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Knowledge Management in Government: An Idea Whose Time Has Come

by

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Governments cannot afford to overlook a ground swell that is currently transforming companies, and more especially big companies. It is important that governments draw the appropriate conclusions, not by seeking to “copy” the private sector, but by endeavouring to innovate in accordance with their own identity and specificity and in accordance with their own way of managing their human resources.

The following issue paper is in three parts:

- the first part briefly describes the ground swell, which is commonly known as knowledge management;
- the second part shows why this movement is also of significance for the public sector;
- the third part makes proposals with a view to initiating a debate capable of turning into a genuine action programme affecting government over the coming years.

1. Knowledge management: an irreversible movement in large companies

What is it all about? Companies are discovering that their strategic resources are collective resources contained in the form of people’s knowledge. The fact is that this knowledge is not properly “exploited”, is “under-exploited” or is even “non-exploited”. It is as if there were an accumulated body of knowledge (of which people are not even aware) with, as the systems analysts would say, “the whole amounting to more than the sum of the parts”. All of which is reminiscent of the famous disillusioned comment made by one of the heads of Hewlett Packard: “Ah, if Hewlett Packard knew what Hewlett Packard knows!”

What are we to make of this remark, which applies to any organised unit? It means admitting that the organisation knows a lot more than it thinks, that there are collective and individual memories that have been erased and that there is expertise that is no longer reactivated for want of appropriate storage methods.

All of this leads to the loss of efficiency apparent in big private organisations. Nobody even bothers to find out how other people solved the same problem earlier. Who remembers the fine invention of the 17th century French philosopher, Blaise Pascal? Seeing his father, the King’s intendant responsible for collecting taxes, struggling with additions and multiplications every day, Pascal thought up and constructed a veritable arithmetic machine,

the ancestor of the first calculator. At the age of 16, this “frightening genius” came up with the invention which would lead ultimately to the computer.

In addition, organisations find it difficult to listen to those who want to improve what already exists (economists call it “process innovation”), even though they use “ideas boxes”. Also, radical innovators tend not to be listened to any more because as new knowledge (or, moreover, a new combination of pieces of knowledge), despite being a source of value creation, is liable to call into question practices that are often fossilised or stabilised. The radical innovations are not listened to for good reasons, though often described as resistance to change. In their disappointment at not being listened to, the said innovators may psychologically desert the organisation, abandoning the idea of making any new contribution and obediently abiding by the collective norm which means that they are no longer under threat. They could be said to be tired of or bored with “pushing” new ideas and new practices – the ones that get nowhere for want of organisational attention.

Although admittedly not new, this waste has now become intolerable for consumers, who are no longer willing to absorb the costs deriving from flawed co-ordination and co-operation mechanisms. It has to be recognised, however, that big companies are beginning to realise the need to change the way they manage their store of knowledge, though the extent of this realisation depends on the nature of the sector.

The **consequences** of this waste are twofold

- there is not sufficient automation of explicit knowledge which could easily be codified; and
- insufficient steps are taken to provide space for those whose job involves proposing new combinations of knowledge and at the same time being willing to take risks.

The so-called knowledge management movement **provides an answer** to the above problems. It is a movement that is now occurring in large private firms, and is not a managerial fashion; or at least, if it is a fashion, it is probably going to last a long time. All of the attributes that characterise knowledge management relate in fact to generic factors such as knowledge **capturing**, processing, transmitting, storing and sharing.

The fact is that firms have always experienced a degree of conflict between “exploration” and “exploitation”. Since they obviously do not want to reinvent the wheel all the time, firms have always sought to develop techniques which facilitate routine and standardisation, thereby increasing efficiency. This is what explains the considerable efforts now being made to automatise everything that can be digitized, i.e. converted into zero and one.

Codifying practices in the form of standard operating procedures is part of the same phenomenon. At the same time, however, firms now realise that nothing can be taken for granted and that success will depend mainly on their capacity to come up with new ideas and solutions that will unsettle their competitors.

Why is it now that firms are realizing the **importance of knowledge management as a specific and vital resource**? First of all, because there is some urgency, in the sense that gaining a competitive advantage depends on how quick firms are to bring new items onto the market:

- that are sufficiently “rich” for a restricted market of consumers ready to acknowledge them and pay the price; or
- sufficiently “poor” to reach a broad public.

