

From Human Resources to Resourceful Humans: Introducing Agility in NGOs

Abstract

The concept of agility is becoming more and more common in organisational management. In the current fast-changing business environment agile organisations are those organisations that can respond quickly to changes in the marketplace or environment; agile organisations are focused on customer's needs, which calls for customised rather than standardised service and products. A key aspect of agile organisations, that is, organisations that thrive in unpredictable and rapidly changing environments, is knowledge management: knowledge flows that result in timely and appropriate action.

There is an increasing body of literature on the need for NGOs to be agile, given the fast-changing policy, legal and funding environment they operate in (Bolton, 2017; Chatwani, 2014; L'Hermitte et al, 2016; Mazuze et al, 2015; Jansen, 2014). Recent research by Chatwani (2019) links this agile capacity to the fact that NGOs are norm- and mission-driven and have a strong identity, which facilitates the required knowledge transfer. Based on her research of Médecins Sans Frontières, Chatwani claims that agile organisations develop a sensing ability that allows them to anticipate environmental shifts by scanning for relevant cues and making sense of these. It is this sense-ability that continually triggers appropriate knowledge flows that result in timely actions. This sense-ability feeds into knowledge management and response-ability is the outcome of it, that is, responsive agile action. Chatwani's model of agility is described in the figure below (2019: 48).

In order to understand the relation between knowledge management and agility we will conduct an explorative study of two NGOs in Romania. Based on a desk study and structured interviews with staff members we will look at information flows, identity and knowledge management systems in two selected NGOs. Through this qualitative research approach we expect to get a better understanding of the complex processes of how the complex interplay of mission-driven organisations whose staff strongly and positively identifies with the mission of the organisation, results in knowledge management and organisational learning that make NGOs more or less agile.

Being a mixed academic-NGO practitioner team we expect to add new insights to both the academic and public debate about the effectiveness of NGOs and their role in contributing to the public good, public interest and services.