



## Knowledge Management and the Informal Sector: a Qualitative Review

Isaac Onyeyirichukwu Chukwuma<sup>1\*</sup>, Uzoma Ogochukwu Okonkwo<sup>2</sup>

<sup>1</sup>University of Port Harcourt, Nigeria

<sup>2</sup>University of Nigeria

**Corresponding Author:** Isaac Onyeyirichukwu Chukwuma

[isaac.chukwuma@uniport.edu.ng](mailto:isaac.chukwuma@uniport.edu.ng)

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### ABSTRACT

The exploration of knowledge management and its influence on the informal sector has become a topical interest to industries and academia. Nonetheless, the current deficiency in literature to reveal empirical association between knowledge management and the informal sector is a critical gap this study sought to reduce. Hence, this study specifically examines the interrelationship between knowledge management and the informal sector. The study employed a qualitative descriptive method in analyzing relevant related studies and was anchored on the absorptive capacity theory. The study concludes that the analysis of knowledge management revealed its growing significance at a rapid trajectory that transcends the informal sector; the increasing need and demand for strategic activation, engagement, and execution of knowledge management activities have become much pronounced and invaluable to the sustainable posterity of the affairs of the informal sector. The study also made postulation on the prospect of the association between knowledge management and the informal sector

## INTRODUCTION

The informal sector is a modern challenge in today's global economy; from the views of millions of men and women who earn livelihoods in the activities of the informal sectors, as well as from the views of the policymakers who seek to enact the appropriate policy responses in a global knowledge dominated economy (ILO, 2013). The concept of knowledge has always been understood as a strategic asset in advancing and achieving a set goal, nonetheless, its optimization is anchored on the effectiveness of its management protocol; hence, knowledge management (KM) is the optimization of knowledge process (knowledge acquisition, knowledge storage and retrieval, knowledge sharing, and knowledge application) to guarantee a strategic advantage in diverse sectors.

In an increasingly global knowledge-dominated economy, KM has become a topical issue for both the industry and academia, which is evident in the extant literature on this construct (Kim, & Ko, 2014; Mariano & Awazu, 2016; Centobelli et al. 2019). Extant literature has linked organizations' success to the effective utilization of KM (Abualoush et al., 2018). Organizations (i.e. formal or informal) are constantly seeking to optimize strategies that manage threats and exploit opportunities in the market via the effective utilization of available resources and this is mostly achieved via the exploitation of KM (Obeidat et al., 2016; Obeidat et al., 2017). Notwithstanding this array of discussions, there is still a need to explore its engagement and level of involvement within the informal sector. This is anchored on the evidence that studies revealed that KM practices are beneficial to all forms of organizations (Arora, 2011; Špaček, 2016; Ukil, 2016), although there is extant literature on KM, in general, it's fitting to the context of the informal sector (TIS) is limited, and there is a paucity of studies that exactly studied KM in relation to TIS; even though the effective functioning of TIS relies on optimal articulation of potential and tested knowledge to actualize their economic goals.

This study aims to explore the interrelationship between KM and the informal sector, its influence on each other, and their prospect in its bid to be relevant in its industry and possibly beyond. As observed by Liyanage et al., (2009) and Ibidunni et al. (2017) the dimensions of KM comprise the acquisition, sharing, storage, and application of knowledge. Therefore, as shown in Figure 1, the direct association of KM (i.e. knowledge acquisition, knowledge sharing, knowledge storage, and knowledge application) with TIS will be examined. Also, the Absorptive Capacity Theory (TACT) perspective to KM and TIS will be evaluated.

