

THE IMPACT OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT ON EMPLOYEE PERFORMANCE IN KNOWLEDGE PROCESS OUTSOURCING COMPANIES IN SRI LANKA

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Abstract

In the modern business world, organizations strive for competitive advantage. This study examines the impact of knowledge acquisition, knowledge creation, knowledge capture and storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge application on employee performance in Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) companies in Sri Lanka. The study adopted a quantitative approach, employing a structured online questionnaire distributed amongst the KPO industry employees. The data is analyzed using statistical methods such as correlation and multiple regression. According to the findings, knowledge management has a significant impact on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka. This result indicates a significant relationship between the selected knowledge management components - acquisition, creation, capture and storage, sharing, application and employee performance. However, challenges such as a lack of comprehensive knowledge management strategies, limited employee engagement, and cultural barriers are identified. The findings prove the need for KPO organizations in Sri Lanka to prioritize knowledge management strategies. The study contributes to the literature on knowledge management in the KPO industry.

Keywords: Employee performance, knowledge management, KPO industry, Sri Lanka

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Introduction

In the contemporary world, business organizations have identified that to achieve higher competitive advantage in the market, they have to develop unique characteristics. Because of that, organizations focus on different business strategies to enhance their market share. Therefore, business organizations prioritize improving employee performance as gaining of competitive advantage (Sunny & Yajurvedi, 2022). In business management academic research, employee performance has been widely researched and discussed and now it has become a major factor for organizational success in the constantly changing business environment (Diamantidis & Chatzoglou, 2019).

According to Striteska and Zapletal (2020), one of the primary responsibilities of the organization's top management is to oversee performance management, with a particular emphasis on developing an organizational culture which prioritizes performance throughout the business. In accordance with Diamantidis and Chatzoglou (2019), knowledge management, management support, organizational culture and climate have a significant role on employee performance in an organization. As shown by Voslobana (2012), there is a positive relationship between organization's growth and employee performance. Therefore, organizations have to keep high employee performance to achieve a high market share.

Currently, knowledge management has been recognized as the most vital component of competitive asset (Qalati, Zafar, Fan, & Sánchez Limón, 2022). Productive, efficient and effective knowledge management gives multiple advantages to an organization such as increased business performance, innovative business functions, and helps to maintain constant competitive advantage (Hemmati & Hosseini, 2016).

The Computer Society of Sri Lanka was established in 1976 after the country was declared an open economy. Around 2000, IT companies such as Knowledge Process Outsourcing (KPO) and Business Process Outsourcing (BPO) began their operations (Kalubandaracchi, 2023). These IT companies were governed under the Information and Communication Act No: 27 of 2003 (Information and Communication Technology Act, 2003). The rapid growth of BPO, KPO and IT provided business processing outsourcing (ITES) in South Asian countries a great opportunity but posed numerous challenges as well. BPO, KPO and ITES companies employ a large number of employees within a particular company and they heavily depend on knowledge economy (Wickramasinghe & Kumara, 2009). Sri Lanka was ranked as 23rd in Kearney Global Services location index in 2021 and ranked the 16th on Tholons 2016 Top 100 Outsourcing Destinations (Melamed, 2023). Over 300 IT companies are established in Sri Lanka (connext, 2021). Moreover, the capital of Sri Lanka, Colombo, offers a widely growing niche workforce which has low cost, is highly adaptable, loyal and English speaking. The growing rate of employment base in the industry is more than 20% (SLASSCOM, 2016). ITES/BPO and KPO industry have grown to a significant level over the past five to six years. The industry grew by 120% and currently it is the highest growing industry in the economy and is the fifth largest export segment. In revenue terms the sector has gained more than EUR 4.5 billion and more than 200,000 jobs were generated in 2022 (export.gov, 2022).

