

Does Age Matter in Knowledge Absorption? : An Empirical Study on Female Beneficiaries in NGOs

Dr. Sheikh Shamim Hasnain
sheikh.hasnain@anglia.ac.uk

Abstract: Does age matters in knowledge absorption? This study investigates the impact of age on knowledge absorption among the NGO (Non-Governmental Organisational) female beneficiaries in Bangladesh. The NGO-beneficiaries (females) are the main actors who are engaged in receiving and absorption of the knowledge transferred by the NGOs. So it is essential to know the knowledge absorption capacity of theirs (the female-beneficiaries). This study follows multi-staged sampling procedure. 14-NGOs (7X large and 7X small NGOs) from each administrative division of Bangladesh are purposefully selected. 54-semi-structured interviews consisting of top, middle and lower levels based on the salary grades (18X interviewees from each level) were interviewed. Concurrently, 35 questionnaires among the beneficiaries were also administered (5 from each administrative division, e.g. 5X7=35). Content analysis technique is used to analyse the interview transcript. It finds, age group 36-55 years have more knowledge absorption capacity than those of below 20 and 21-35 years groups. Future researchers may conduct similar study in a different country].

Key Words: Knowledge Transfer, Knowledge Absorption, NGOs, Bangladesh

Genesis of Investigation

First Item-Knowledge Management neglects the issue of knowledge absorption : Organisations could realise the importance of managing knowledge nowadays. It deeply focuses and relies on a strong culture of cooperative, sharing and supportive, social community, with a view to achieving organisational strategic requirements (Debowski, 2006). Knowledge Management ensures superior and excellent productivity (Fireston and McElroy, 2005). Several theorists and researchers (Gamble and Blackwell, 2001; Zuckerman & Buell, 1998; Jasimuddin et al., 2006) have mentioned elements of the Knowledge Management process. For example, Gamble and Blackwell (2001) find identifying, organizing, transferring and using to be some of these elements. Zuckerman and Buell (1998) identify collection, storage, sharing, and linking as part of the process. Jasimuddin et al. (2006) describe identifying capturing, storing, retrieving, and transferring as the important elements of knowledge transfer. Heavin and Neville (2006) find capture, storage, dissemination, and creation are the crucial ingredients of knowledge management process. So various elements of the knowledge management process have been proposed by the researchers (Holsapple and Jones, 2006). The phases may be fragmented, and divided into various sub-phases. The major elements of the knowledge management process are: creation, storage, transfer and use. Among them knowledge transfer is receiving wide attention (Argote et al., 2000) as it is essential for the survival and prosperity (Wathne et al., 1996) of the organisations. Learning and implementations of others' experiences for social and organisational benefit necessitate the relevance of the concept of knowledge transfer. New knowledge may promote organisational learning and innovations in new methods and practices, which may also be absorbed into routines and culture (Darr and Kurtzberg, 2000). Out of the new knowledge all stakeholders of the organisations may be benefitted. Knowledge transfer provides value (Hogberg and Edvinsson, 1998) and force (Hall, 2001) to the present knowledge stock of the organisations. Several researchers (Szulanski, 1996; van Wijk et al., 2008) argue that lack of absorption capacity in the recipient's end is a barrier to knowledge transfer. Davenport and Prusak (2000) go further by arguing "if knowledge is not absorbed, it has not been transferred" (p. 101). Like Davenport and Prusak (2000), many knowledge management researchers also consider knowledge absorption as an integral part of knowledge transfer, but unfortunately they did not empirically examine the impact of age on knowledge absorption.

Second Item-The NGOs neglect the issue of beneficiaries' knowledge absorption: Najam (1996) identifies the beneficiaries/clients, the donors/patrons and the NGO itself/employees are the most vital stakeholders in the NGO sector. In the NGO sector knowledge transfer mainly occurs between the NGOs and their beneficiaries. So it is crucial for the NGOs to know the impact of the beneficiaries' age on knowledge absorption. If they can not absorb the same, it is no point of transferring knowledge to them. So far, hardly any knowledge management and non-profit sector literature has addressed the issue of knowledge absorption. It is unfortunate to note that beyond knowledge management and non-profit sector this area (knowledge absorption) is also highly neglected. The author of this article could hardly find any literature addressing the knowledge absorption issues in the NGO/non-NGO context. Many issues and areas (except knowledge absorption) of NGOs are covered by Knowledge Management literature. For example, authors have spoken on microcredit (Rahman, 2006a), social

awareness (Ahmad, 1999), health (Mahamud, 1998), education (Buckland, 1998), agriculture (Lewis, 1997), income generating skills (Begum, 2008), disaster management (Rahman, 2000), barriers to knowledge transfer (Hasnain and Jasimuddin, 2012), NGO-Locations (Hasnain, 2014), NGO-accountability (Edwards & Hulme, 2002) etc.