It is this process of value creation that gives rise to the conflict between the **richness** of ideas and the goal to be achieved (reachness).

Once innovation becomes a key success factor, firms are going to have to change the way they manage those who may be described as knowledge workers. Who are they? They are people who do not perform tasks that can be observed and measured with scientific measuring instruments (such as people’s schedules or the sequencing of operations in basic units), but who handle symbols. Knowledge workers are faced with having to solve problems for which they do not always have a catalogue of answers.

The expectations of knowledge workers with respect to organisations are no longer the same as the expectations that employees had in the 1950s, when they were content to be loyal to the organisation in exchange for acceptable compensation. At that time, large organisations achieved stability because of the balance established between acceptable contributions and accepted rewards. This was the implicitly shared equilibrium model.

Nowadays, the situation has completely changed. To pick up a slogan from the 1960s, knowledge workers no longer work for General Motors or IBM. It is General Motors and IBM which have to give them good reasons why they should come and work in their companies. Future employees therefore have to agree to “rent”, for a time, knowledge that they feel they own. This vision of the employee’s relationship with the firm marks a complete turnaround in the behaviour of the employee.

This is the explanation given for the difference between a “local” researcher and a “cosmopolitan” researcher in the very competitive world of research. The local researcher will seek to keep up and progress on the spot, in his/her laboratory, while the cosmopolitan researcher will endeavour to broaden his/her scope with the prime objective of obtaining the recognition of his/her peers. The said recognition will be gained by means of international

conferences and articles published in journals read by the author's peers. The cosmopolitan researcher will have no hesitation in travelling the world and changing jobs, rather in the same way as motor car designers who are courted by a number of competing manufacturers at the same time.

These new employees will be attentive to the quality of the organisation which will facilitate learning mechanisms and enable them to progress in their area of expertise. So they expect not just a salary, but also:

- a place in which they can continually learn new things; and
- the opportunity to belong to a professional community in which cosmopolitan researchers will seek to be recognised on the grounds of their quality.

As a result, belonging to a professional community will often be seen to be more important than belonging to the organisation that employs the researchers in question. The professional community, therefore, is the place where practices are exchanged and personal development can take place. This is precisely the meaning that is to be attached to the enthusiasm (in articles at least) for the role played by communities of practices.

2. Is this knowledge management movement of any significance for the public sector?

Although overly succinct, this panorama does nevertheless show what is happening nowadays in firms that practice knowledge management. The question is whether this panorama has a meaning for the public sector or, more specifically, for government.

At first sight, it could be argued that what has been described above is of a somewhat exotic nature for government. Clearly, government is by no means subject to the same constraints as the private sector which is constantly liable to be punished by a market that can cause firms to disappear from one day to the next. Government therefore does not experience the anguish of such foreseeable decline, but by the same token, those in charge cannot use urgency as a means of imposing change.

Could the present excitement about knowledge management be no more than the futile gesturing of government officials in need of something new? To quote the French proverb and characterise the cynicism of those who are sceptical about managerial method phenomena: "let people bad-mouth what they want".

To use just two examples from the previous section, it certainly could be noted that, in government:

- the "exploitation" dimension carries more weight than the "exploration" dimension; and

- where knowledge workers are concerned, loyalty does not have the same implications.

When one looks at the functioning of mechanical bureaucracies, the importance of the “**exploitation**” dimension compared to the “exploration” dimension is obvious. The machine metaphor used here is the best way of describing government departments whose method of co-ordination mainly involves recourse to written rules and procedures. Moreover, these procedures are an important or even an essential production activity. The quest for efficiency is (or should be) the permanent concern of government officials who can in fact automate tasks with a high codification potential. Some sectors are obviously more appropriate than others.

To take just the example of the calculation and collection of taxes in a country like France, the army of Treasury accountants and collectors (hundreds of thousands of people) is numerically much bigger than the number of civil servants who put the budget together (just a few hundred). In a ministry like the Finance Ministry, there is therefore a big imbalance between the number of civil servants working on exploitation and the number working on exploration.

