

ORGANIZATIONAL LEARNING SYSTEMS IN THE HYBRID WORK MODEL. LESSONS LEARNED FROM THE ACTION RESEARCH BASED ON FITOEXPORT PROJECT

Introduction

At the beginning of the 21st century, *hybrid* has become one of the most common words, regardless of the industry. In the contemporary economy one can find a hybrid model of work where communication platforms are used or hybrid organizations which combine the public and private sectors and voluntary work. The concept of hybrid cars is being intensely developed in the automotive industry. Hybridity is thus an integral part of the modern world. In our study, we focus on the first aspect, i.e., the possibilities offered to organizations by remote work – often called the hybrid work model.

The research and applications described in this article are an element of the work carried out under the FITOEXPORT project financed by the Polish National Centre for Research and Development within the framework of the GOSPOSTRATEG program¹. The State Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service (referred to as “the Inspection” throughout this article) was a leader in that project, while the Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw, was a consortium member. The project was implemented in 2019–2022 and was divided into two phases: research (A) and preparation for implementation (B).

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The work of the research team was aimed at diagnosing the organization in terms of organizational learning. It was followed by the design of solutions that were to increase the Inspection's innovation and the support for strategy development. Such combined public and market orientation and the involvement of private actors defines the examined organization as one that introduces a hybrid identity [Joldersma, Winter, 2002]. This is also convergent with New Public Management, which recommended instilling business methods in administration [Stroińska, 2020]. Research questions posed for the implementation of the set goals included, among others:

- What solutions should be applied so that the effects of organizational change are not limited solely to the duration of the project?
- How to design solutions for a real organizational change?
- What solutions would be conducive to organizational learning?
- How to embed the process of continuous improvement into the organization?

As the research has shown, the Inspection applies virtually all elements of organizational learning: at the individual level, at the team level, and between teams (different organizational units). The problem with the Inspection, however, was that the learning process was an individual rather than a systemic matter. The organization lacked systemic incentives to share knowledge, hence the benefits of learning were rather local. It was a problematic issue because the Inspection is a decentralized institution operating within unified territorial governmental administration [Sabir et al., 2021]. This means that the Main Inspectorate of Plant Health and Seed Inspection is financed by the Ministry of Agriculture and Rural Development whereas the Voivodship Inspectorates of Plant Health and Seed Inspection are funded from the budgets of the competent voivodes. Such a structure meant that the Inspection faced a very big challenge related to the coordination of activities and the flow of knowledge [Sveiby, 2005].

1. Research method

Designing organizational change, including the organizational learning systems, was preceded by in-depth analytics of the examined organization. The work under the project was planned in accordance with the principle of triangulation: methodological, theoretical and the researcher's [Denzin, 2012]. The researcher's triangulation criteria were satisfied through the participation of eight researchers in the study and analyses of the field material. Researchers represented various organizational units of the Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw, and had diverse knowledge, professional experience and research interests. In order to coordinate the work, the team met regularly, and a certain level of work standardization was to be achieved by creating solutions such as an ex-ante list of issues for interviewers. To implement the principle

of methodological triangulation, the following techniques for collecting data and information about the organization were used, inter alia: field research (interviews), literature analyses, legal analyses, organizational data analytics, quantitative research (of service recipients) and joint workshops with employees of the analyzed organization. From the perspective of theoretical triangulation, it was decided to base the work on two main theoretical foundations: the action research method and the learning organization concept. Additionally, the results of individual analyses were interpreted from different theoretical perspectives. Until recently, scientific advice was not very popular in Poland, probably due to the long-term and risky research and application process, with management boards focused on achieving quick effects [Obłój, 2019]. Action research is not convergent with the interests of large consulting corporations; it rather remains a domain of small and independent companies or those affiliated with universities [Bawden, 2021]. Nonetheless, it was chosen for that project due to its advantages (it is one of very few methods that enable direct and active participation of the researcher in the operation of an organization and allows for theory development, while being practically significant). Consequently, this makes the study unique on the Polish scale.

2. A systems approach and a learning organization

The conducted research was founded on several key assumptions: the use of a systems approach, a learning organization, innovativeness and sustainability of the implemented solutions.

The systems theory was intended to emphasize the aim of the project, i.e., the introduction of sustainable solutions. Under such an approach, organization is treated as a complex open system that exchanges matter (in the form of material flows), finances (cash flows and accompanying documents) and information (signals from outside transformed into organizational knowledge) with the environment. Thus, it is a complex system which requires taking into account the nature of many of its components. The complexity of today's organizations results from an evolution in the approach to forming organizational structures that can implement changing goals set for organizations [Kessler, 2013]. This is especially true of such large and decentralized organizations as the one under the study.