Third Item-Literature nearer to knowledge absorption: Ackerman (2000) investigates the issue of “middle age adults are, on average, less intelligent than young adults”. The investigation on 228 educated adults between ages 21 and 62 find that middle-aged adults are more knowledgeable in many domains. The IQ level of the males and females has been investigated by many researchers (Naderi, Abdullah and Aizan, 2008; .Zaidi, 2010; Lynn and Kanazawa, 2011). However, hardly any knowledge management guru (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995; Chae and Bloodgood, 2006; Hasnain, 2012; Jashapara, 2004; Prusak, 2001; Hasnain and Jasimuddin, 2012; Argote, Ingram, Levine and Moreland, 2000) has investigated the impact of age-groups (female) on knowledge absorption. Naderi, Abdullah and Aizan (2008) investigated the differences of IQ levels between men and women. Lynn and Kanazawa (2011) carried out a longitudinal study on sex difference in intelligence. Zaidi (2010) made a review on gender differences in human brain. She exhibits the anatomical differences of male and female human brains and finally concluded “both sexes are equal in intelligence, but tend to operate differently” (p. 37). Similarly, Jensen and Johnson (1994) find that there is no impact of sex on IQ. Chowdhury, Butel, Hakki and Ismail (2009) argue “transfer of knowledge includes two actions; one is transmission which means sending knowledge to potential receiver, and another is absorption meaning that knowledge must be incorporated either by a person or a group” (p. 53). So Knowledge transfer is useless if it is not absorbed by the knowledge recipient (Davenport and Prusak, 2000). Question remains- Is there any research on knowledge absorption above?

Fourth Item- NGOs and Bangladesh: The gradual expansion of the NGOs has made this sector a powerful and strong industry in Bangladesh. Due to their activities in human resource development, they could earn an inseparable entity in the culture of the country. Thus they could reach the doorsteps of millions with new hope, where government activities have yet to start (Ahmad and Townsend, 1998). Presently NGOs in Bangladesh are at the top in respect of contributions to the country’s development (Devine, 2003). According to the Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics (2009), the total population of the country is 140.6 million (male population: 72 million; Female population: 68.6 million), out of which 34.6 million people (24.61%) live in rural areas. 50.62 million (36%) of the population live in poverty (World Development Report, 2002). The literacy rate of the country is 43.1% (Bangladesh Bureau of Statistics, 2009). From the above statistics, it is clear that more than 40% of the population live under the level of poverty. More than 50% of the population is illiterate. 35% of the country’s population is enjoying the benefits of the NGOs (Devine, 2003) as more than 22,000 NGOs are providing their services to the people in Bangladesh (Rahman, 2006). It may be mentioned that a huge number of country’s illiterate population are the NGO-beneficiaries. The Illiterate beneficiaries find it difficult to absorb knowledge transferred by the NGOs. Thus huge number of NGOs’ role on poverty alleviation is not significant. The UN Economic and Social Council declares ‘NGO’ as the official name for the ‘Non-Governmental Organisations’ (e.g. UN Resolution 288 B (X) dated 27th February 1950). Before that the term was generic for voluntary associations, non-profit associations, and diverse organisations including international non-government development, new social movement, people’s and membership, and grassroots support., The term was applied to identify various organisations and not befitting with the missions, ideology and objectives of the organisations (Fernando and Heston, 1997). Vakil (1997) defines NGOs as, “self governing, private, not profit organizations that are geared to improving the quality of life of disadvantaged people” (p. 2060). NGOs’ contribution to the socio-economic development of developing countries has been widely acknowledged. The contributions of NGOs in various aspects of human lives such as poverty alleviation, education (Ahmad, 1999), family planning, employment, relief operations in natural calamities (Rahman, 2000), and health (Gauri and Galef, 2005) and infrastructure development for the poor, have made this sector indispensable in modern society. In many areas, the NGO sector could supersede the public and private sectors. Stiles (2002) finds that, “NGOs, by virtue of their relatively independent character, their non-profit making status, and their link to the poor communities that they have generally served well, offers donors a relatively safe and convenient means of avoiding both public and private sector and all their dangers” (p.836). So this sector is addressed as the third sector, while public and private are named as first and second sectors (Panda, 2007; Lewis, 2005), and it works as supplementary to the other two in any country. NGO activities may be broadly categorised as, income generation programmes, provision of social services and social organizing (Buckland, 1998). Mainly NGO activities started in Bangladesh after the liberation war of 1971 (Rahman, 2006; Lewis, 1997; Devine, 2006; Karim, 2001; Karim, 2008), although one or two NGOs had been operating as missionary organisations before this time. CARE, a US based NGO was pioneer in starting activities in 1949 in the then East Pakistan, now Bangladesh. NGO activity