As discussed above, the KPO industry plays a significant role in the Sri Lankan economy. However, there is still a literature gap regarding KPO organizations in Sri Lanka. In 2006, LIRNEasia conducted research and it was only focused on the industry importance to the country to date (LIRNEasia, 2006). Moreover, Wickramasinghe and Kumara (2009) conducted research to recognize the capability requirements that favor between KPO and ITES-BPO industries. Hence, KPO organizations deeply depend on the knowledge economy (Wickramasinghe & Kumara, 2009). Knowledge management contributes to generating new knowledge and innovation. Understanding the effect of knowledge management practices helps to boost the employee performance practices (Jafari, Mohammadbagher, Suppiah, & Mariyayee, 2015). Moreover, knowledge management practices foster innovation and problem-solving capacities that give access to increasing the collective knowledge of employees (Abubakar, Elrehail, Alatailat, & Elçi, 2019). Measuring the impact of knowledge management on employee performance could help to understand how innovation and problem solving positively influence organizational outcomes. However, the impact of knowledge management on employee performance has not been evaluated in Sri Lankan context.

Therefore, the purpose of this study is to evaluate the impact of knowledge management on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka. This study focuses on filling the research gap from the academic and practical perspective. the successful recommendations and improvements will help to improve the employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka.

Literature Review

Performances can be categorized as organizational and employee (Qalati, Zafar, Fan, & Sánchez Limón, 2022). As shown by Brown, Mazumdar and McCracken (2018), organizational performance is significantly dependent on employee performance. High employee performance brings mutual benefits for both employers and employees. With regards to employer, employee performance and productivity have positive relationship and it will enhance organization's competitive advantage (Abubakar, Elrehail, Alatailat, & Elçi, 2019). With regards to employee, high employee performance leads to career development and friendly work environment (Iis, Wahyuddin, Thoyib, Ilham, & Sinta, 2022). It is argued that employee performance could be measured objectively, and a positive work environment has power to enhance employee commitment and achievement striving ability. Both employee commitment and striving ability help to improve employee performance (Zhenjing, Chupradit, Ku, Nassani, & Haffar, 2022).

In the modern business environment, organizations struggle to survive and since the beginning of the 21st century, knowledge management has grown into one of the most important parts of production (Magliocca, Herold, Canestrino, Temperini, & Albino, 2023).

Knowledge acquisition is defined as the activities that make an organization's knowledge base bigger (Li & Gao, 2023). According to Wilfredo and Esteves, the internal and external environment of an organization can help employees become more self-actualized, which will make them more committed, motivated and satisfied with their jobs (Wilfredo & Esteves, 2013).

Knowledge creation means an organization's capacity to come up with new and useful concepts and solutions at all levels of the organization (Kianto, Vanhala, & Heilmann, 2016). Furthermore, it is important for employees to have opportunities in the decision-making process of an organization in order to produce new information and ideas based on existing knowledge (Fattah, Yesiltas, & Atan, 2022).

Organizations should take actions to record and store the knowledge. Knowledge creation is not enough, companies should take actions to capture and store it (Abubakar, Elrehail, Alatailat, & Elçi, 2019). Both the explicit and tacit knowledge should be captured and stored for the organization's references. The experienced employees are the main source of tangible and knowledge stored in the organization (Asiamah, 2023). Moreover, it is essential to replace new technology and remove the old obstacles to improve organization's performance (Nadkarni & Prügl, 2020).

In the knowledge-based economy, sharing knowledge is considered as a main part of organizational effectiveness (Quigley, Tesluk, Locke, & Bartol, 2007). In accordance with Hussein et al. (2016), knowledge sharing highly impacts employee performance. Knowledge is a critical component in achieving organizational objectives and it is important when organizations make decisions and create new policies. Through experiences employees know how to handle things. When employees are more organized, they can take appropriate actions. Otherwise, knowledge is impractical. Also, it is important to note that organizations should have proper methods to apply and use original knowledge sources.

As shown by Inkinen (2016), if an organization needs to achieve its goals, employees should have to go above and beyond their tasks. Therefore, organizations need to invest in knowledge as an asset to improve employee performance. With reference to Purnamasari and team (2019), Standards Operation Procedures (SOPs) help businesses run smoothly and make sure employees do their best work. In 2019, Purnamasari and team conducted a study on the semantic network. However, there is better technology now to make SOPs. However, researchers have insufficiently discussed problems regarding inadequate knowledge management support. It is argued that the three elements of knowledge management such as technology literacy, job procedures and personal knowledge have positive relationship with knowledge management (Sardjono & Novian, 2018). As concluded by Sahana and Menon (2018), knowledge management and employee performance have a positive relationship (Sahana & Menon, 2018).