With regard to knowledge workers’ **loyalty**, the question differs according to whether one is referring to the public or the private sector. It is hard to imagine “cosmopolitan” workers in the public sector being ready to work for competing organisations on the grounds of their expertise. Suffice it to take the example of sovereign departments such as justice or the police, or a department like health, to realise the impossibility of switching behaviour. Any defection would be seen as a protest or a sign of serious unrest.

Loyalty does not have to be won in this case inasmuch as it is already established, owing to the existence of an agreed idea of the meaning to be given to the concept of service. In a large number of OECD member countries, this loyalty stems more often than not from the fact that civil servant status is gained as a result of an administrative examination, while in some other countries it confers job stability over a certain length of time.

This constitutes a substantial difference which acts in favour of the public sector, inasmuch as the effort that government decision-makers have to make to establish a common culture with shared objectives is much less significant than the efforts that heads of private organisations have to make. In theory, and also in practice, “knowledge workers” are socialised by ideas concerning the general interest or the “public good”. That ideology, which has to be seen as the “cement” holding all the objectives together, is without any equivalent in the private sector which has to find other engines that can prove effective but can also suddenly break down (the stock options example).

Concerning these two examples – the strains between the exploitation/exploration logic and loyalty – two comments may be made:

- i) There is in fact in government a wide variety between the nature of the tasks performed by civil servants and the collective or individual dimension of their work.

The idea of the mechanistic bureaucracy, in which co-ordination is ensured by rules and not by people, simplifies a daily reality which is a lot more subtle and difficult to understand. Civil servants' work can certainly be extremely humdrum, but it can also require judgment and discernment, while the same civil servants may also work alone or in groups. Just think of the police, judges, nurses, prison warders, or engineers responsible for road maintenance. These two dimensions – the complexity of the work and the degree of interdependence between the people engaged in the same activity – are independent and give rise to work situations which can be modelled.

In the case of primary and secondary education for example, most of the staff are primary school teachers whose work could hardly be called "routine", even if teachers have to keep to an official syllabus. Their work still calls for initiative and discernment (first dimension), but more often than not they are isolated (second dimension).

What we therefore have is something that could be termed an independent expert model. There is also another model where independent experts, whose work also demands judgment and discernment, work together on a given problem (the drafting of a pedagogic paper or the diagnosis of a medical image). This can be the case in schools when there is "networking" between colleagues teaching the same subjects, or between schools, or in hospitals which, increasingly, are developing telemedicine techniques.

- ii) While knowledge workers' loyalty may be an established fact in the public sector, this does not necessarily mean that their expectations are any different from those found in the private sector: securing lifelong training for doctors, the teaching profession and magistrates and sharing their questioning with respect to problems encountered in their everyday lives are expectations that are also found in professional bureaucracies in the public sector.

Both examples involve bureaucracies that can be termed professional, i.e. bureaucracies whose co-ordination mechanisms require their "operatives" – teachers and doctors – to be skilled. The latter are anxious to maintain a level of qualification that guarantees their professional independence.

While there is therefore no lack of *a priori* objections regarding the limits to the transposition of a knowledge management policy, they do not in fact stand up to close scrutiny of actual practice. Governments are experiencing

the same mounting expectations of staff who are no longer working on separable and quantifiable projects, but on “**events**”, i.e. mainly on problems to be solved, decisions to be taken and anticipatory measures. Examples include the crises that demand rapid and relevant responses, such as natural disasters and industrial and public health risks.

This means that government can no longer afford to overlook the change in operative work, and it also assumes that administrative productivity no longer stems from individual tasks but from the quality of organisation between actors who have to marshal fragmented items of knowledge.

This is the assumption underlying the survey undertaken by the OECD with the object of assessing what progress has been made in terms of knowledge management practices. The whole interest of this survey lies in fact in identifying a series of challenges that government has had, to contend with or will have in the not-too-distant future. These challenges can be met with the resources currently available, without any reference to a far-reaching reform that is constantly being postponed because it is deemed impossible despite being vital. Even so, a number of proposals can lead to a realistic action programme.

3. Action proposals

3.1. Use NICTs to eliminate paper and set up cold data in terms of both quantity and quality

The impressive processing power of computer tools (NICTs, new information and communication technologies) can now be used to make paper documents available on-line. This is the process now taking place with the introduction of e-government confirmed by the OECD survey.