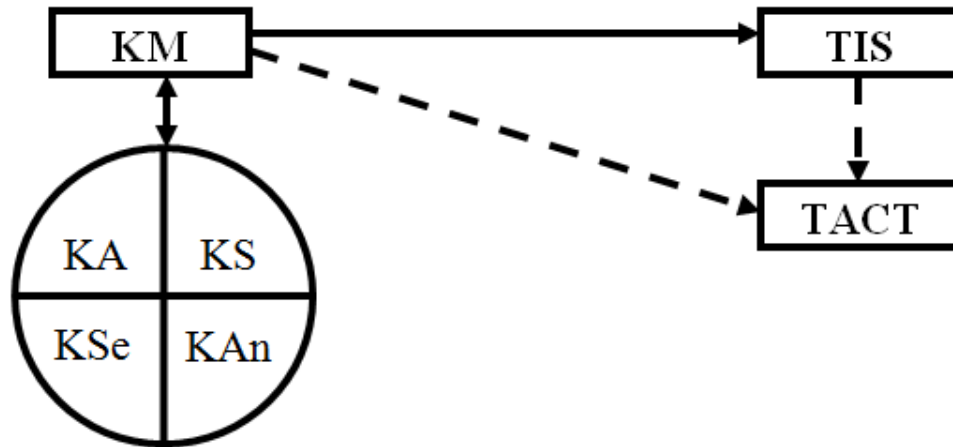


Figure 1. Conceptual Model for this Study

Note: KM: Knowledge Management; KA: Knowledge Acquisition; KS: Knowledge Sharing; KSe: Knowledge Storage; KAn: Knowledge Application; TIS: The Informal Sector; TACT: The Absorptive Capacity Theory

## LITERATURE REVIEW

### Knowledge Management (KM)

Knowledge has always played a significant role in the vested interest of organizations (Foray, 2004; Mosconi & Roy, 2013), its relevance and quest have been strengthened with the advent of globalization; causing it to become an intangible asset capable of delivering a competitive edge (Tunc-Bozbura, 2007; Ikujiro & Hiroshi, 2013). The potency in knowledge can only be explored through effective optimization of KM (Hansen et al., 1999) to maximize performance in the business industry (Malhotra, 2001). The quest for understanding KM is also reinforced by the fact that the strategic driver for the performance of firms is their level of KM competence (Spender and Grant, 1996; Grant, 1996). KM connotes the conscious practices and processes a firm utilized in optimizing the management of its knowledge resource to ensure achievement of set goals (Heisig, 2009; Andreeva & Kianto, 2012; Kianto et al. 2014).

Advocates of the knowledge-based perspective to firms have endorsed via empirical studies that knowledge and its optimized management is the most significant strategic asset for guaranteeing a firm's posterior competitive advantage in sustaining a viable going concern (Spender, 1996; Grant, 1996). Extant studies have revealed how KM is composed of diverse activities through which knowledge is created, acquired, stored, transferred, protected, and utilized by firms to optimize performance (Grant, 2002; Zack et al., 2009; Thang & Tuan, 2020). The association between KM and firm performance has been captured in literature; its direct and indirect influence on firm's bottom-line, affective employee's commitment, values, and IT support (Liao, 2011; Kuo, 2011; Camelo-Ordaz et al., 2011; Chuang et al., 2013; Soto-Acosta et al., 2014; Inkinen et al., 2015).

### **The Informal Sector**

The informal sector (TIS) was tagged as a means to account for fluid economic activities earlier ignored in articulating economic development models in national development (Peattie, 1987; Kanbur & McIntosh, 1988; Basant & Kumar, 1990). Notwithstanding its increasing relevance, the definition of TIS has largely been inconsistent among scholars. The various perspective to which TIS have been articulated as postulated by Swaminathan (1991) includes; first, approaches that recognize a formal-informal dualism on the premise of identified empirical attributes of activities (i.e. technology, organization, and production). The second consideration is the articulation of the TIS as a production system that is highly dependent on the capitalist economy; hence, the economy is perceived as an amalgamation of interconnected sectors. The third approach connotes the “flexible specialization approach,” mostly perceived in developed nations, where TIS activities are related to technological and organizational flexibility. Finally, TIS is mainly characterized as unrecognized and unregulated economic activities in a nation. Notwithstanding the fluid nature of the perspectives in articulating TIS, Swaminathan (1991) further posits that there are overlapping attributes but they differ in the emphasis laid on the diverse factors related to TIS. Other definitions of TIS articulated the attributes to the following variables; ownership structure, state regulations, and employment nature (Portes & Sassen-Koob, 1987; Castells & Portes, 1989; Swaminathan, 1991). Finally, De-Soto (1989) posits that TIS incorporates a refuge for individuals that consider the cost of attaining economic objectives under a formalized and regulated economic and legal structure exceeds the accrued advantages and benefits.

TIS accounts for more than half of the global environment (ILO 2002; 2013), and the size of TIS in a nation significantly relates to a nation’s economic development level (Schneider 2002; Chambwera, MacGregor & Baker, 2011). The flexible nature of TIS enables it to effectively thrive in challenging situations i.e. global recession. Hence their relevance and growth is increasingly notable and has drawn the attention of some government to enact policies that support the activities of TIS (i.e. Ghana established the National Secretariat of the Informal Economy Project, China’s formalization of the waste recycling industry) (Waldmann & Stocker, 2007), even though it may be difficult to directly measure (Chambwera, MacGregor & Baker, 2011). Flodman (2004); Chambwera, MacGregor and Baker (2011); ILO, (2013) posits that the increasing relevance and growth of TIS is attributed to the fact that the formal sector is significantly lacking in accommodating the increasing supply of labour (especially for the unskilled workforce), changing production structures, economic crises, drive for flexibility, and poverty.

