

A CASE STUDY OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PRACTICES AT THE INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS' GROUP

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Abstract

Purpose of the study: This study aims to gain an understanding of how (and if) the InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG) manages knowledge to create value.

Methodology: Publicly available data about the IHG were assessed using [Pawlowski and Bick's \(2015\)](#) Global Knowledge Management Framework (GKMFW) to determine the extent to which the IHG is implementing knowledge management (KM). Four experts reviewed the findings for validation.

Main findings: Knowledge management (KM) practices are used by the IHG at a basic level. Data collected in this study indicate that the IHG is not connecting KM processes in its strategy. This research highlights that the IHG and potentially other hotel companies could integrate KM to enhance their performance.

Applications of this study: The study's findings are important for hotel industry stakeholders (academics, hotel executives, owners, etc.), assisting them to better understand "hotel KM". Stakeholders are encouraged to implement holistic and purposeful KM programs (i.e., a framework), potentially delivering more value to their organisations.

Novelty/Originality of this study: This study is the first attempt to investigate KM activities in one major standard-setting hotel company (SSHC), as defined by [Boardman and Barbato \(2008\)](#). It highlights the limitations in hotel-specific KM research and the limited way in which KM is being applied in the InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG). It not only identifies a gap in the literature about KM in the hospitality industry but starts to fill this gap.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, InterContinental Hotels Group, Case Study, GKMFW, Hospitality Industry.

INTRODUCTION

The release of the international standard for knowledge management (KM), ISO 30401:2018 ([International Organization for Standardization \[ISO\], 2018](#)), and the increasing number of case studies on KM being used in strategic ways ([Syed et al., 2018](#)) highlight the importance of KM both within ([Bouncken, 2002](#)) and across industry sectors ([Heisig, 2009, 2014](#)). The ISO 30401 standard brings with it the long-awaited and well-deserved recognition of KM as a serious business management tool. Acknowledged as a key resource for competitive advantage in several industries ([Drucker, 1993](#); [Grant, 1996](#); [Gupta & Govindarajan, 2000](#); [Porter, 1985](#); [Teece, 1998](#)), KM is also a driver of innovation ([Syed et al., 2018](#)). [Okumus \(2013\)](#) referred to KM as a key asset of the hospitality industry. However, despite the acknowledgment of KM playing a key role, surprisingly few studies are found in the literature on how KM can be used in the hospitality industry ([Voegeli, 2019a](#)). The current study is conducted with the aim of highlighting the importance of knowledge initiatives and KM while investigating the KM practices of the IHG, a standard-setting hotel company (SSHC). The study's findings suggest that the IHG lacks a fully implemented (holistic and purposeful) KM program; thus, its KM efforts and activities do not appear to be fully leveraged. These concerns are supported by the increasing number of well-ranked "A" journals dedicated to the topic ([Serenko & Bontis, 2013, 2017](#)) and the growing number of educational institutions that offer KM programs (at MBA/Ph.D. levels) ([Sutton, 2007](#); [Roknuzzaman & Umemoto, 2009](#)). When KM is viewed from a financial impact perspective, large companies, through KM practices, have added hundreds of millions of dollars in value to their organisations, as indicated by various authors ([Ingram & Roberts, 2000](#); [Myers, 2015](#); [Vestal, 2002](#); [Voegeli, 2015](#)). With this knowledge, one would expect that hotel industry stakeholders (top executives, asset managers, investment bankers/funds with hotel portfolios, policymakers, hotel consulting firms, etc.) and researchers would be interested in knowing more about knowledge management (KM).