The systems approach also allows the issue of managing knowledge resources to be addressed practically [Elias, Davis, 2018]. The starting point for building a systemic model of knowledge management is to distinguish the basic dimensions of management. To this end, it is necessary to diagnose such dimensions of an organization as: knowledge management strategies, knowledge-based organizational forms, information management, management of knowledge workers, organizational

culture. These elements constitute the core of knowledge management in an enterprise, yet they are not the only ones that matter. Broadly speaking, knowledge management in an enterprise is a method of enterprise management covering all processes enabling the creation, dissemination and use of knowledge to achieve the enterprise's goals. It takes the form of an interactive model with multidirectional interactions between its individual elements: knowledge creation, knowledge dissemination, and knowledge application [Kingston, 2012].

Moreover, an important role in the selection of elements for the analysis was played by the Main Inspector, who imposed a significant format on the work whereby the Voivodship Inspectorates, rather than just the central unit, should work on organizational innovations. The intention of the research team was to develop solutions that would enable systematic (not episodic) initiation and implementation of innovative processes.

From the project sponsor's perspective, it was also extremely important to increase the degree of the institution's innovativeness. Strategy – one of the work's products – was meant to be a strategy towards innovativeness, understood as the practical implementation of creative ideas, novelties with practical application. Hence, such ideas could include various types of modern engineering solutions adopted in everyday work and organizational innovations. They were therefore in line with Keeley's [2013] concept of ten types of innovation. In congruence with it, it was also assumed that innovation does not always have to be an invention. Innovation is a result or process of implementing new or significantly improved solutions in the market. On the other hand, innovativeness is a certain feature of economic actors implementing innovations [Dziurski et al., 2021]. Both private enterprises (if they want to be successful in the market) and public organizations (in order to fulfil their public mission well) must be innovative. Innovations should be implemented systematically and must cover the basic areas of enterprise's operations. The key innovations include product, marketing, process, organizational and organizational culture innovations.

The research shows that the basic barriers to innovativeness in Poland include limited funds allocated to research and development, conservative organizational culture and the lack of appropriate competences of managers [Dziurski, Wachowiak, 2021]. All these barriers occurred while our team was providing advice.

In addition to the key assumptions, the project also adopted a number of other axioms as the foundation for the research and advice. It was assumed that the best information could be provided by employees and stakeholders, with clients playing the key role among them. Organizational documents and legal acts are important but they are usually a source of complementary knowledge. It was also presupposed that when used in an appropriate manner, benchmarking makes it possible to introduce proven changes relatively quickly. If appropriate conditions are met, benchmarking can offer tailor-made solutions – well suited to a given organization. The team also

relied on the knowledge that the full benefits of benchmarking are achieved when it allows for knowledge to be acquired about certain internal and external patterns. In the context of the logic of introducing changes, it seems more advantageous to start with internal benchmarking, which may bring about many quick improvements that will give the organization the necessary dynamics and enable further changes.

3. Hybrid work as a catalyst for innovation – case study

Until the implementation of the FITOEXPORT project, the Inspection had made efforts to transform tacit knowledge (developed, for example, in a single Voivodship Inspectorate) into explicit knowledge (available to the entire organization). The problem was that, as a heavily underfunded institution, it had limited opportunities to organize meetings and conferences where pro-development initiatives could be discussed. It was because each such meeting resulted in detaching employees from their current work for one or more days and in high costs of their business trips (transport, accommodation). Hybrid work and the internal benchmarking system allowed for much more frequent (more intensive) discussions on organizational innovations while reducing the costs of several-day business trips.

The internal benchmarking system involved the organization's headquarters assigning tasks to Voivodship Inspectorates whereby the latter had to look for solutions to problems identified in the research phase of the FITOEXPORT project. The solutions were to be developed simultaneously in sixteen Voivodship Inspectorates. It was assumed that:

1. Innovation did not always have to be a discovery and the answers to the questions asked may already be known in some parts of the organization. The key was that knowledge about them should be common.
2. Solutions applied at the level of individual Voivodship Inspectorates of Plant Health and Seed Inspection might be an innovation for the others.
3. Solutions developed by individual Voivodship Inspectorates of Plant Health and Seed Inspection would be tailored to the challenges and specificity of the Inspection's work. Internal benchmarking might prove more effective than external benchmarking because it was more adaptable in other parts of the organization.
4. The tasks for Voivodship Inspectorates of Plant Health and Seed Inspection might become a commonly used platform for the exchange of experience in management issues and constitute the foundation for continuous improvement.

