

Citizen participation in decision-making processes: knowledge sharing in knowledge cities

Michal Goldberg, Edna Pasher and Maya Levin-Sagi



Michal Goldberg, Edna Pasher and Maya Levin-Sagi are all based at Edna Pasher PhD & Associates, Herzlia, Israel.

Abstract

Purpose – The purpose of this paper is to address the subject of knowledge citizenship from the perspective of citizen participation in their city's decision-making processes. It focuses on a case study of the city of Holon, Israel.

Design/methodology/approach – This paper presents three distinct methods for citizen participation processes which were used by Holon: citizen-based consensus conference, neighborhood conversations, and knowledge café sessions, all of which allow the municipality to implement citizen participation as part of its routine, fluent operations.

Findings – The story of Holon presents the methods and processes for the creation of citizen dialog aimed to allow a city to develop itself into a knowledge city.

Originality/value – The case study shows how the theory of knowledge cities can be transferred into actual practicality. It describes three different ways to combine knowledge sharing in a city as part of the town's development into a knowledge city. Holon's experience can serve other cities to learn what processes are more suitable and applicable for them.

Keywords Knowledge management, Citizen participation, Cities, Intellectual capital

Paper type Case study

Introduction

The subject of knowledge cities is a novel research field of recent interest. The concept of knowledge city derives its principles and values from the field of knowledge management. It is aimed at finding ways to contribute to the sustainable development and growth of cities in the twenty-first century.

Ergazakis *et al.* (2004) define the knowledge city as a town that encourages ongoing creation, sharing, evaluation, renewal and update of knowledge through the continuous interaction between its citizens as well as interaction with citizens of other cities. These interactions form the essence of the knowledge city, supported by citizens' knowledge sharing culture as well as the city's appropriate design, IT networks and infrastructures.

Learning in organizations and in cities

Senge (1990), in his book *The Fifth Discipline*, notes that few large corporations live even half as long as a person's life. Cities, presently, have better survival chances than organizations, but still, many of them are expiring and others could be much more successful than they actually are. According to Senge (1990), the reason for organizations' poor chance of survival is the learning disabilities that organizations tend to develop. So, what does make an organization into a learning one?

Foremost, organizational learning is rooted in individual learning. However, the fact that each individual is learning does not mean that the organization as a whole could learn and improve itself. In order for organizational learning to occur, there has to be a synergy of the knowledge, perspectives and insights of its members into an effect that is greater than the

“A town that wants to evolve into a knowledge city must, in many cases, empower its residents into knowledge citizens.”

sum of the effects each individual is able to create independently (Senge, 1990). This transition is rooted in communication; through which knowledge sharing can evolve.

The second element for creating organizational learning is feedback. Organizational, as well as personal growth can only happen when there is an ability to see the reality as it is and face the truth (Lynn, 2002). One of the major problems of senior management in big organizations is losing contact with what is happening “out there”, “in the field” (Finkelstein, 2003). That is why learning organizations are those that encourage middle management, first line workers and customers to express their point-of-view, and see to it that the higher-level management will get this information.

A city is characterized by a few organizational aspects: there is the senior management (the mayor, the CEO and the executive team) there are municipal middle management and workers, and there are customers (the citizens). A learning city, just like a learning organization, needs to be a place where both individual and group learning occurs through conversation and feedback.

Citizens in knowledge cities

Research shows the advantages of knowledge cities incorporated as a strong innovation dynamic, a more sustainable economy, better education services, etc. (Ergazakis *et al.*, 2004). Among these benefits is the citizens' role in the city, allowing people to grow into new competences, while utilizing their individual potential to the fullest through establishing person-context exchange dynamics (Martinez, 2006). In a recent publication (Martinez, 2006), Martinez describes the profile of knowledge citizens as having capabilities of civic responsibility, tolerance, solidarity, self motivation and others. Nonetheless, many citizens are not as involved in the city's life as in the ideal profile. Kent Roberts, the director of a National Civility Center stated:

It is strange that in an age where technology has connected people in a wide variety of ways that we seem so disconnected as citizens. This disconnection becomes the challenge of our society. . . Though we have immediate access to tons of information we seem incapable of finding common sense solutions to the problems we face. The culture and context of our communities needs to be reestablished (Roberts, 2006).

A town that wants to evolve into a knowledge city must, in many cases, empower its residents into knowledge citizens. Such change should focus on citizens' perceptions regarding the level of involvement and influence they have on the city's life, as well as the extent to which they are willing to contribute to the shaping of the environment in which they live.

