Exploring How Human Resource Management Initiatives Can Build Organisational Knowledge: 
A case study of Knowledge Management in a Law firm

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Declaration

I declare that this thesis is my own account of my research and contains, as its main content, work which has not previously been submitted for a degree at any tertiary educational institution.

Erin Marley
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Abstract

Over the past decade knowledge has been highlighted as the definitive source of competitive advantage (CA) and value for organisations in the new Knowledge Economy (Kong and Thomson 2009; Hartell and Fujimoto 2010). Since the early 1990’s many researchers have discussed the management of knowledge within organisations; prompting the exploration of knowledge creation and management theories (Wikström and Normann 1994). Research has revealed a limited ability for Knowledge Management (KM) frameworks to address the ‘soft’ (human) aspects alongside the ‘hard’ (technological) aspects of knowledge creation and transfer (Leyland 2010). This has called for an emphasis to be placed on the appropriate use of structures and strategies to harness knowledge and technology, in order to stay competitive (Leyland 2010).

Aiming to address these points this research is an explorative study investigating how HRM initiative can impact on knowledge generation and thereby build competitive advantage. The study employs a single case study approach premised on an in-depth rather than an industry-wide investigation of the relationships between KM and HRM in achieving organisational learning and CA. More specifically the research identifies how HRM initiatives enable knowledge-sharing between knowledge workers for the purpose of organisational learning, value adding to goods and services, and increased competitive advantage (CA).

This study is both unique and significant in terms of its contributions to knowledge in the field of KM. It elicits understandings from a review of the current KM literature and a practical perspective generated from the feedback given by 12 managers from a large Australian Law firm, situated in a highly knowledge-intensive industry with an incentive to engage in KM. The study aims to address the gap in the literature by providing broad practical insights into the management of knowledge from both ‘hard’ (IT) and ‘soft’ (Human) perspectives. A thematic analysis of both the literature and the data collected in chapters two and four provides a synthesis of theory and practice offered in chapter five.

The key findings indicated that in the case organisation HRM policy and practice were not a key aspect of managing relationships and facilitating knowledge-sharing amongst employees. However, organisational culture played a big part in enabling and encouraging commitment to KM. The core recommendation for the case organisation to consider is the implementation of HRM initiatives which will promote the development of an organisational learning focused culture to improve the knowledge-sharing. This finding is supported with reference to the broader KM, organisational learning and HRM literature. This study provides a platform for further research exploring the potentially productive nexus between KM, HRM, organisational learning and culture and how this can better understood by academics and managers seeking to add value in legal and professional services.
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List of Acronyms and Definitions

Competitive Advantage (CA) – A firm has competitive advantage when it is implementing a value creating strategy not simultaneously being implemented by any current or potential competitors (Barney 1991).

Human Resources Management (HRM) – is the pattern of planned human resource deployments and activities intended to enable an organization to achieve its goals (Wright and McMahan 1992)

Knowledge-Based View (KBV) – identifies knowledge as a capability for competitive advantage alongside physical resources; labelling it a ‘costly-to-imitate resource’ (Barney 1991).

Knowledge Management (KM) – “It focuses on the need to develop collaborative knowledge networks, which are increasingly global in nature and which support people with the technology needed to work across distance to foster the innovation needed to remain competitive in global environments” (Hawryskiew 2010, 5).

Knowledge Management Lawyer (KML) – describes lawyers operating in the space of knowledge and utilising knowledge to improve practice.

Organisational Learning (OL) – Organisational learning is an organisation-wide process, which identifies gaps in current and desired performance, through bringing employees together to become aware of capabilities and consequences for experience (Hartell and Fujimoto 2010).

Resource-Based View (RBV) - identifies that physical resources and capabilities rather than products and services used by organisation to build competitive strategy (Grant 1996).