De Long and Fahey (2000) declared, the establishment of knowledge management fundamentals in any organization have an impact on the organization's culture. Nevertheless, organizational culture is not the only reason. There are other reasons that are intercorrelated with the culture. In accordance with Borges (2013), personality and social environment are intercorrelated factors. Moreover, he explained personality related factors exert a covert influence on individual's behavior when it comes to disclosing personal conduct. Overlooked in the existing literature, the behavior of tacit knowledge is a contributing factor to this problem. The comprehensive strategic approach of a business plays a critical role in the establishment of effective human resource management (Almajali, Aljaafreh, Al-nethami, Asasfeh, & Alabadleh, 2022). If the organization's management fails to prioritize the importance of continuous education, it may result in knowledge management problems due to inadequate integration.

A commonly mentioned challenge in knowledge management is the reluctance to adopt knowledge management systems. Thus, Li, Liu and Liu (2016), observed that the resistance of knowledge management systems is influenced by transaction cost, loss aversion and social norms. Organizations face challenges in developing effective knowledge management protocols due to ownership related obstacles. Furthermore, they found that employees prefer to be rewarded for their knowledge rather than sharing it

with others. In addition, Chua, Thinakaran and Vasudevan (2023) have shown that when an organization supports a single individual's knowledge, knowledge management becomes a critical issue for the organization. According to the above discussed literature, it was revealed that the issues related to knowledge management are mostly connected to organizational culture, employee variables, organization's structure and management.

Culture is intangible, collaborative, and created through the actions of a particular community. Managers and organizations have the ability to establish a culture that encourages employees to willingly share their knowledge and experiences with other teammates and colleagues, without the risk of losing valuable implicit knowledge. Thus, it is necessary for managers to establish a culture of mutual benefits within the organization. It is essential for organizational management to consistently promote continuous education within the organization. Communication is considered as the main instrument to develop intangible strategies within the company, including building trust, fostering employee engagement and facilitating community development.

Several previous studies have been conducted to clarify knowledge management and its related disciplines. Although the area of employee performance has been extensively discussed in behavioral research literature, the perspective of employee performance in relation to knowledge management has rarely been explored and the factors that influence employee performance have not included knowledge management and related concepts. This study aims to address the gap in existing literature by evaluating how knowledge management processes and strategies influence employee performance.

Materials and Methods

In the above analyzed context, the current study was conducted to assess the impact of knowledge management on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka. The **specific objective of the study** is:

- To analyze the impact of knowledge acquisition, knowledge creation, knowledge capture and storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge application on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka.

The **research questions** of the study are:

- What is the impact of knowledge management on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka?
- How have knowledge acquisition, knowledge creation, knowledge capture and storage, knowledge sharing, and knowledge application impacted employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka?

Research Sample

In order to attain the research objective, the data was collected from the KPO industry in Sri Lanka. Export.gov (2022) identified that there are 200,000 employees working in ITES/BPO and KPO organizations in Sri Lanka. However, due to the research gap of the KPO industry, information on the total number of employees exactly in KPO industry is not publicly available in Sri Lanka. The KPO is involved with more analytical, specified, and knowledge-based work (Murphy, 2021); KPO organizations provide services in medical, planning, finance, legal, research and development and work study. Hence, due to the complexity of KPO business, more BPOs organizations are available than KPOs in Sri Lanka (export.gov, 2022).

For the study, data were collected from employees in KPO industry in Sri Lanka using a simple random sampling method. Due to the time and cost constraints the sample size is 252.

The characteristics of the employee respondents is shown in Table 1. According to Table 1, 79% of respondents were female, 21% were male. According to the study conducted by Wickramasinghe and Kumara (2009), more than 50% of employees are female in both KPO and BPO industry in Sri Lanka.

Table 1 Summary of demographic distribution of total respondents

Variables	Frequency (n= 214)	Percentage (%)
Gender		
Male	46	21
Female	168	79
Age		
20-24	66	31
25-29	57	27
30-34	48	22
35-39	31	14
40 or above	12	6
Employment		
Less than 02 years	72	34
More than 02 years less than 05 years	68	32
More than 05 years, less than 08 years	42	20
More than 08 years	32	15

The **research framework** is depicted in Figure 1.