Surprisingly, the contrary seems to be the case. Hotel-specific KM is not a significant topic in hospitality research or in the hotel trade literature ([Voegeli, 2019a](#)). This gap warrants further investment in research to enlighten the hospitality industry and increase KM awareness. The notion that hotel-specific KM is under-researched has been supported by [Bouncken \(2002\)](#); [Hallin and Marnburg \(2008\)](#); [Cooper \(2006\)](#); [Kim \(2009\)](#); [Musulin et al. \(2011\)](#); [Lee \(2008\)](#); and [Cheng \(2010\)](#). Moreover, it has been noted that the few hotel KM studies that exist have been concerned about only one or two KM aspects ([Voegeli, 2019a](#)), for example, knowledge sharing or KM and innovation, rather than holistic KM that is purposefully integrated into strategy and leadership decision making. In addition to the lack of hotel KM research, "knowledge secrecy" appears to apply, owing to commercial interests. For example, the author of this paper was denied permission by many organisations to explore their KM practices when conducting the associated Ph.D. research. The impact of vested commercial interests in preventing knowledge sharing is supported by [Vikrant's \(2018\)](#) paper titled "KM: A hidden aspect in the hospitality industry". Interestingly, [Okumus et al. \(2007\)](#) experienced a similar problem in gaining access to hotel companies' knowledge, with these difficulties described in detail in their reflection paper.

The possible reasons why hotel executives refused access to KM-related research could be:

- They do not know or understand KM ([Lee, 2008](#)) and/or
- They are afraid of possible espionage or concerned about losing their (knowledge-based) competitive advantage ([Durst & Zieba, 2019](#)).

Therefore, special measures needed to be taken to complete the current research and to gain an understanding in response to the following questions for the hotel industry:

- 1) What KM practices are being implemented?
- 2) Is value currently being created through KM practices?
- 3) What are the KM and capability gaps or the opportunities for KM?

HOTEL INDUSTRY CONTEXT

Hospitality (including the hotel industry) is one of the largest industry sectors with many important linkages (upstream and downstream) to other sectors (e.g., airlines, real estate, construction, banking, food, and agriculture, to name a few). However, [Singal's \(2015\)](#) empirical paper found that the differences between the hospitality and tourism (HT) industry and other industries were so great that business theories from other industries needed to be tested in the HT context so they could be validated or rejected. Taking a similar perspective, [Erickson and Rothberg \(2015\)](#) assessed knowledge levels (assets) in service and non-service companies, between which significant differences were noted. [Dimitrios et al. \(2018\)](#) viewed KM as a tool to leverage tourism companies, highlighting that the human factor (staff–guest relationship) was a central concept, strongly separating hospitality from other industry sectors.

Looking at hotel companies (HCs) through a commercial lens, it is not only logical but also obvious that large companies with high annual turnovers (US\$ billions) (in this study, particularly SSHCs) have a higher potential to leverage KM opportunities (considering their size and footprint). The reason is the scope of activities to which they can apply their insights. [Ingram and Roberts \(2000\)](#) provided the value of the impact of hotel managers' friendship and information exchange (knowledge sharing) in the Sydney hotel industry as being equivalent to 15% of annual revenue (approximately A\$90 million at that time). The power of trusted relationships and networks is only one aspect of KM ([Shelley, 2017](#)) that larger HCs can access but which smaller HCs lack. Large HCs typically have higher budget allocations for business management tools, including tools that enable knowledge-related projects. As an SSHC, the IHG should be considered as "playing in the same league" as these large companies in terms of its global footprint, range of brands, and asset-light operations. These large SSHCs carry a full range of brands from luxury to budget. Their corporate offices support a range of management areas (at corporate and unit levels) that share knowledge. They commonly use a variety of management tools (e.g., strengths, weaknesses, opportunities, threats [SWOT]; benchmarking; total quality management [TQM]; competitive set [comp set] benchmarking, etc.) to achieve higher efficiency (performance) and to stay ahead of their competition.

The current study was particularly challenging owing to KM's complex nature ([Khoshsima et al., 2004](#); [Lee & Wong, 2016](#); [Pawlowski & Bick, 2015](#); [Jasimuddin, 2006](#); [Snowden, 2002](#)) and the complexities which are well known in the hotel industry ([Jones & Lockwood, 2002](#)). Finding the manager responsible for KM in hotel management was the first challenge and engaging employees to share any insights was the next. These challenges may be the reason why the literature on hotel KM is limited, disconnected, and without clear direction. Another factor may be the lack of unified nomenclature in the hotel industry literature. For example, an organisation, such as the IHG, may be called a hotel company (HC), hotel group, hotel chain, hospitality company, hotel management company, hotel operator, tourism enterprise, or a range of other such terms. This distorts the research and limits the ability to compare studies. Another key factor that makes it difficult to conduct this kind of research in this industry is high employee turnover ([Boardman & Barbato, 2008](#); [Bouncken, 2002](#); [Lee, 2008](#)), with high employee turnover possibly disrupting KM implementation, long-term engagement, and the development of a conducive knowledge environment (i.e., a KM culture).