Plenty of measures have been taken, all the OECD member countries having shown initiative in bringing their government departments up-to-date, whether willingly or unwillingly. Nowadays, government portals have no difficulty rivalling private company portals in terms of computer graphics and ergonomics. Local authorities were quick to understand what they could gain by investing in this technology so as to ensure better day-to-day relations with their inhabitants/taxpayers. Making the minutes of town council meetings or auditors' reports available on line for example is, evidence of local authorities' growing enthusiasm for the idea of finally introducing direct democracy which does not involve going through the filter of representation.

From analysing the services available on-line and the quality of the web pages, it has to be recognised that a lot of public organisations have jumped onto the new information technologies bandwagon with, in many cases, considerable success and talent, using both the Internet and Intranet. While big companies' Intranet sites pool their knowledge with regard to strategy

watch, local authorities are also sharing their technological infrastructure in order to pool their public information data bases. The pooling process is therefore clearly under way.

But more is needed, in the sense that the processing power of computer tools needs to be put to work for a specific purpose. On the one hand, it is a matter of working on data bases that are on the network, but also, and above all, it is important to make the system more reactive for the wellbeing of the citizen – a citizen whose expectations are unlimited as the relevant policy-makers know, and whose disappointment with regard to the quality of the services he/she receives can well involve sanctions for the policy-makers in question.

In the private sector, the intention is clear: consumers have to be targeted as well as possible, according to their profile, and their loyalty gained, since a faithful customer costs less to win over than a new customer. Business people and distributors nowadays form partnerships to share the information they have about consumers. They are in possession of data not just about the socio-economic category to which people belong, but also their behaviour, their buying habits, their preferred leisure pursuits, etc. In this way, enormous data banks are built up and information can be swapped. A disposable nappy manufacturer, for example, will “share” his data base with a producer of milk for babies.

It is hard to see why this sort of tool, used systematically in the private sector (which uses it for data mining), could not be used in the public sector, though obviously the intention would not be the same. This type of initiative is in fact becoming very much more frequent in the public sector.

In sectors such as the administration of health care reimbursement, where data can easily be codified, an operation that used to take days and occupy thousands of employees, now only takes a few minutes. To take another example – pension scheme management (which occupies a number of civil servants who do only routine tasks) – NICTs in OECD member countries that are experiencing ageing of their population pyramid have made the machinery considerably more efficient. This is rather the same as in the “bank assurance” sector which chose to industrialise the production of its services as early as the late 1950s.

In Canada, for example, a member of the labour force on the point of retiring, who has contributed to several funds and different schemes, can use the Internet to obtain a simulation of the amount of his/her pension in just a few minutes. Not all OECD member countries have yet reached this level of performance, but the outlook has been clearly charted by the policy-makers, who will be faced with increasingly demanding citizens finding it harder and harder to put up with the performance differential between the private sector and a public sector which, in their eyes, carries out much the same tasks. This is where NICTs can play their role to the full.

With varying degrees of facility, NICTs can also penetrate a universe which is harder to codify such as medical diagnoses. The chip can be linked up with the stethoscope, as for example when setting up information systems. But the productivity gains to be derived from using NICTs in the area of medicine itself are hard to gauge, inasmuch as a hospital's overall performance is unrelated to the performance of a simple task.

When it comes to building up data banks, public officials are not unaware of the fact that resistance to change cannot be overlooked. However, the trend towards automation via codification seems irreversible. Data are read by means of bar codes, which are now so commonplace that nobody thinks about them any more. As regards productivity gains in the private sector, bar codes are to industry what the horse collar was to agriculture in the Middle Ages.

Bar codes have quite simply revolutionised downstream-upstream relations: in supermarkets, suppliers know exactly, in real time, when their product is sold. In other words, the downstream side keeps the upstream side permanently informed. This revolution is important for managing government action, where the aim is specifically to ensure that information moves in a downstream-upstream direction. Bar codes have very quickly become efficient tools of food safety policy, for example by introducing traceability in the breeding industries. It is thus a tool that produces cold data: calf Z reared under its mother Y by breeder X, was born on such and such a day, etc. We have never had at our disposal so much incontrovertible information that cannot be falsified. Nor has paper, the logistical back-up for administrations that were founded on information being traceable, ever been so marginalised. But this does not mean the end of the public authorities' certification role (issuing permits).