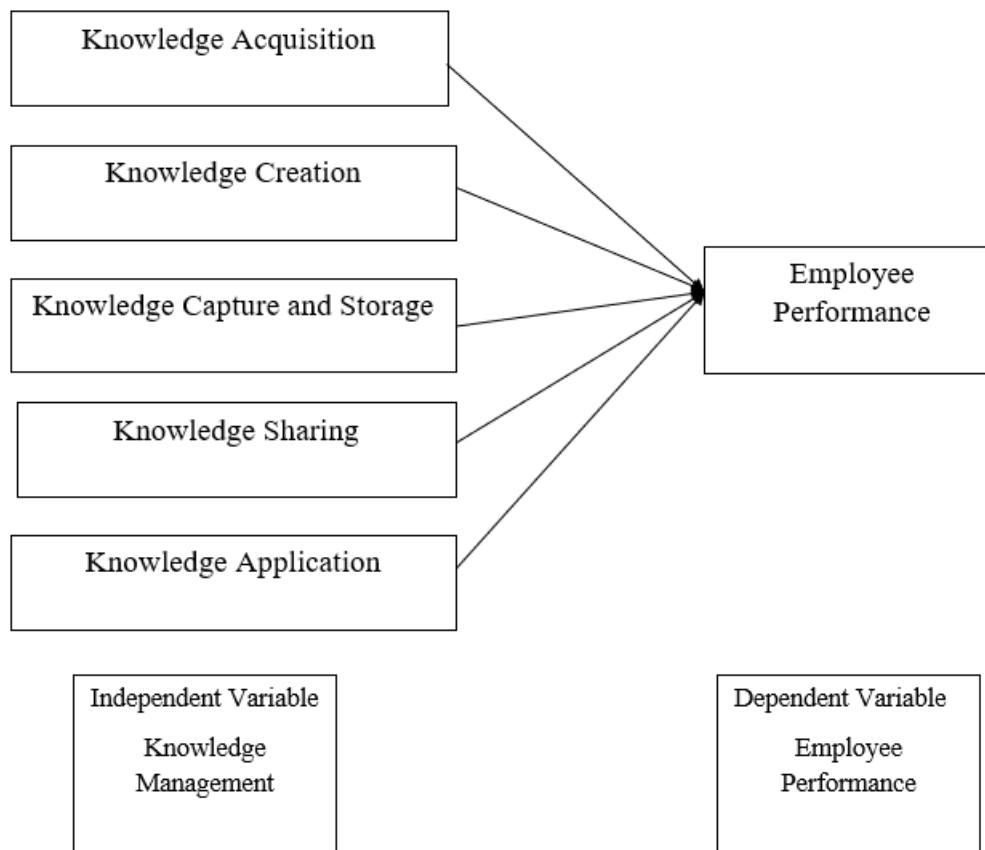


Figure 1 Research Framework

Research Methods and the Questionnaire Tool

The structured online questionnaire has been selected to gather the data for this quantitative study. The Likert scale was selected to study how strongly subjects *agree* or *disagree* with the statements on a five-point scale from *strongly disagree* (1) to *strongly agree* (5). The questionnaire was developed in three sections: the first section contains demographic information of respondents; the second section contains information about the level of employee performance in KPO organizations in Sri Lanka; the third section contains five sub sections about factors determining knowledge management process in KPO

organizations in Sri Lanka. In total, 36 items were included in the questionnaire including the demographic information of respondents.

The total number of questionnaires distributed was 252 in December 2023. 223 respondents voluntarily responded within the four weeks of time period. 214 usable responses were received, resulting in an 85% response rate.

The selected data analysis tool package is SPSS 25. *Cronbach's alpha* has been used to check the validity and reliability of the data. Descriptive statistics tests have been used to analyze the central tendency and dispersion of the variables of the study. Inferential parametric statistics tests have been utilized to determine the relationship between independent and dependent variables.