A driving factor for the current research was that if the hotel industry could have a KM framework to optimise performance, the entire industry could be improved and become more competitive. However, it was not possible to determine if leading industry practices were currently in place or not ([Voegeli, 2019a](#)). Therefore, rather than attempting to explore internal sources, the decision was made to research publicly available data to see if the presence of KM practices could be demonstrated in that way.

Significant disruptions are occurring across entire industries for reasons such as the COVID-19 pandemic, machine learning, the 4th Industrial Revolution, robotics, digitalisation, and changing socioeconomic demographics. Added to these factors are head-on competition with "new" accommodation providers (such as AirBnB) and dependencies on airlines: these factors, along with the listed disruptions, should be providing encouragement to HC executives to build the industry's resilience. In other industries, innovation funnels have been stimulated through better KM and it would seem plausible that this could also be applied in the hospitality industry. Increased knowledge sharing within and across HCs may help the industry to survive and prosper. This current research on the IHG, one of the leading HCs, is of

benefit as it begins to highlight the gaps in KM understanding and offers potential actions for the adoption of KM in a more strategic manner.

Within the top 10 ranked hotel companies (Weinstein, 2019) are four SSHCs, namely, Marriott, Hilton, the IHG, and Accor. These SSHCs provide an industry benchmark for managerial practices, as stated by Tribe (2016, p. 114) "... [the] IHG also benchmarks its performance against competing branded hotel management companies..." Hence, these SSHCs should be expected to work at a similar level; that is, they can be expected to use similar tools, processes, and, possibly, similar KM initiatives. Of the above-mentioned SSHCs, the IHG was identified as the most suitable case for the current study, as it is the only leading HC with some public information about KM activity over the last 15 years (King, 2008; Ulrich & Smallwood, 2004). The IHG had a KM department for many years, led by a Director of KM, based at IHG's Atlanta office in the United States (US) and a KM Analyst based at the IHG's Denham office in the United Kingdom (UK). According to a former IHG employee, the KM office was supported by a team of about 10 staff.

INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS GROUP (IHG) CONTEXT

The IHG (PLC) website (InterContinental Hotels Group [IHG], 2020a) states that the IHG has around 800,000 rooms across 5,895 hotels in over 100 countries. In comparison, 12 years earlier, King (2008, p.10) described the IHG as "a global leader in the hospitality industry with over 3,700 distinct properties in nearly 100 countries". This comparison shows that the company grew its portfolio by a stunning 1,600 properties (43%) in a relatively short time. The Vault webpage (Vault, 2020) stated that the IHG business model is based more on franchising than ownership: "... [it] takes an asset-light approach to hoteling, franchising its 13 brands to, or managing hotels, on behalf of third parties".

This, therefore, makes the IHG of more interest to research: a franchise model should benefit from shared knowledge across the various sections of its business as this would enable efficiencies and effectiveness in this type of operation.

Early in 2017, as part of a Ph.D. project, the author of this paper formally wrote to executives in the hotel industry (at Marriott, Accor, the IHG, and Hilton) to request permission to conduct research about their KM practices. The emails were addressed to their respective Chief Executive Officers (CEOs) with a copy to either the Vice-President Operations or the Vice-President Human Resources. However, all requests for information and interviews were unsuccessful. Several email and phone follow-ups were also rejected or referred from one person to another until the request became "lost in the system". While these rejections could have deterred the research, in this case, they strengthened the author's determination to explore hotel KM practices in at least one large hotel company (an SSHC) and to reflect on the surrounding secrecy. Was it that KM did not exist and HC executives were ignorant of the opportunity? Or was it that they practised KM but wished to keep this from their competitors, as they saw it as a form of competitive advantage?