Computer storage of data can also be affected in more surprising places than sickness insurance centres or police stations. In France recently, at the suggestion of a senior master who may be described as innovative, a *lycée* had the idea of recording secondary school students' absenteeism in real time by means of bar codes. At the start of every class, the teacher calls out the names and uses an electronic pen to highlight the bar code of the missing student(s). The senior master sees not only overall absenteeism (which may be 10%), but also immediately knows the name of the missing student, the time, the class and the name of the teacher. Furnished with both an overall picture and detailed information, the immediate effect for the master is to shorten the time taken to process the data and enhance the quality of his/her response.

Previously, the procedure was a paper procedure, dependent on the goodwill of the participants in the system. The teacher completed (or did not complete) a detachable form which was then deposited (or not) in the senior master's office every evening. The latter would then collect all these forms

which would be processed – not on time, but halfway through the day. The master needed two days to know who had been absent, before contending with the protestations of the student claiming (with his/her friends' backing) to have been at one course in three, and then perhaps warning the parents who would receive the information – a week later.

So the bar code makes it possible to collect “cold” data which can then be interpreted. Therein lies the problem of the **transition between data and information**, which now has to be emphasised. The term data refers to a set of facts describing a state or condition. The data refer to the attributes of an object, person or event. If the data identify attributes, they also identify absolutely specific causal relations. Knowledge is precisely this capacity to convert these cold data.

Having data on computer will certainly provide masses of data, but without giving them meaning. It will not answer the fundamental question of why. For example, why – other things being equal – are more cataracts operated on here rather than there; why is the cost of collecting this or that tax higher in that particular country, etc. But the work involved in collecting data can be greatly facilitated by establishing indicators which serve to some extent as parameters for describing a government measure.

Building indicators is not straightforward. Relevant parameters have to be established to describe what is to be observed. How, for example, does one construct an indicator of violence on the public highway? How should offences be codified? How can successful social reintegration be codified if success cannot be defined independently of the person providing the definition of success?

Shifting from cold data, which are increasingly well collected and abridged in the form of a composite index, interpreting them and taking action needs to be seen as a veritable “work project” to be undertaken by administrations embarking on the knowledge management path. The survey shows that many have no doubts about doing so.

3.2. Develop new competencies: learning how to interpret cold data

The transition from data collection to data interpretation is central to the knowledge management issue. What is important is to give some meaning to these data which, because of their sheer volume, are liable not to be read or simply to expire in the form of statistics that are regularly published but soon become no more than a ritual.

In both public and private organisations, everybody knows about the mechanisms that bury people under masses of data. Now it is up to knowledge officers to run an ongoing selection and sorting operation. One definition of knowledge management would thus be organising the attention of players in data-saturated systems.

This means changing levels and moving from data collection techniques (which are becoming more and more sophisticated) to interpretation, which is still rather “unrefined”, being based much more on the intuition, judgment, flair and experience of the person doing the interpreting, who will use his own filtering system.

Coming back to the example of recording absenteeism in schools, real-time collection of the information becomes a valuable tool for the master in dealing with the event symbolised by the student’s absenteeism, which has to be interpreted as a breakdown. This will enable the master to narrow down the answers inasmuch as he/she will now have a better grasp of the situation. It may be discovered that the student’s absenteeism is “selective” rather than “systematic” (a particular student being unable to bear a particular teacher and missing only that course). At the same time, the master gets information on absenteeism rates in that particular teacher’s class, the teacher not always being anxious for colleagues to know that students miss his/her courses (or else the student is absent simply because he/she knows there is homework to be handed in on that day).

In other words, the cold data give the master a variety of situations which will enable him to react differently and come up with much more cogent answers than previously. A variety of situations calls for a variety of solutions, and it is the quality of the information that will enable the master to alter the perception of this or that student.

While it may seem insignificant, this example illustrates both the role played by cold data collection and the skills needed to interpret them. Without automation, the data would have been provided in the form of average absenteeism per half-day. This raises the whole question of the relevance of data collection in relation to the intention. If, after operating for seven hours, a surgeon telephones in the evening to find out how his patient is and is told that the average temperature in his unit is 37.9 degrees, no interpretation will be possible. There will be no relationship between the information itself and using it in order to respond.