Reliability Analysis

Reliability pertains to the consistency and accuracy of the obtained results in accurately representing the entire population under the study (Middleton, 2019). In this study, the reliability test has been conducted through Cronbach's Alpha. The Cronbach's Alpha value for employee performance is 0.913, knowledge acquisition is 0.962, knowledge creation is 0.948, knowledge capture and storage is 0.947, knowledge sharing is 0.962 and knowledge application is 0.932. As all the Cronbach's Alpha scores are above 0.7. This shows high reliability of the variables used (Hair, Anderson, Tatham, & Black, 2006). According to that, there were not any significant changes to the listed items on the questionnaire.

Results

The descriptive statistics are shown in *Figure 2*. The highest mean value ($\bar{x}=2.92$) is shown by employee performance. The median values are equal for all the variables ($M=2$). The highest standard deviation value is shown by knowledge capture and storage and knowledge creation ($\sigma=1.2$) and the least standard deviation value is shown by employee performance ($\sigma=0.95$). Moreover, the highest variance is shown by knowledge capture and storage and knowledge creation ($\sigma^2=1.4$). Since they have the highest standard deviation value among variables. Furthermore, the Skewness values of the variables are within the range (0.518 and 1.22). Except for employee performance for all the other variables, Skewness values are greater than +01, and it indicates that the data is highly skewed.

Figure 2 Summary of descriptive statistics

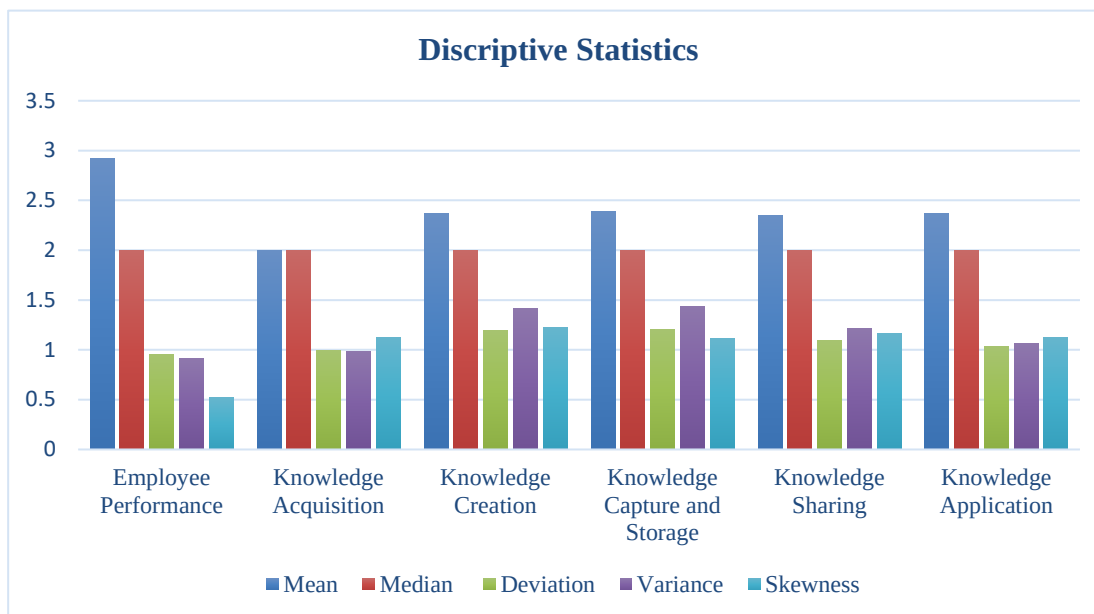


Table 2 shows the correlation analysis amongst the variables. According to Table 2, all the correlations between knowledge management subcategories and employee performance were significant and positive.

Table 2 Results of correlation analysis

	Person Correla- tion	Knowledg e Acquisitio n	Knowledge Creation	Knowledge Capture and Storage	Knowledge Sharing	Knowledge Application
		0.807	0.819	0.831	0.731	0.81
		Sig. (2-tailed)	0.000	0.000	0.000	0.000
Employee Performance	N	214	214	214	214	214

Note: Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

Multiple regression

The R² value of the study was 0.76 suggesting that 76 percent of variance in dependent variables (employee performance) is explained by the covariates. The rest of 24 percent is not explained on this model. According to the Analysis of Variance (ANOVA) test results, the F value should be below 0.05. If it is below 0.05, then the model is considered as fit model for identifying the factors that influence the dependent variable. The significance value of this model is 0.000 and it is less than 0.05. Therefore, it indicates that this model fits enough to recognize the determinants of the dependent variables.