The IHG has had a long history of consistent growth and global leadership over many decades and had publicly available information about its former KM initiatives. For these reasons, the IHG was selected as the best SSHC for the case study in this research.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (KM) IMPLEMENTATION HISTORY OF THE INTERCONTINENTAL HOTELS GROUP (IHG)

Ulrich and Smallwood (2004) reported in a *Harvard Business Review* (HBR) article titled "Capitalizing on capabilities", that, in the late 1990s, the IHG seriously underperformed, resulting in strong shareholder demands for performance improvement. The IHG leadership had to take strong action to accomplish a swift company turnaround in performance improvement. They appointed a consultant to perform a capability audit and to identify the IHG's performance gaps between actual and desired levels of capability compared to industry levels. The review process included benchmarking across eight categories. Although at first glance, this seems unrelated to KM, a closer consideration of four of the capabilities (collaboration, learning, talent, and shared mindset) reveals typical KM characteristics. Although the work under these topics was not specifically performed as a KM initiative, it showed that, in early 2000, some important (i.e., high-impact) KM practices were being actively managed and assessed at the IHG as important aspects of business performance.

Ulrich and Smallwood's (2004) article highlighted collaboration as the largest capability gap. In high-performing organisations (especially a franchise model), collaboration is a key success criterion and enabler for KM or, if it is lacking, a barrier to knowledge management (KM). A first step in performing knowledge audits is to assess the quality and capacity of knowledge-related capabilities and to identify the gaps. Therefore, in many ways, the consultant study was an effective and extended KM audit. Unfortunately, no information about follow-up action was publicly available; thus, information about the impacts of any actions taken in this exercise was unobtainable. This information could have been valuable for the industry generally, as collaboration and learning strongly impact on KM outcomes and knowledge flow and, ultimately, on success in any company. Sharing the actions and impacts of such cases would be the ideal research to enable KM professionals to make more informed decisions about knowledge strategies (Heisig, 2014) and could provide deeper insights on success or failure. Given the IHG's rapid growth in the hotel industry since that review, we could assume that the implemented steps moved the company's collaboration capabilities to the world-class level. However, the IHG decided not to share what was undertaken and how the changes generated a better performance and improved efficiencies. The improvement activities were likely to have been protected from public view and, therefore, from other hotel companies (HCs). It seems logical to conclude that the IHG considered these insights to be significant

competitive factors generating its continued growth (with this reinforced by the increase in share price, number of hotels and rooms, and revenue that eventuated after this time). That said, making direct connections between a KM initiative's actions and such improvements can be a difficult undertaking in most projects. In an article titled "When half a second of the action is better than half a day of talk", [Voegeli \(2019b\)](#) highlighted how un-collaborative colleagues can delay and disrupt the process flow in an organisation. These behaviours contribute to making interactions unnecessarily complicated and, consequently, can destroy value ([Shelley, 2017](#)).

The next KM-related milestone for the IHG was the DSpace project, a shared knowledge database. From the earlier knowledge initiative, the IHG (presumably) learned that it could gain foresight and performance improvements which would be contributing factors to its growth. This increased the IHG's desire to invest in knowledge-related initiatives, including centralising and optimising its databases. This may be considered as a first-mover initiative for the hotel industry. The project, led and documented by [King \(2008\)](#), was published in a case study titled "The implementation of DSpace at the InterContinental Hotels Group: A knowledge management project success". The article described the implementation of a centralised repository and archiving technology, emphasising the technology aspects of the initiative. The DSpace project highlighted that the IHG was accelerating its engagement and investment in KM-related initiatives at that time.