This would be an element of an organizational culture that encourages reflection on how to organize, work better and systemically transform tacit knowledge into explicit knowledge.

Following these assumptions, a list of tasks was drawn up that defined the topics of individual tasks and their goals. Also, auxiliary questions were formulated that should help the teams understand the idea of the work and the expected results (products) were defined. The key was the establishment of sixteen voivodship teams. At first glance, the idea of parallel search for solutions by sixteen teams does not seem to be economical. However, it was important to us that the proposals constituting the results of the work were creative and innovative. Therefore, in order to increase the probability of developing an interesting solution that could actually contribute to the improved functioning of the Inspection, a large scale of works was needed. Usually, the first ideas for solving complicated problems do not have to turn out to be accurate. Given that a large number of teams were working in parallel, there were better chances of a particular problem being solved through a measure that would be worth implementing in the organization. This also made it possible to combine and transform individual solutions at a later stage, if needed. In this way, synergy effects could be achieved, leading to the development of a comprehensive reform plan that would be ready for implementation throughout the organization.

The work structure included meetings of voivodship team leaders (Strategy Team) who, together with the Main Inspectorate of Plant Health and Seed Inspection's employees, analyzed individual proposals and recommended the most interesting of them to the Main Inspector for implementation. Thanks to remote work and the use of communication platforms, the costs of organizing such meetings were significantly reduced. Employees did not have to spend at least two days on them (including travel) or bear the costs of business trips. From the perspective of an organization with very limited resources, this was a significant change. This solution made it possible to increase the frequency of meetings at which issues of actually strategic importance were discussed. Finally, the discussion on the future of the organization of strategic importance to the society was not conditioned by mundane financial issues.

The entire cycle for a single task was as follows. The headquarters, i.e., the Main Inspectorate of Plant Health and Seed Inspection, assigned a task to be accomplished by sixteen Voivodship Inspectorates. Solutions were put forward as presentations in previously prepared templates and sent to the headquarters, which subsequently distributed them to all members of the Strategy Team. Each of them completed a short (electronic) questionnaire on each of the presentations. The completeness and innovativeness of the proposed solutions were assessed. The first assessment criterion was needed to establish an appropriate work standard that would require the involvement of the team and solid substance of solutions. The assessment of innovativeness was to indicate which proposals were a real breakthrough and thus were worth implementing with a view to improving the functioning of the Inspection. After the assessments were sent back and compiled, three best presentations with the highest ratings were selected. As the assigned work was of a pioneering nature in the

organization, it was decided not to publish all the assessments so as not to demotivate those teams that were worst rated.

The recommendations contained in the three best presentations were then discussed by the leaders of all voivodship teams and representatives of the organization's headquarters. The discussion was conducted remotely. Four tasks were assigned during the FITOEXPORT project. The list therefore was not exhausted. In accordance with the recommendations of the team from the Faculty of Management, University of Warsaw, in the future it should be supplemented with further issues raised, among others, during team leaders' meetings. Usually, such meetings were very constructive and led to better solutions. It also turned out that they were an excellent forum for exchanging experiences and interesting ideas for solving day-to-day problems.

Among the proposals that appeared after assigning the first task, there were several recommendations that should bring tangible benefits not only to the Inspection itself but also to service recipients. During the discussion on optimization measures, the mission of ensuring consumer safety was not forgotten. This meant that no reforms could negatively affect this issue. The highest-rated proposals for which a consensus was achieved will be implemented on a pilot basis in selected Voivodship Inspectorates. If successful, they will be extended to other voivodships and become an organizational standard.

The concepts standardizing the activities of the Inspection deserved special attention. They were completely consistent with the research conclusions and the opinions of service recipients expressed at the research stage. The State Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service, operating within unified territorial governmental administration in some organizational matters, was excessively decentralized. In some areas, too high degree of decentralization seems to be even contrary to the principles of a unitary state. In other areas, excessive decentralization does not make sense and leads to dysfunctions. For example, there is no need for documentation standards to be developed in each voivodship separately. Such an action is cost-inefficient (the same work is repeated in different voivodships) and generates problems with adaptation to changing environmental conditions. Indeed, when the (national or European) law is amended, it may be necessary to adjust the forms or other documents used in individual voivodships. Standardization of regulations and documentation used throughout the Inspection would not only ensure savings but also enable a faster response to changes. It is also important that the activities of many producers go beyond the borders of one voivodship, which means that when cooperating with the same organization (the Inspection), they may encounter different standards. The implementation of the ideas proposed under Task 1 would therefore contribute to facilitating the operations also on the part of service recipients.