Critics of the TIS have often cited the difficulty in measuring it; this is usually based on the analysis via monetary values (i.e. GNP), and ignoring barter exchange, and work for self which features in TIS (Chambwera, MacGregor & Baker, 2011). Also, the misconception that TIS connotes the “black economy or market,” hence comprises illogical activities, limiting their security in a nations’ policy. The above logic ignores the fact that TIS denotes economic activities that are not under government control (i.e. acts, taxation, regulations) (Schneider

2002); hence the scope of TIS encompasses but not limited to small-scale ventures, subsistence farming, and illegal activity (Henry and Sills 2006). Finally, the acclaimed illegality of the operations of TIS; this perspective is context-based, as postulated by Soyinbo (1997), TIS although not captured in the GDP of a nation's economy is ethically legal with tangible and positive benefits to the inhabitants of such nations. Smith (1994) likewise posits that informality in economic operations that are value-oriented and market-based possess both illegal and legal dimensions that contribute to a nation's growth and development. The above misconception has generally resulted in TIS having a weak voice in policy formulation and execution, as well as lacking a legal standing to advocate for better work welfare, which has made workers in TIS become exposed to abuse and harassment (i.e. absence of formal contracts, inadequate work conditions, paying below minimum wage, etc.) by employers. The colossal dynamics of situations in TIS demand equally varied solutions modified to exact contexts via effective knowledge management (ILO, 2013).

### **Knowledge Acquisition and the Informal Sector**

Knowledge acquisition (KA) connotes the acquisition of skills, ideas, and knowledge that are necessary for the firm's goals (Tiwana, 2002; Choo, 2003). KA is a significant and continuous activity for firms that constantly seek to grow, develop, and be relevant in their industry. Studies have revealed the relevance of KA to a firm's innovativeness (Chen & Huang, 2009; Andreeva & Kianto, 2011; Nishihara, 2018). Thang & Tuan (2020) observe that notwithstanding the generally held beliefs on the significant role of KA in the innovativeness of firms (i.e. TIS) to optimally perform, the particular mode of this association is still been debated. Thang & Tuan (2020) further posit that KA from a universal viewpoint may possess an effect on a firm's innovativeness; innovation is necessary for today's highly competitive market, and actors in TIS are constantly innovating to gain a competitive niche amongst many competitors. Alternatively, from a contingency viewpoint, TIS innovative activities can be further strengthened and result bound when aligned with KM strategic attributes. The ability of TIS to acquire and codify strategic knowledge, hence making it accessible and useful via digital channels is anchored on the competence of the work personnel (Hansen et al. 1999; Choi & Lee, 2002). But where a human-oriented (i.e. personalization) strategy is implored in KA, TIS utilizes personal contacts, internal or external social medium to acquire and disseminate strategic knowledge (Ammirato et al., 2019).

KA has been known to significantly contribute to firm's (i.e. informal and formal) interactions, innovativeness, and product development (Yli-Renko et al. 2001; Darroch, 2005; Andreeva & Kianto, 2011; Chen & Huang, 2009); this influence, when optimized within TIS will replicate a significant result in performance, growth, and development. In articulating the significance of KA to TIS, Zahra et al. (2000); Yli-Renko et al. (2001); Thang & Tuan (2020) postulate the following values of KA; KA widens the depth of external knowledge accessible to a firm, hence enriching the scope of external and internal knowledge available to optimize a firm's service and performance. Also, KA enhances the availability of strategic information necessary for effective decisions, and effective

structuring of internal knowledge to exploit opportunities and control threats. The necessity for TIS, to invest in KA should not be undermined (West & Bogers, 2014; Hall & Sena, 2017; Roper et al. 2017), as knowledge is the lifeblood of their economic viability.