These sequential developments at the IHG showed that it was practising KM in a very deliberate way at that time. In parallel, the IHG business model and practices moved to an asset-light strategy (managing but not owning properties). This strategy can be considered as KM in its purest form, as it generates efficiencies through shared procedures and knowledge. Business consulting firms operate in a similar way, selling their clients access to knowledge, experience, and know-how to enable higher performance. Franchising is similar in that the owner runs the hotel more independently; that is, the owner has access to all group initiatives and use of all head office tools but this is not mandated. The individual hotels can also take advantage of the brand (recognition) and sales and marketing (activities/channels) to gain wider access to stakeholder groups than they could independently, with this often a bank's precondition for loan approval. This effectively creates value through more significant branding and sales influence. Through payment of their franchise service fees, hotel owners gain access to the sharing of knowledge, with a wider array of options and increased influence enabling them to meet stakeholder expectations.

RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

The current research was conducted by analysing publicly available information about the InterContinental Hotels Group (IHG). Evidence on the application of KM in an SSHC was gathered and compared to KM practices defined by the Global Knowledge Management Framework (GKMFW) ([Pawlowski & Bick, 2015](#)). The observed insights were also compared with the practices of KM programs by other organisations.

A single case study is appropriate when looking at a revelatory example and could also be used for a critical case or an extreme or unique case ([Yin, 1994](#)). The researcher enters the analysis while acknowledging the potential for bias when using subjective analysis, with such criticism having been made about the case study as a research method. For example, [Yin \(1994\)](#) indicated that "bias may enter ... other research". The author of the current study highlighted the benefits of his many years of hotel industry experience while acknowledging the risk of bias. On the other hand, this awareness could help to mitigate bias through the application of appropriate instruments (e.g., validation cycles/triangulation). Naturally, when studying SSHCs (or, for that matter, any multinational corporation [MNC]), culture and language are significant factors that can cause distortion in research findings. In the current study, this potential weakness was mitigated by validating findings against industry informants who were native speakers. Potential cultural impacts were mitigated by linking informants' input to publicly available data and by comparison with other informants' statements through applying two cycles of validation.

The exploration of the IHG, as one of the SSHCs, in order to understand its specific KM dynamics represents an example of what [Eisenhardt \(1989, p. 534\)](#) expressed as the "focus is on understanding the dynamics present in a single case setting". Each discoverable aspect of the IHG practices was allocated to a category of the GKMFW to assess how comprehensively its practices fulfilled the model. A copy of the findings was shared in two cycles of feedback with two senior IHG managers and two KM consultants (who had consulted for the IHG). These experts participated in "off-the-record" conversations with all confirming the findings: all four are anonymously referred to as IHG1–4 in this paper. Care was taken to ensure commentary remained focused on public information to ensure the IHG intellectual property (IP) was not compromised. After review and discussion, the hotel industry representatives were prompted to comment on other KM-related insights. For example, IHG1 informed the author that artificial intelligence/machine learning (AI/ML) technology had very recently been introduced. These informants made themselves available for a second round of validation to confirm the refined and consolidated findings. Consequently, a high level of confidence can be expressed that the findings are complete and reflect the IHG's practices. For visualisation of the intensity of KM, two figures (Fig. 1 and Fig. 2) were created to provide a KM "maturity score" assessment.

FINDINGS AND DISCUSSION

The study's findings focused on two key areas of the GKMFW (procurement and human resources [HR]), although other areas are detailed in the related Ph.D. research. The current study reviewed the IHG against all categories of the

GKMFW to establish the extent to which the company applied KM and the consistency of its implementation, with these compared to best practice tools and processes. While the GKMFW is well respected as an integrated KM tool, it does not have a grading instrument. Some experienced subjective assessment needed to be made on the available data, as happens in most audits against any standard. In its assessment, the GKMFW covers over 60 categories to provide comprehensive feedback. Any company that performs in the top quartile (75–100 score range) in all categories is regarded as a top performer in KM practices.