intensified in this area after the cyclone disaster of November 1970. A cyclone injured nation and the liberation war of 1971 paralysed the country's socio-economic conditions. Many local and foreign NGOs came forward to rescue the country from the privations of social and economic devastation. Supply of relief goods, distribution of medicine, healthcare, construction of shelters and rehabilitation were the main agenda of the NGOs at that time. The number of NGOs in 1980s accelerated in an experiential fashion with multidimensional activities such as education of rural people, health and medicine, poverty elevation, and family planning.

Central Research Question: ‘What is the impact of the female NGO-beneficiaries’ age on knowledge absorption in Bangladesh?’

Research Methodology

This study carried out semi-structured interviews for the NGO-employees and questionnaire survey for the NGO-beneficiaries simultaneously. Multi-staged sampling as described by Saunders et al (1997) is followed. The whole Bangladesh is geographically divided into seven administrative divisions. From each division a single district, from the selected district a single Thana, from Thana an union and from the selected union 5 beneficiaries were randomly selected for questionnaire survey (5X7=35). Drop and collect (e.g. in person) technique was applied as the respondents (the NGO-beneficiaries) needed a detail explanation about this study and questionnaire. Further, this technique (drop and collect) is supported by many researchers (Brown, 1987; Hair, et al., 2007; Ibeh, Brock and Zhou, 2004). This technique is also fast, reliable, cheap and suitable to those who are having the resource constraints (Brown, 1987). Out of listed 2445 NGOs (excluding the cancelled memberships) 14 NGOs (out of which (i) 7- large NGOs and (ii) 7- small NGOs) were purposefully selected for the interviews. Total 54-semi-structured interviews consisting of their top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each) employees were selected. The field works of this research were carried out in Bangladesh. This research went for qualitative investigation (e.g. semi-structured interviews) and quantitative study (e.g. survey questionnaires) simultaneously. Some scholars (Creswell, 1994; Creswell and Clark, 2007) emphasis on simultaneous and sequential triangulations. In the simultaneous triangulation, both qualitative and quantitative approaches are used equally, separately and usually results are examined to cross-validate the findings (Steckler et al., 1992; Creswell, 1994). The present study needed a detail view of the topic under study and a solid validity. The researcher here studies the subject in the natural setting (Bangladeshi NGO-scenario). The interviewees had the chances to explain their views and experiences on the subject matter, while the questionnaire-respondents help in finding the validity of the interview findings and vice versa. In research, it is the use of multiple but independent measures (Easterby-Smith et al., 2002) in a same phenomena or programme (Patton, 1990) under study. More comprehensively, Denzin (1978) finds triangulation as “combination of methodologies in the study of same phenomenon” (p. 291). In fact, it is the art of employing of one method to cross-check the results of another (Jankowicz, 2005).

Regarding the qualitative data analysis techniques Jankowicz (2005) finds “the main technique associated with semi-structured interviews is called content analysis” (p. 270). Now-a-days content analysis technique is popular to academics, commercial researchers and communication practitioners (Neuendorf, 2002). For this research all interviews (recorded and interview notes) are transcribed. This study borrowed the procedural guidelines to tabulate and present the content analysed data from Jankowicz (2005, p. 272-73). The data categories are put as per the research issues of this study.

Findings and Discussion

It is mentioned in the research methodology section that this study interviewed 54-NGO officials consisting of top, mid and lower levels based on salary grade (18 from each). Table-1 exhibits the results of the interviews.

Table-1: The NGO-employees’ opinion on female age-group and knowledge absorption capacity (N=54)

Age Groups	0-20 Years	21-35 Years	36-55 Years	Above 55 Years	No/other comments	Total
Numbers	0	09	30	0	15	N=54
Percentages (%)	0%	16.67%	55.56%	0%	27.77%	100%

16.67% NGO-employees believe that 21-35 age group of females is capable to absorb knowledge while 55.56% for 36-55 years and 0% was for above 55-years.

In this regard an NGO official claims,

“Female clients absorb and implement the transferred knowledge better. Out of 100%, I think 85% females absorb and implement the transferred knowledge, ...

An Assistant Manager of an NGO observes,

“If I talk about age, I find 36-55 years old people try to receive more knowledge and also try to implement those.”

About the age and knowledge absorption, an NGO-field worker says,

“Middle aged persons who are between 35-55 years old they can absorb and implement knowledge properly. Females are sincere and they can absorption and implementation better ... They always want to return the instalments in time”.