### **Knowledge Sharing and the Informal Sector**

Knowledge sharing (KS) is critical and inevitable in any informal knowledge-based cluster (Ogunjemilua et al. 2020). Notwithstanding the avalanche of definitions and its diverse connotation, a common theme amongst the definition of KS generally denotes the means of disseminating, communicating, and exchanging of individuals' competency, expertise, and proficiency to other individuals, groups, or firms via personal or electronic means (Lauring & Bjerregaard, 2009; Yu et al. 2010; Ibidunni et al. 2020). The informal sector may generally not have a structured base for effective KS, this reality does not limit them from benefiting from the activities of KS, which aligns with the observation of Yu et al. (2010) which reveal that KS frequently happens indirectly and directly in TIS; although the effectiveness of KS practice in such firm may be influenced by psychological and cultural variables prevalent in such firms. KS encompasses six phases: examining, codification, deliberation, dispersion, ingestion, and affecting (Ibidunni et al. 2020).

The presence of KS in TIS does not negate the operations of trade secrets amongst actors in TIS (Abiola 2006). Hence, KS activities in TIS, while present, are limited to communicating mostly information that is basic to everyday activities and operations in TIS; hence, information that is considered significant and possesses potential or actual strategic value in gaining competitive niche and advantage is rarely shared. Nonetheless, the shared knowledge available and accessible has ensured a relatively stable level of output and quality in services, products, and performance.

The proximity and clustering nature of TIS with regards to their trade is an effective trigger for KS achieved via sharing, observation, and strategic alliance. This situation further results in enhancing the social capital of the actors, increase competitive advantage, enhance the ease of interaction and sharing of significant information, ensure adherence to agreements, and promotes mutually equitable negotiation of actors in the TIS (Oyelaran-Oyeyinka, 2006; Rahmani & Mousavi, 2011; Ogunjemilua et al. 2020). This is further reinforced by the fact that KS promotes TIS's competitive niche, innovativeness, and performance (Bock et al. 2005; Wang & Wang 2012).

### **Knowledge Storage and the Informal Sector**

Knowledge storage (KSe) denotes the systemic procedures for storing and coordinating knowledge (Alegre et al. 2013). Odea & Ayavoo, (2020) posit that KS is mostly an information-technology based system that promotes and advance the storage and repossession of operational knowledge; this is further done on other modes such as; explicit documentation, human codified knowledge, fiduciary trust in individuals, and teams (Donate & Pablo, 2015). Studies have also revealed that KSe influences innovative performance (Lai et al. 2014; Odea & Ayavoo, 2020). While the above is valid in a stable and controlled firm culture that promotes the virtue of KSe, activities of TIS hardly advance knowledge traits that can be systematically stored, assessed, and upgraded, with few exceptions,

those who practice it executive obsolete models of KSe that is difficult to assess and understand.

### **Knowledge Application and the Informal Sector**

Knowledge application (KAn) connotes the process of leveraging and utilizing knowledge to enhance the accomplishment of firm goals and promote their performance (Boateng & Agyemang, 2015; Odea & Ayavoo, 2020). KAn in extant literature is a significant benchmark factor for new-product development, innovativeness, and performance level of firms (Hamdoun et al., 2018; Mardani et al., 2018; Odea & Ayavoo, 2020); hence, KAn activities (even in TIS) optimizes the amalgamation of external and internal sourced knowledge to achieve a competitive niche in their industry (Shin et al., 2001). The core of KAn is the execution of strategic information, which TIS may utilize to enhance their economic stature, advance their market reach and size, and remain relevant in posterity. This aligns with the observation of Allameh, et al., (2011) which posit that KAn also results in cost reduction and optimization of a firm's efficiency. Finally, Chen and Huang (2009) and Shujahat et al. (2017) advocate that KAn articulates and explores the diverse available knowledge in a firm and optimizes its efficacy for optimal results. These advantages as evidenced in empirical studies aids TIS to coordinate and exploit the advantages acquired via experience, exposure, and activities in a market-cluster environment to further their economic activities and achieve set goals.

### **The Absorptive Capacity Theory Perspective to Knowledge Management and the Informal Sector**

The absorptive capacity theory (TACT) has witnessed diverse connotations in extant literature, nonetheless, a much agreed authoritative definition to this concept was observed in the work of Cohen and Levinthal (1990) and Zahra and George (2002). Cohen and Levinthal (1990) postulate that TACT connotes the recognition of strategic knowledge, assimilation of its orientation, process, and operations, and the exploitation of its value to a defined end (i.e. economic ends) by TIS. TACT was further asserted to denote the procedures by which TIS acquire or create strategic knowledge, assimilate strategic knowledge, transform or process strategic knowledge, and optimized exploitation of the strategic knowledge (Zahra & George, 2002). Zahra and George (2002) in furthering the understanding of absorptive capacity note that acquisition and assimilation of strategic knowledge connotes a potential absorptive capacity, while the transformation and exploitation of strategic knowledge denote a realized absorptive capacity.