Interpretation can also be based on comparison, whence the strength of benchmarking surveys, which are beginning to be used in the public sector as instruments for producing knowledge on the functioning of organisations, in order to mobilise not only the players in the systems involved, but also public opinion. Why do more French die on the roads in France than in England, other things being equal in terms of the passenger/kilometre ratio? This is a question that can be asked all the more calmly because cold data are collected in accordance with increasingly strict protocols and are available immediately.

The transition from figures to letters (or the “transposition into words”) requires all the more care in that the said interpretation is destined to result in

public policy measures. So the figures take on all their importance, as long as one knows how to read them and decipher the strategies of the actors involved in formulating the said indicators, and who will be handling them. An example that illustrates this point is to be found in police statistics on delinquency. How are the figures to be interpreted? Is it police activity that is being measured (which can push the figures up or down, depending on the strategies involved in the system), or delinquency? What are the sources of these figures? How are the data aggregated?

In other words, how and where data are collected are details that have to be factored into the work of interpretation. Concerning a question as politically sensitive as security, interpreting the cold data becomes very delicate when the said data are placed under the control of policy-makers and do not derive from an independent observatory or an international organisation such as the OECD. A French sociologist specialising in police matters has proposed the following theorem (the Demonque theorem): “Over a short period, delinquency figures vary in inverse proportion to the popularity of the minister in charge of the department responsible for collecting the data.”

3.3. Changing the structures and methods of human resource management

Knowledge management is not devoid of consequences for the structure of the hierarchy and for human resource management. To mention just three:

- the change in the division of labour;
- the importance to be attributed to knowledge-sharing;
- the reappraisal of human resource management methods.

3.3.1. The change in the division of labour

As soon as data turn into information that can be put to active use, the immediate result will be to profoundly alter the way organisations are structured. This is true in both the private and the public sectors.

The role of hierarchy is redefined. It is no longer a person's position in a hierarchy that will keep his/her there, but the skill in accurately interpreting data that will have an impact on actions made apparent to civil society. That skill will have to be recognised and accepted by a rank and file increasingly well equipped for data collection. Hierarchy will not actually cease to exist, but the way it gains legitimacy will be changed. **Competence will take the place of authority.**

Going back to the example of a budget to be drawn up: once data entry techniques have been automated and simulations made both possible and more and more sophisticated, there is more time available to discuss the

impact of the assumptions made. The once fastidious task of data compilation, which could take up a lot of work time, is nowadays turning into policy analysis, with questions being asked and a variety of answers provided regarding taxation or the costs and benefits of this or that solution.

In other words, the number of levels in the hierarchy is going to decrease as those at the base of the pyramid become better informed. The base will increasingly resemble the professional musicians who “naturally” accept the authority of the conductor. The immediate effect will be not only to completely rethink what a hierarchical level means in terms of “value added” on a knowledge chain, but also to rethink the traditional breakdown in mechanistic bureaucracies between “staff” and “line”.

Traditionally, staff “thought”, i.e. laid down what work was to be done, while the line employees “executed” that work. With the arrival of new information technologies, that division of labour no longer has any meaning precisely because a manager is expected to meld it together.

Relations between the top and bottom of the hierarchy will be changed by the same token. It will no longer be a question of the management focusing on the information coming up from the bottom, but rather one of organising information sharing and the comparing of interpretations – which will necessarily depend on points of view and will differ – precisely in order to improve the quality of decision-making. Administrations will have to focus their efforts on the task of “making sense”.

3.3.2. The importance to be attributed to knowledge-sharing

The process of comparing points of view can only happen at meetings which become real places of work, rather than places for presenting a social hierarchy. It often used to be the case in highly “hierarchy-intensive” meetings that the person who knew was the person who kept quiet. There is in fact nothing spontaneous about knowledge-sharing. In a lot of “mechanistic” bureaucracies, withholding information was a technique or strategy used to enhance one’s power. In the new set-up which permits the circulation of knowledge, the expert’s power is founded not so much on individual knowledge as on his/her ability to make colleagues’ knowledge or opinions “flexible” and so improve decision-making in response to events.