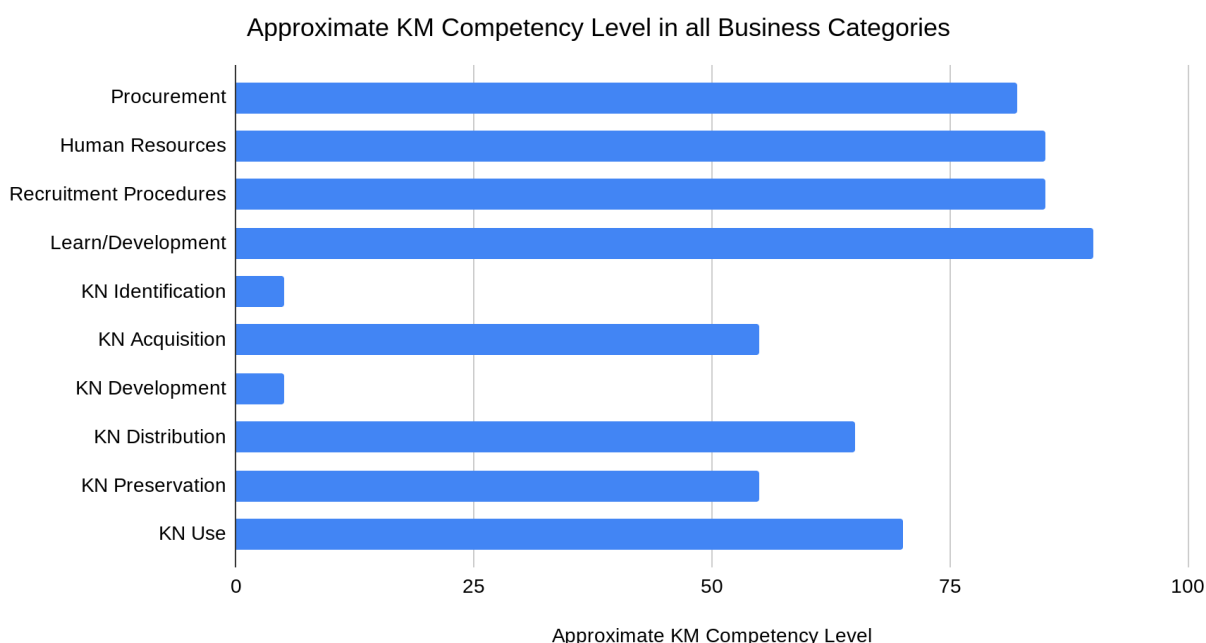


Figure 1: KM competency level assessment in all business categories

Note: KN=knowledge

Source: Author

The scores provided a capability indication on a scale from 0 (low) to 100 (high, i.e., world-class). This study only assessed publicly available information (with informant validation); therefore, it is acknowledged that allocated scores were not a comprehensive measure of all IHG practices. Nevertheless, the assessed scores are useful in providing an indication, as they give some idea of the level of KM practice. As shown in Figure 1, in the first category – procurement – the score is in the upper quartile (score=82). This score is based on information from multiple references confirming that the IHG was using procurement software tools, such as Inn Supply ([InterContinental Hotels Group \[IHG\], 2020b](#)) and, in the Austral Asian region, Market boomer ([United States Documents, 2015](#)). These sophisticated web/software procurement tools, together with the relevant standard operating procedure (SOP), show that the IHG has put considerable energy and resources into ensuring a detailed and rigorous procurement process for better efficiency and effectiveness. For example, it is claimed that the tools provide real-time supplier pricing, better quality, and complete process automation.

In the human resources (HR) category (score=85), the IHG used models and metrics that ensured a consistent and high level of HR practices. The two models prominently used and communicated throughout the organisation (via reminders in daily briefings, weekly meetings, and training classes, as mentioned by IHG1 and IHG2) were the “5Winning Ways” (model) and the promotion of the types of KM behaviour by which to live, as stated below:

- Do the right thing
- Aim higher
- Work better together
- Show care
- Celebrate difference (refer to IHG’s [2019] *My Colleague Handbook*).