From the perspective of hybrid work solutions, remote inspections turned out to be a very interesting proposal. They would be conducted if nothing else but documentation

were subject to examination. Such activities would save not only the costs of travel but also the working time of inspectors, increasing the efficiency of their work.

In the context of the organizational learning theory, the described process failed to close the learning loop upon the completion of each task. Due to time constraints in the FITOEXPORT project, the teams did not receive feedback from the Main Inspector. As intended by the UW team, this was an extremely important component in view of the potential empowerment of the teams. A positive public evaluation of the teams' work was to contribute to their greater involvement and to show that the developed proposals were crucial for the organization. However, feedback was provided on the presentation of summary recommendations and solutions that were recounted at a separate conference. It can thus be said that the learning loop was closed with positive comments by the Main Inspector.

Conclusion

In 2021, a new operating strategy was developed for the State Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service. One thing contained in the vision of the organization is the call for the ability to use the organization's potential resulting from decentralization. The key systemic solution in this regard lies in internal benchmarking system. It can be concluded that the hybrid work model and the system based on a remote contact made it possible to even initiate work on organizational innovations. In-person meetings before the COVID-19 pandemic were so problematic in terms of logistics and costs that they actually prevented a similar method of work on organizational improvement being employed. Remote work based on electronic tools increased the frequency of contact between individual organizational units, possibilities of exchanging knowledge and views, and led to a real change in public administration. Given the usual inertia of such organizations, the breakthrough that has taken place should be appreciated.

The system described in this paper can be applied especially in organizations with decentralized structures. This is true of public administration, which operates in a system comparable to the State Plant Health and Seed Inspection Service in Poland, with its headquarters and sixteen structurally similar units of considerable autonomy. These solutions can, nonetheless, also be used in the private sector, e.g., in organizations with many branches with a much the same activity profile. The experience of the research team shows that such solutions, which enhance communication in an organization and enable the exchange of experience, can bring about many positive effects.

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Abstract

The article exemplifies the implementation of strategic management and a learning-based approach in a public-sector institution. By using a systems approach, we show a case of an organization that is developing learning processes relying on hybrid work. The aim of the article is to present a part of the diagnose of the Inspection in terms of organizational learning and the analysis of solutions increasing the effectiveness of the Inspection and support in creating the strategy. For this purpose we use the action research method, which allows for the interaction with an organization during research. As a result, the foundations for organizational change were built at the stage of planning and implementing solutions. In the empirical part of the article, we describe a case study illustrating the first effects of new solutions. The conclusions of our work are not limited to public-sector institutions but can also be applied in private-sector organizations operating on the basis of decentralized structures.

KEYWORDS: PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION, SYSTEMS APPROACH, INNOVATION, LEARNING, HYBRID ORGANIZATION

JEL CLASSIFICATION CODES: H830, O31, O35, D830

SYSTEMY ORGANIZACYJNEGO UCZENIA SIĘ W TRYBIE PRACY HYBRYDOWEJ. WNIOSKI Z PROJEKTU FITOEXPORT OPARTEGO NA METODZIE *ACTION RESEARCH*

Streszczenie

Artykuł prezentuje przykład wprowadzenia zarządzania strategicznego i podejścia opartego na uczeniu się w instytucji sektora publicznego. Przy wykorzystaniu podejścia systemowego, pokazano przykład organizacji, która buduje procesy uczenia się, opierając się na możliwości pracy hybrydowej. Celem artykułu jest zaprezentowanie fragmentu diagnozy Inspekcji pod kątem organizacyjnego uczenia oraz analiza rozwiązań podnoszących efektywność działania Inspekcji, a także wsparcie przy tworzeniu strategii. W tym celu posługujemy się metodą *action research* (badania w działaniu), która umożliwia wejście w interakcję z organizacją już

w trakcie badań. Dzięki temu na etapie planowania i wdrażania rozwiązań były zbudowane fundamenty pod zmianę organizacyjną. W części empirycznej artykułu opisujemy studium przypadku ilustrujące pierwsze efekty funkcjonowania nowych rozwiązań. Wnioski z przeprowadzonych prac nie ograniczają się jedynie do instytucji sektora publicznego, lecz mogą znaleźć zastosowanie również w organizacjach z sektora prywatnego funkcjonujących na zdecentralizowanych strukturach.

SŁOWA KLUCZOWE: ADMINISTRACJA PUBLICZNA, PODEJŚCIE SYSTEMOWE, INNOWACJA, UCZENIE SIĘ, PRZEDSIĘBIORSTWO HYBRYDOWE

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