Citizens' participation in Holon

Holon is a town of 180,000 residents; located in the urban center of Israel. In the 1990s, this major Israeli town was facing the problem of stagnation. It was losing its overall appeal to its townspeople in general, and especially to the younger educated generation. In the mid-1990s, in response to losing attractiveness, the new mayor, Motti Sasson, along with the CEO, Hanna Herzman, initiated a new approach to the city's management, by proposing that the city implement a client and supplier relationship with the population. In order to carry out this approach, a benchmarking research was conducted, resulting in a new identity for Holon as “The city of children”. The focus was put on the intellectual capital of the city and the encouragement of nurturing its knowledge. Over the last eight years the city has implemented this new strategy, in various ways, focusing on enhancing the town's educational environment and infrastructures, while creating new and unique cultural institutions and activities with a major emphasis on children's activities (Levin-Sagi *et al.*, 2006).

Corresponding to the new theme Holon chose it was believed that there was a need to establish new channels for direct communication with the citizens. In attempt to become a knowledge city, Holon's aim was to enable direct feedback from its clients, the civilians, as well as to encourage citizens' participation and involvement in municipal issues that matter to them. The initiative for citizen participation was carried out in three ways: conducting a citizen-based consensus conference, arranging a series of neighborhood conversations, and holding knowledge café sessions.

Citizen-based consensus conference

The citizen based consensus conference method was developed in Denmark for a process that enables citizens to participate in democratic decision-making. The aim of the citizen based consensus conference is to create a platform for citizens to convey their position regarding policy-making issues. Examples of such issues could include unemployment, the future of transportation, or media: who does the sky belong to? All of which were discussed in past consensus conferences held in Israel over the last few years. However, such issues are usually complex, and are referred to as "issues for experts". Thus, the citizen-based consensus conference provides the participating citizens a thorough exploration of the issue under discussion. This allows participants to understand the issue adequately, enabling them to make relevant comments for decision makers to attend to. At the end of the conference, the participants write a report, stating their position and recommendations on the issue and presenting it to policy makers. The method of consensus conferences requires that the report will be based on consensus achieved by all group members (Zippori Institution, n.d.).

While four consensus conferences were held in Israel on a national level, Holon was the first city in Israel to conduct such a conference on the municipal level. This initiative was led by the Holon municipality and The Haim Zippori Community Education Center. The center brought the consensus conference methodology to Israel, adjusting it to the character and needs of Israeli democracy. The process was assisted by Edna Pasher PhD and Associates, who gave consultation and feedback on how to adapt the national format to the municipal level.

The focus of the citizen based consensus conference was Holon's identity as "The city of children". It included fine tuning of the city's vision and strategy and the actions planned necessary for implementation of strategy. Choosing the theme allowed the municipality to open a dialogue with its citizens, discussing the different ways in which the city's future should be planned and carried out. The consensus conference was held for three months. It included three meetings, lasting two to three days, guided with professional moderators from The Haim Zippori Community Education Center. In the breaks between the meetings, participants held discussions through a forum on the city's web site, and conducted individual learning. Spreading the conference meetings over a few months enabled several iterations in long learning process of knowledge sharing discussions, developing a meaningful understanding of the theme.

Initially, the conference steering committee was formed, in order to plan and follow the conference as it proceeded. The steering committee advertised the conference for the purpose of recruiting participants. An ad was placed in the local papers and a series of interviews were held by phone, leading down to a choice of 20 participants out of the approximately 100 that answered the ad. The criteria for the choice focused mostly on achieving a demographic representation that would reflect town's demographics.

“The aim of the citizen-based consensus conference is to create a platform for citizens to convey their position regarding policy-making issues.”

“Neighborhood conversations target the creation of a direct contact between town leaders and a neighborhood within it.”

The first meeting of the conference group was a two days session held at the Haim Zippori Community Education Center, in Jerusalem. Prior to that meeting, a background paper was sent to the participating citizens. The paper outlined the conference theme from various perspectives: professional, ethical, and political, in an attempt to provide a comprehensive map of the theme as understood by the professional steering committee. The first weekend aimed at bringing the group together and exploring the theme to decide what realms of the city life should be in focus. For that purpose, the group met the author of the background paper for further understanding of the theme.