For over 15 years, these behaviours have been part of the IHG’s proposition for its employees through these “preaching and teaching” processes. With this knowledge, one could assume that the IHG has reached a comparably high level of embedded practice in these aspects (which, in turn, would mean better and more efficient work and, hence, more addition of value). This assumption may, however, be wrong if the IHG had similar (high) employee turnover rates as

was the case in other hotel companies (HCs) which would be disruptive, making it difficult to maintain a KM culture. In relation to this information, IHG1 and IHG2 confirmed the IHG's establishment of an elaborate structure to support HR processes and to proactively guide and support the HR function (with the full hierarchy consisting of HR/Regional or Cluster HR/HR Learning and Development/HR Talent Acquisition people, etc.) Another part of IHG's proposition to its employees was found to be the "5 Rooms" model, an IHG promise to its employees. This comprised the following:

- Room to be yourself
- Room to have a great start
- Room to be involved
- Room to grow
- Room for you (refer to [IHG's \[2019\] My Colleague Handbook](#)).

The next HR subcategory comprised the recruitment process, with the IHG clearly concerned about and going to great lengths to ensure it acquired the best talent. Applicants must pass a detailed and rigorous screening ("assessment centre") process (the application is usually through a talent/web-based career tool, followed by screening and shortlisting). Shortlisted candidates then have an initial interview (talk) and, if they pass, they obtain a link to an aptitude test (on an [SHL](#) [Aptitude Test Provider] webpage). If the aptitude test is successfully completed, the next step is the second interview stage (this process applies for management-level employees; for general employees, the process is simpler). More recently, the IHG has added artificial intelligence/machine learning (AI/ML) technology which follows the interview process and provides supporting analysis and recommendations (according to IHG1). If the applicant is selected, he/she would then undergo a detailed onboarding program (IHG2 confirmed that, when the onboarding program was rolled out globally, he/she was actively involved in providing classes in every region and sub-region). Within the associated learning and development category, several processes and structures provided evidence that the IHG used a sophisticated system (e.g., IHG1 reported that talent was coached/trained using the GROW [Goal–Reality–Opportunities–Way forward] model and that a talent matrix was used to support talent development). The overhead onboarding program was used to train all IHG associates from Day 1, so newcomers would understand all IHG routines and systems right from the start. Implementing such a program should reduce the repetition of work or time lost spent searching for answers or "reinventing the wheel". Unfortunately, no information could be accessed about whether the impact of this program was measured (the value and outcome of this initiative). In the knowledge (KN) identification category, public references could not be found, nor could the informant experts point to a specific process or tool (hence, a low approximate score of 10 was allocated). In the knowledge (KN) acquisition category (score=60), two references were discovered in conversation with IHG1 and IHG2:

1. Merlin (portal/intranet platform) has one subpage where employees are encouraged to upload examples of best practices (updated daily by a team of editors) as stated in the [IHG \(2019\) My Colleague Handbook](#) but it is not known if the IHG evaluates/measures the outcomes (utilisation and value-add) of the submitted best practices.
2. At a corporate level, the KM team regularly receives requests to submit data/intelligence to various corporate functions (departments), with each job supported by a document ("knowledge value sheet") to show the approximate value added to the organisation (as per IHG2).

No evidence could be found on the knowledge (KN) development category. However, a score of 10 was allocated, based on the assumption that some development work must have been done by the Merlin team of editors. As for the knowledge (KN) distribution category, several processes and activities could be found (score=70). Across all the IHG properties, Merlin is the platform that provides news updates, benchmark figures, and video communication and learning. Interestingly, IHG1 indicated that Merlin's e-learning section has 37 units/classes about revenue management (i.e., 37 for only one topic!). In addition, Merlin offers CEO video broadcasts (CEO announcements); weekly clusters; regional calls (Corporate with Regional Offices, General Manager [GM], HR and Finance); and the Annual General Meeting (AGM) conference (with various workshops, presentations, storytelling, workshops, etc.). A considerable amount of energy and resources have been devoted to the knowledge (KN) preservation category (score=60). The IHG had already updated its repository system, as reported by [King \(2008\)](#), and has continued to improve the system. Merlin has a team of editors responsible for looking after KN content (updating, renewing, or deleting). The study found the knowledge management (KM) use category (score=70) the hardest to evaluate (i.e., to what should a score be allocated?) as "knowledge management (KM)" was a term that the IHG did not use. Hence, the IHG associates did not know the answers to "why", "for what purpose" and "what benefit was there for them" in using the Merlin portal. On the other hand, KM usage was definitely evident in fragmented "undercover" KM activities (Merlin, meetings, conferences, videos, tutorials, online learning, best practice subpage, etc.).