Table 3 shows the coefficient analysis of the study. According to Table 3, the predictions of the model coefficient for β_0 (Constant) is 1.102 β_1 (Knowledge Acquisition) is 0.373 with a significant value of 0.000, β_2 (Knowledge Creation) is 0.307 with a significant value of 0.000, β_3 (Knowledge Capture and Storage) is 0.205 with a significant value of 0.035, β_4 (Knowledge Sharing) is (-0.34) with a significant value of 0.000, B_5 (Knowledge Application) is 0.237 with a significant value of 0.008. The significance value of all the variables is less than 0.05 and it indicates that all the variables in the model are significant. Except for Knowledge Sharing other variables show a positive relationship with employee performance.

The regression equation can be developed based on the findings of the model.

Employee Performance = 1.102+0.373*knowledge acquisition + 0.307* knowledge creation+ 0.205* knowledge capture and storage – 0.34*knowledge sharing + 0.237*knowledge application.

Table 3 Coefficient analysis of Multiple regression

Coefficients	Unstandardized Coefficients		Standardized Coefficients	t	Sig.
	B	Std. Error	Beta		
(Constant)	1.102	0.086		12.777	0.000
Knowledge Acquisition	0.373	0.068	0.387	5.51	0.000
Knowledge Creation	0.307	0.085	0.382	3.627	0.000
Knowledge Capture and Storage	0.205	0.097	0.259	2.121	0.035
Knowledge Sharing	-0.34	0.077	-0.392	-4.427	0.000
Knowledge Application	0.237	0.088	0.257	2.688	0.008

In online questionnaire data were collected about knowledge management practices in KPO companies. According to the survey findings, twelve KPO organizations may lack a well-structured knowledge

management strategy. The lack of effective management, sharing and application of knowledge are identified as some of the reasons (n=85). Furthermore, it was found that employees also do not like to participate too actively in knowledge sharing sessions. The limited employee engagement and awareness in knowledge management is considered as a barrier to implementing proper knowledge management systems (n=102). KPO companies are knowledge and technology driven companies. However, inadequate technology infrastructure can hinder knowledge management practices in companies. It makes it challenging to capture, store, and disseminate knowledge effectively. Another barrier identified in the survey was cultural barriers of the companies such as hierarchical structure (n=108). Because of the cultural barriers, employees are reluctant to share knowledge, it may impede the free flow of knowledge sharing within the company. Mostly, KPO companies provide induction training for new entrants. However, it was found that organization decision makers are not much interested in providing sufficient training programs regarding knowledge management tools and practices (n=89), which may decrease their ability to effectively use and contribute to the knowledge base. Another sensitive barrier was that KPO companies often deal with client sensitive information. Concerns about the client data, data security and confidentiality may limit knowledge sharing particularly across teams (n=118). Integration challenges with the client systems was identified as a barrier. Different clients have different systems, and some clients may not expose much information and issues regarding exchanging information, affecting employee performance and collaboration between the outsourcing companies and the clients.

Discussion

KPO is a typical product of the service economy and one of the main drivers of changing the Sri Lankan economy. It is widely believed that the KPO industry will persist in growing, thereby generating a multitude of job opportunities. Employees with relevant knowledge are better positioned to succeed in KPO industry nowadays. The KPO service providers are either moving up the knowledge strength value chain with the existing clients or are using novel opportunities in the high end KPO industry. Given the knowledge intensive nature of the industry, a well timely question to ask is what the impact of knowledge management on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka is. In this article this question was addressed by using quantitative methodology. The study's findings indicate that the R^2 value of the multiple regression analysis, which measures the impact of knowledge management on employee performance, is approximately 76% ($R^2 = 0.762$). Furthermore, this result indicates a significant relationship between the selected knowledge management components: acquisition, creation, capture, sharing, application and employee performance. Except for knowledge sharing, all other variables show a positive relationship with employee performance. So far, a limited number of studies have addressed the question about the knowledge management in KPO industry. Thus, the findings of the study could be utilized to assist both individuals and organizations to recognize effective strategies to address knowledge management requirements for this important expanding industry.