TACT has been known to enhance a firm's performance (Martin, Massy & Clarke, 2003; Abreu et al. 2006; Ahmad & Ercek, 2018), hence when TIS actively engage higher levels of absorptive capacity in their KM process, their performance will yield higher, positive and sustainable output. Ahmad and Ercek (2018) posit that absorptive capacity provides a repertoire on the exploitation of KM to positively influencing the economic activities of firms (i.e. TIS).

## **METHODOLOGY**

The study deployed a qualitative descriptive method in analyzing relevant related studies and was anchored on the absorptive capacity theory. The qualitative descriptive method enables a right perspective to the description of an identified phenomenon to offer assessment and interpretation of findings that sufficiently represent the analogy of examined information (Sandelowski, 2000; Clancy, 2013).

## **DISCUSSION**

The relevance of KM has become much significant as an indispensable tool in TIS. The study aimed to explore the interrelationship between KM and the informal sector, its influence on each other, and their prospect in its bid to be relevant in its industry and possibly beyond. Also, TACT perspective to KM and TIS was examined via a review of relevant related literature. The analysis of KM revealed its growing significance at a rapid trajectory that transcends TIS. The increasing need and demand for strategic activation, engagement, and execution of KM activities have become much pronounced and invaluable to the sustainable posterity of the affairs of any firm, and this has been proven in the literatures reviewed. TIS on its own has also become an indispensable economic oriented force in both developed and developing nations; its increasing and notable relevance are gaining heightened recognition by different nations, and its activities are constantly becoming refined to meet defined benchmarks set by some formal structures; hence the continuous need for their investment and involvement in strategic knowledge management (i.e. KA, KS, KSe, KAn) process that is the lifeblood of relevance in any economic enterprise.

The association between KA and TIS having been reviewed reveals a great potential of the strategic competitive advantage that could be accessed and exploited when TIS utilizes and enshrines culture that promotes KA activities (i.e. thinking, training, observation, etc. This connotes the quest for strategic new or modified knowledge (i.e. not obsolete) that gives a niche to the activities of TIS. A brainstorming session, observation of the activities of other firms, studying firms' activities in other geographical locations can provide valuable KA insights that could further TIS interest. KS activities in TIS although present and possess significance in creating a cordial inter-relationship amongst colleagues and firms, are also exploited to create and manage an impression that might be exploited at a later end. While knowledge shared is basically routine details that are easy to obtain, strategic insights and knowledge that may give significant competitive advantages are rarely shared even among employees in the same firms. Practically KS activities in TIS are relatively low as compared to such activities in the formal sector, and an inter-play of variables is responsible for this; chief amongst them is the unstructured nature of TIS makes KS an unprofitable collaborative or non-mutual advantageous venture. The association between KSn and TIS is rarely captured in literature, nonetheless, the cost of storage and the ever-increasing need to minimize cost in TIS greatly affects KSn activities in TIS. Also, the lack of continuity, succession planning, and strategically (i.e. long-termed) planned relevance of TIS economic activities negates effective KSn activities. This limits TIS in structurally understanding

market trends, product scope, and implications of economic policies, etc. for their sustainable posterity. With regards to KAn and TIS, the application of acquired knowledge is executed in TIS, nonetheless, the systemic and refined application of this knowledge is questionable, and may invalidate the expected result from such engagement. The TACT perspective to the association between KM and TIS highlights the unending potentials that may be exploited when TIS engages and heightens their absorptive capacity for KM dimensions; hence, TIS must actively engage and explore their environment (i.e. internal and external) for strategic knowledge which when evaluated, processed and engaged gives them a competitive niche and advantage in their industry.

The prospect of KM in TIS endeavours is not likely to change from observed trends, with exception to the infusion of three basic variables; first, an active and pursued desire to lead the industry by firm actors in the TIS; this denotes an active quest to continuously exploit KM by actors in TIS. Secondly, increasing the active involvement of a government-sponsored process to promote KM activities that are peculiar to the unstructured process of TIS; this, some nations have already begun. Finally, the entrance of new actors in TIS, who have studied its peculiarities and aims to exploit its advantages by the KM process that have been analyzed. Eventually, KM will become a competitive necessity for TIS.

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