The second meeting, two days long as well, was dedicated to a panel of interest groups representatives relevant to the various aspects of Holon as “The city of children”. The interest groups included the town’s youth movements, the children’s parliament, the Council of Volunteer’s Organization, the District Police and others. The aim of the panel was to expose the citizens to a variety of perspectives and ideas regarding the implementation of Holon as “The city of children” and the possible influences of such actions over different segments of the city’s population. The discussions began with the representatives presenting their respective positions, followed by the citizens presenting questions to the panel. In the next stage, the citizens divided into small groups for internal discussions amongst themselves, processing the information they received and consolidating their conclusions from it. The citizens were also supposed to form a list of questions to be presented to experts in various fields, with whom they would meet during the third meeting. Due to the circumstances, no time was left for question preparation. Instead, the participants initiated a voluntary session dedicated to forming those questions between the second meeting and the third. The questions were then sent to the experts, allowing them a thorough preparation for the next meeting.

The third meeting was held for three days. It was divided into two parts: the experts’ panel, and the writing of the report. The experts that took part in the panel were chosen by the citizens. Most of them were senior managers among the executive team of the municipality, because the citizens wanted to receive practical and relevant information as to the city’s current state. Just like the interest group panel, the expert panel was based on questions and answers, followed by an internal discussion among the citizens.

Writing the report was a challenge for the citizens. Foremost, it was done under the pressure of limited time. Secondly, the group wanted the report to include many different aspects relevant to the “city of children” theme, beginning with education and culture, through welfare, sanitation, and so on. In order to accomplish the mission in time, the group was divided into small teams each focusing on one sub-issue. The final report was handed to the mayor, the CEO, and the executive team, in a public ceremony covered by the press and open to the public. It should be noted that as the process evolved, the group members developed a stronger citizen identity, and became even more involved and engaged with its municipal issues. The CEO, Hanna Herzman, kept meeting with the group long after the conference was formally over, encouraging their involvement and feedback on municipal issues.

Neighborhood conversations

Neighborhood conversations target the creation of a direct contact between town leaders and a neighborhood within it. The purpose is to discuss the issues and problems of the neighborhood. Holon’s Mayor and executive team held several neighborhood conversations in the past, and started a new round in November 2005, planned to be carried on throughout 2006. The meetings are initiated and arranged by the municipality, and are held in the local school or community center. Once a meeting is set, it is published around the neighborhood

via direct mailing, street signs, and through the local newspapers. The local residents are requested to send questions beforehand to the meeting organizers. We observed the first meeting in the “Qiryat Rabin” neighborhood.

The meeting was held in the auditorium of an elementary school. It began at 19:00 and was attended by about 200 people. Present were the mayor, the CEO, several senior executives, and also the regional chief of police. The citizens raised the prepared questions as well as other spontaneous questions to the municipal representatives. The questions regarded all aspects of the neighborhood's life, from streetlights, through a traffic light that needs repair and even the sculpture in the neighborhood plaza. The team sat with the residents for five and a half hours on, till after midnight, and listened patiently to what was bothering citizens, and what was needed for improving the quality of life in the neighborhood. In addition, the mayor and his team presented their future plans for improving the neighborhood.

Neighborhood conversations create an authentic way for the mayor and his team to get a feeling of what is happening “on the streets”. Nonetheless, though the citizens' point-of-view on their quality of life in the neighborhood was brought about on that evening, it was a strenuous and exhausting evening for everyone involved. Moreover, at times an angry atmosphere developed, with the citizens' complaints towards the municipality. The knowledge café, which will be described hereafter, is designated to enable a learning process for large audiences. It may be suggested as a way of leveraging such meetings to a more fertile interaction in which citizens could both raise problems and suggest possible and preferred solutions for improving their neighborhood.

Knowledge café sessions

One of Holon's pioneering and creative ideas for transformation into a knowledge city involved the creation of the intellectual capital report of the municipality's Educational and Cultural Administration, aimed at visualizing the city's performance as a knowledge city (Levin-Sagi *et al.*, 2006). In order to launch the intellectual capital report, as well as to motivate and commit the employees to take an active role in the process, knowledge café sessions were held for employees, managers and other stakeholders. The knowledge café is a distinct method that enables conducting effective brainstorming sessions with a large group of people. At this forum employee from all parts of the organization discuss strategic and managerial issues, as they sit in small groups over a cup of coffee. This knowledge-sharing junction enables a wide audience conversation, while at the same time it maintains a personal, intimate level of conversation (Levin-Sagi *et al.*, 2006). What makes these sessions special is a strong backbone of ethic principles that form the infrastructure, while defining the sessions' boundaries and rules. The knowledge café principles are:

- clarifying the context, explaining the situation, the process and its outcome to the participants;
- creating a hospitable space;
- exploring meaningful questions;
- connecting diverse perspectives;
- encouraging personal contribution;
- listening together for deeper patterns, insights and questions; and
- sharing collective discoveries.

