years.

Another striking aspect, perhaps typical of developing countries, relates to the difficulty of recognising success or failure and accessing those involved, due to various characteristics of Chilean organisational culture. One of them is the verticality (or power distance) in labour relations, which is very present in all Latin American countries, unlike developed countries whose structures tend to be flatter (Perez-Arrau, 2012). Verticality accentuates the asymmetry of power, generates differences in duties and rights among employees, and hinders communication between people by establishing formal barriers to communication. Likewise, the authoritarianism of the Chilean organisational culture (Rodriguez & Stewart, 2017) makes it unfeasible for a person to openly acknowledge a mistake, at the risk of being severely "punished" for it. This is why in Chilean organisational culture, error is assumed in an ambiguous way, through apparently absurd mechanisms that allow responsibility to be avoided (Hojman & Pérez-Arrau, 2005). Although it is true that authoritarianism in labour relations has been decreasing over time, given the recent changes in Chilean society (for example, the social rebellion of October 2019), this characteristic is still very present in the more traditional economic and productive sectors and at a more operational level.

In this context, it is not surprising that trust is not a favourable factor in the knowledge management initiatives of the organisations studied. Chile is a country whose organisational culture is characterised by low interpersonal trust (Perez-Arrau, 2012). Chile is a country that in the last forty years has suffered a strong social fracture and disintegration, starting with the military coup of 1973, the effects of which are expressed to this day, even in labour relations within organisations. Trust has been identified in the knowledge management literature as one of the most common barriers that organisations have to face (Ardichvili et al, 2003).

In this context, the existence of "territory of power" is a barrier very typical of Latin American paternalistic organisational culture. The monopoly of information, decision-making and informal control of labour relations tends to discourage any knowledge management initiative. On the contrary, knowledge management could be seen as a threat by those who hold the control and hegemony of authoritarian power. Many foreign companies operating in Chile and other national companies in more dynamic and competitive environments have realised how dysfunctional this aspect of Chilean organisational culture is and have made significant efforts to change it (Rodriguez & Rios, 2009).

Furthermore, the sharp social differences that still exist in this country, as well as the latent social conflict in labour relations, will undoubtedly be an impediment to any knowledge management initiative. As long as these differences remain in Chilean society, it is to be expected that knowledge management will develop slowly and, to some extent, not without conflict.

Finally, a curious finding, but not minor in its impact, is the difficulty of expressing ideas at the most operational levels in organisations, i.e. the difficulty of communicating orally and in writing. This problem is unimaginable to most managers in developed countries, whose workers received a good quality primary education. But in the reality of developing countries, where sharp differences in education prevail, this is an uncomfortable reality. In a country like Chile, where 84% of its population does not fully understand what they read (Consejo de la Cultura y las Artes, 2011), it is not surprising that many of the tools available in knowledge management cannot be properly applied because of this factor.

Finally, two relevant conclusions of this study are, firstly, It is apparent the importance of context for the implementation of knowledge management initiatives. It is (seemingly) obvious that behind the prevailing global knowledge management model lies a set of assumptions about social environment that is not fully present in all countries, especially in developing countries.

Second, the development of knowledge management initiatives in developing countries contains a number of unique barriers present in their environment that have not been appropriately considered in the global literature. To some extent, the absent of them exclude these countries from the development of this discipline. It is clear that knowledge management offers important tools to address the challenges inherent in the knowledge economy, so it is expected that new research and theoretical development will emerge in these countries to address their specific needs.

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