OECD member countries suffer to a greater or lesser degree, for example, from the difficulty of providing schools with systematic experience-sharing mechanisms which will rescue teachers from the isolation that every day saps their energy. Sharing experience in this way involves organising time and places where experience can be shared between colleagues and where actual cases can be dissected. All these mechanisms have to be put in place if a learning administration is to become a reality.

There are, in short, a lot of initiatives, either taken directly by teachers who form networks, or driven directly by the state, borrowing from the example of a country like Mexico which, at federal level, has set up a network for experience sharing in occupational training. Tests with experience-sharing networks are increasing in line with their success, the survey carried out by the OECD confirming that they exist and are operational.

The initiative taken recently by a young writer in France, who set up a public good practice agency (*bonnespratiques.com*), goes further than the shared practice with the same professional referent. Starting with a concrete problem to be solved (how can schools be opened outside official hours so that voluntary helpers can attend to students, for example), it is a question in this case of circulating practical solutions “that work” throughout the country and sharing practices that have been assessed beforehand by experts and then disseminating them.

3.3.3. The reappraisal of human resource management methods

The effects on human resource management are also important. The expected profile will be different. The basis for assessment will change: success in an administrative examination will no longer guarantee a management post, defined once and for all. On the contrary, the desired qualities after for a managerial position will rather be those looked for in a conductor, to go back to the metaphor used above.

But how does one ensure that one is recognised by musicians, who are professionals, and thus impose one’s authority? A conductor can only assert him or herself with fellow professionals by virtue of his/her reputation and recognition on the international market for conductors and amongst the public. This means shifting from an objectives- to a results-based culture.

Turning to civil servants, whose own individual work can no longer be recognised as such in the sense that they have to share in understanding a given situation (without any answers being given in advance), it would seem that, here too, staff management methods need to be reassessed.

Will the faith of the teacher, the hospital doctor or the magistrate in his or her work be sufficient to give rise to vocations transcended by the spirit of public service? It is clear that fresh incentives have to be found in order to prevent the best people defecting and to avoid the “negative” attractions of public service looked upon as a shield against the risks of the labour market. Here again, the stakes are very high, always assuming it is presumed that if one knows how to manage knowledge, one also knows how to manage human resources. This is an assumption that still has to become a reality.

It may be postulated, by way of conclusion, that what is new today – both for firms and government – is that knowledge is becoming a management

subject. So knowledge may now – at the start of the 21st century – be said to be taking the place of the manual work which was the subject of scientific management at the beginning of the previous century. It is this shift which needs to be stressed and to which thought needs to be given prior to taking action.

To be exhaustive, it should be added that the producers, transmitters and users of this knowledge are fully aware of the above shift and make use of it. In the 19th century, people got married without “knowing”, i.e. without having read the comparative statistics on divorce rates in different countries, by age or socio-occupational category. It is very different nowadays, in the sense that lay people are able, in their own way, to appropriate the knowledge that used to be the reserve of specialists by reading simplified articles based on data produced by family research institutes. To continue with this example, Durkheim’s work is now in the public domain – some would say for the better, some for the worse. The medical sector certainly provides the best example of this interplay between knowledge producers, transmitters and users.

Anthony Giddens, a sociologist and one of Tony Blair’s policy advisers, was one of the first to build a theory around this phenomenon by putting forward the idea of reflexivity. In a society that is becoming reflexive, the increase in knowledge which is removed from its “official” place of production (like universities) does not make for improved control of society but can, on the contrary, cause social instability. This means that individual states have to find fresh space in their capacity to constantly develop cognitive and organisational conditions (and no longer just control and order them) so as to permit interaction between players. This fresh space assumes:

- a form of knowledge management between the central and local levels: at central level this means “making things possible” – though without doing anything other than proffering advice – in order to put together programmes with service producers who agree to be assessed on the basis of their results;
- civil servants who “play the game” by no longer sheltering behind their status, and who are prepared to see their work become similar to that of “internal advisers” to administrative units which, for their part, have to contend with citizens who no longer accept an authority over them that does not provide any explanations. And the more citizens are able to understand such explanations, the more vehemently they call for them.

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