“In many ways, knowledge cities derive their beauty from their openness to varied voices inside them, and their ability not only to tolerate diversity but also to use it as a source for knowledge and development.”

At the beginning of the session, the ethic principles are presented to the participants and it is the host's duty to have them kept throughout the whole session (The World Café, n.d.).

The gatherings usually start with a presentation of one or more managerial dilemmas, turning them into the topic conversations at the tables. After these discussions are over, a representative from each table presents the findings of his group to the other participants, enabling further knowledge sharing and multiple perspective insights (Levin-Sagi *et al.*, 2006). In Holon, the knowledge café sessions were used in order to engage the participants with the municipality's growth and improvement strategy. Hence, the first question raised at the sessions was: "how can we improve the ongoing renewal processes in the municipality of Holon?" Answers varied from "becoming more professional service providers" to "using public opinion polls for feedback, in order to learn about citizens' expectations". In the second round, the participants were asked: "what should the municipality change and what should it nurture?" opening those questions for discussion increased the participants' feeling of involvement, and brought up ideas and insights that lead to new possibilities for improving the municipality performance.

Summary

Living in a city is far from being a homogeneous experience. Indeed, each inhabitant of today's multiple and diverse cities lives each day through a particular array of experiences that not only may be common to others in many regards, but also unique in many others...but beyond the potentially infinite combination of urban experiences, the point here is to substantiate the vast richness of urban environments (Carrillo, 2006).

In many ways, knowledge cities derive their beauty from their openness to varied voices inside them, and their ability not only to tolerate diversity but also to use it as a source for knowledge and development. There is no doubt that the city's biggest knowledge pool lies nowhere else but in the minds of its citizens, workers and managers. In this paper, we present three different methods for a city to use in order to develop a fertile dialogue with its people. As more and more towns become knowledge cities, we hope that conversations and dialogs, such as the ones described in Holon, will be their cornerstone.

References

- Carrillo, F.J. (2006), "Reconstructing urban experience", in Carrillo, F.J. (Ed.), *Knowledge Cities: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, pp. 273-84.
- Ergazakis, K., Metaxiotis, K. and Psarras, J. (2004), "Towards knowledge cities: conceptual analysis and success stories", *Journal of Knowledge Management*, Vol. 8, pp. 5-16.
- Finkelstein, S. (2003), *Why Smart Executives Fail: and What You Can Learn from their Mistakes*, Penguin Group, New York, NY.
- Levin-Sagi, M., Pasher, E. and Hertzman, H. (2006), "Holon: transition into city of children", in Carrillo, F.J. (Ed.), *Knowledge Cities: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, pp. 113-21.
- Lynn, A.B. (2002), *In Search of Honor*, Pecker Publishers, Tel Aviv.
- Martinez, A. (2006), "Knowledge citizens: a competence profile", in Carrillo, F.J. (Ed.), *Knowledge Cities: Approaches, Experiences, and Perspectives*, Elsevier, Amsterdam, pp. 233-43.
- Roberts, K. (2006), "Empowerment guides", internet correspondence (accessed 5 January 2006).
- Senge, P.M. (1990), *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practices of the Learning Organization*, Doubleday, New York, NY.
- (The) World Café (2006), "The principles of the world café", available at: www.theworldcafe.com/questionsnprinciples.html (accessed 29 January 2006).
- Zippori Institution (n.d.), "What is a citizen-based consensus conference?", available at: www.zippori.org.il/Index.asp?ArticleID=186&CategoryID=124&Page=1 (accessed 29 January 2006).

About the authors

Michal Goldberg is a consultant and a project manager at Edna Pasher PhD & Associates. She leads the field of knowledge management in the firm. As such, she has taken part in various consultation projects focusing on innovation management, KM strategic planning, and implementation of KM processes. Michal Goldberg is the corresponding author and can be contacted at: Michal@pasher.co.il

Edna Pasher earned her PhD at New York University in Communication Arts and Sciences. She founded an international strategic management consulting firm in 1978. Edna has been a pioneer and leader of the knowledge management movement in Israel and an active member of the international community of the KM Pioneers.

Maya Levin-Sagi is a consultant, researcher and project manager at Edna Pasher PhD & Associates. She has been involved in research in various fields such as cognitive social psychology, technology's social impact and adoption.

To purchase reprints of this article please e-mail: reprints@emeraldinsight.com
Or visit our web site for further details: www.emeraldinsight.com/reprints