It is observed that no interviewee has supported age group: 0-20 years. In this regard an interviewee reports,

“....actually 0-20 years clients are not matured enough to absorb knowledge. At the age of 20, you may expect some maturity from them. They tell us that they could receive our knowledge, but when you go to see their projects, it is very frustrating”

It is mentioned in the research methodology section that this study administered (5X7=) 35 questionnaires for the NGO-beneficiaries covering the whole Bangladesh. It followed multi-staged sampling. Table-2 exhibits the results of the questionnaire survey.

Table-2: The beneficiaries’ opinion on female age-group and knowledge absorption capacity (N=35)

Age Groups	0-20 Years	21-35 Years	36-55 Years	Above 55 Years	No/other comments	Total
Numbers	0	04	21	0	10	N=35
Percentage (%)	0%	11.43%	60%	0%	28.57%	100%

11.43% of the beneficiaries believe that 21-35 age group of females is capable to absorb knowledge while 60% for 36-55 years and 0% was for above 55-years.

The triangulation of the findings in respect of the opinions of NGO-employees and the beneficiaries should exhibit a comprehensive picture (table-3). A side by side study of the findings depicts that in both the cases, age group 36-55 is highly opined by the NGO-employees and the beneficiaries, while age group 0-20 years was not at all supported by both NGO-employees and the beneficiaries.

Table-3: Triangulation of Results NGO-employees (N=54) and beneficiaries’ (N=35) on female age-group and knowledge absorption capacity

Age Groups	0-20 Years	21-35 Years	36-55 Years	Above 55 Years	No/other comments	Total
The NGO-employees (%)	0%	16.67%	55.56%	0%	27.77%	100%
The Beneficiaries (%)	0%	11.43%	60%	0%	28.57%	100%

This study examines only the impact of the age group of the female beneficiaries in the context of NGOs in Bangladesh. Such study probably unique in nature. So the result is compared with the similar studies, or nearer to this study. Ackerman (2000) investigates the issue of “middle age adults are, on average, less intelligent than young adults”. His investigation on 228 educated adults between ages 21 and 62 finds that middle-aged adults are more knowledgeable in many domains. Naderi, Abdullah and Aizan (2008) carried out the empirical investigation on the differences between the intelligence level of the male and female university students. They had a sample of 48 males and 105 females. They find that there is no significant difference between the intelligence level and the male and female students. Zaidi (2010) had the similar results. Blinkhorn (2005) also finds that there is no IQ difference between the male and female university students. Geary, Saults, Liu and Hoard (2000) find “males show significantly higher mean scores on the arithmetical computations, arithmetical reasoning, and special cognition measures” (p. 337). In their study Lynn and Kanazawa (2011) reveal that after the age of 16-years males start to develop higher IQ than females. 7 and 11-years girls have an IQ of 1 IQ point. But at the age of 16 the boys get an IQ point of 1.8. But the girls do not. It may be noted that in maximum cases the literature reflects the superior IQ and knowledge absorption capacity of the males than those of the females. However, the findings of this study are different from those studies. This study could reveal that age group between 35-55 years (the female beneficiaries) can absorb knowledge more than those of the other groups mentioned above. This group is sincere and try to improve their socio-economic conditions through knowledge absorption.

Conclusion and Future Research:

Davenport and Prusak (2000) highlight the importance of knowledge absorption by the knowledge recipient. The NGO-sector consists of three vital stakeholders, namely, the donors, the NGO itself (e.g. NGO-employees) and the beneficiaries. The NGOs and their beneficiaries are the main actors in this sector and knowledge transfer mainly occurs between these two stakeholders. The beneficiaries’ successful absorption of knowledge indicates that the knowledge transfer was an effective one. If the transferred knowledge is not absorbed by the beneficiaries properly- it indicates that the entire NGO mission is a failure one as the NGOs are created for the socio-economic development of the beneficiaries, and there is no substitute to knowledge transfer for the socio-economic development of the poor and the deprived. In Bangladesh the female NGO beneficiaries are efficient and they are very active members. So it is imperative to know the impact of their age on the knowledge absorption capacity. Bangladesh is selected as the context of this study as the highest number of NGOs is in operation here. More so, the positive contribution of the NGOs to the socio-economic development of Bangladesh is highly documented. The study finds the similar results from the interviews and the questionnaire survey. The triangulated result of the interviews and the questionnaire survey on the NGO-beneficiaries present that the age group of 36-55 years belonging to females is capable in absorbing more knowledge than other groups (e.g. 0-20 years, 21-35 years, above 55 years). Future researchers may also carry out the similar study in any other country of the globe.

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