The findings of the current study suggest organizations have given attention to knowledge management in KPOs. This has implications for Research and Development (R&D). KPO service providers and policy makers should pay more attention to knowledge management to increase employee performance. Next, when organizations plan to move up the value chain, company decision makers will be able to achieve a highly competitive advantage. The integration of knowledge in a person provides the employee value. Therefore, knowledge management systems in the KPO companies make employees more competitive. In this regard, a combination of right knowledge management strategies can help them to continue to add value. In this context, organizations with the right knowledge management strategies might find it easier to obtain more market share and better organizational performance. All such developments have implications for knowledge management in KPO industry, which is primarily increased employee performance.

It is a challenge to identify and implement common knowledge management systems in the KPO sector. Sri Lankan KPO sector draws employees from different sources and backgrounds. Unfortunately, in many

cases the decision makers do not understand the value of knowledge management within companies. As explained above, the issues related to knowledge management in the KPO companies in Sri Lanka hinder the overall employee performance which may directly result in lower competitive advantage in the market. There is a limited literature available regarding the KPO industry not only in Sri Lanka but also in other countries in the world. However, knowledge management on employee performance is not limited to a specific industry. In 2018, Ahmad, Muhammad and Anwar conducted research about knowledge management and employee performance in telecommunication industry. According to their findings, knowledge management significantly impact on employee performance. It indicates that there exists a consistent trend across different industries and regions. Gnawali conducted research in 2020 regarding knowledge management practices and its impact in performance in IT companies in Nepal. According to the findings of their study, there is a positive significant relationship between knowledge management and performance. Moreover, knowledge management practices are weak due to the organizational culture. This study also found that organizational culture is a challenge to implement knowledge management practices.

The consistent conclusion across varied industries and geographic area is the positive impact of knowledge management on employee performance. However, the challenges and complexities associated with processes for managing knowledge differ, highlighting the significance of industry specific strategies and organizational culture in implementing knowledge management.

Conclusion

To conclude, the study focuses on the crucial role of knowledge management in enhancing competitive advantage in the modern business environment, specifically in the rapidly growing KPO industry in Sri Lanka. According to the findings, knowledge management has a significant impact on employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka. Furthermore, correlation analysis reveals a significant relationship between knowledge management variables and employee performance in KPO companies in Sri Lanka. Despite the positive correlation, the study reveals challenges such as a lack of comprehensive knowledge management strategies, limited employee engagement, and cultural barriers. The study contributes to the literature on knowledge management in the KPO industry, filling a gap in understanding the dynamics of knowledge management in Sri Lankan context.

According to the survey findings, it becomes evident, that it is necessary to develop a comprehensive knowledge management strategy which would be aligned with the organization's objectives. Implementing rewarding programs both monetary and non-monetary and internal marketing programs could promote active participation in knowledge management initiatives. Furthermore, investing in modern and upgraded technology will support efficient knowledge management systems in companies. It is essential to develop training and awareness programs to address cultural barriers. Emphasizing the value of knowledge management initiatives and collaboration could develop a culture which promotes openness and transparency. Furthermore, the management has to develop strict data security programs and take clear confidentiality measures. Effective communication measures build confidence and trust in the security of the knowledge management systems. It may be done by developing programs to share knowledge amongst employees, implementing mentorship programs and documentation processes.

Limitations of the Research and Implications for Future Research

The sample size of this research is 214 from the KPO industry in Sri Lanka. The relatively small sample size might limit its generalizability to the entire KPO industry in Sri Lanka and not fully capture the diversity of the KPO industry. Since, the latest information related to KPO industry work force has not been available- The authors had to rely on the 2008 published statistics.

The study identified cultural barriers as a challenge in knowledge management. However, the research does not inquire deeply into specific cultural factors that may limit knowledge management practices. A more in-depth exploration of these cultural complexities could provide a better understanding of the challenges faced. These all open the door for future studies.

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