Approximate KM Competency Level in the Result Categories

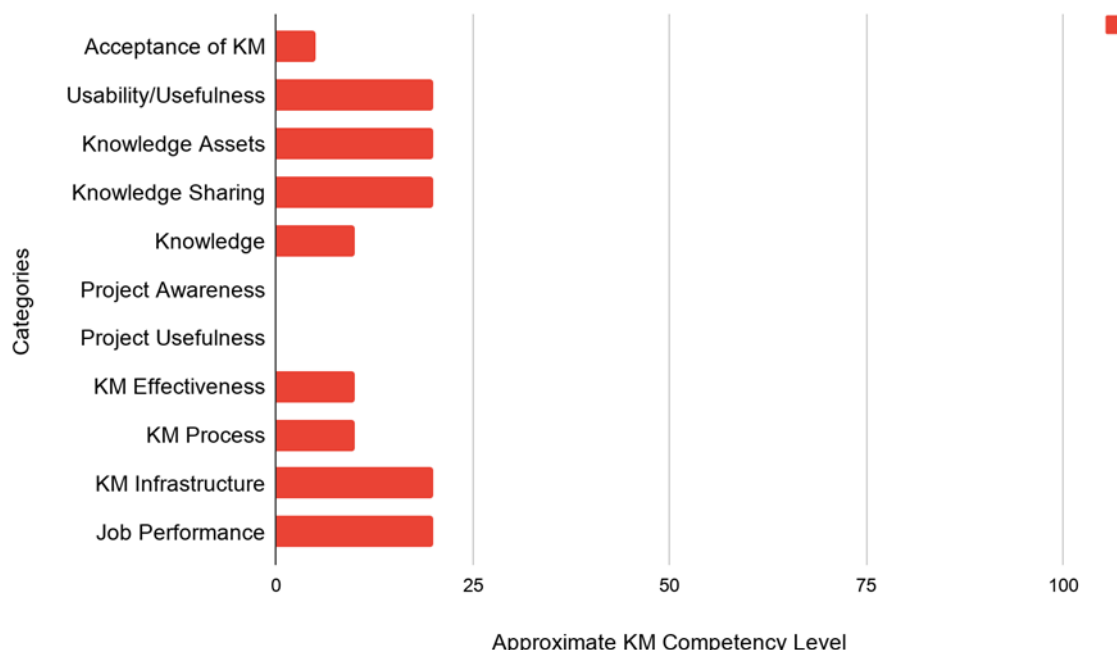


Figure 2: KM competency level assessment in all business categories

Note: KN=knowledge; KM=knowledge management

Source: Author

At first glance, Figure 2 appears to show that the previously stated notion of the IHG having fragmented (insular) KM practices is evident, as scores in the result categories are relatively low. A best-in-class HC would take great care to ensure its KM activities (utilisation, implementation, embeddedness, etc.) were strongly linked to results, as the old adage “what gets measured, gets done” applies. With the IHG staff having unknowingly used KM (as the IHG had not used the term ‘knowledge management [KM]’), the acceptance level may, in fact, be zero but, considering the level of KM activities and utilisation, a score of 10 was allocated. Likewise, as the categories of usability, knowledge (KN) assets, and knowledge (KN) sharing had been happening in “autopilot” mode as a requirement of one of the insular KM activities/practices, a score of 20 was allocated. Project awareness and usefulness scored zero as scores could not be allocated for things that “do not exist”. Similarly, KM effectiveness/process/infrastructure and job performance were hard to score due to KM’s non-existence in the IHG’s overall strategy. However, all four subcategories had some process and structure in the fragmented practices performed by the IHG and, hence, their scores were in the range of the low 10s to 20. This infers that the IHG and potentially other hotel HCs may be able to achieve higher performance levels by implementing a highly integrated strategic KM program.

Among these subcategories, infrastructure and job performance each received a score of 20 as some fragmented tools and processes were in place (e.g., Merlin, “5 Winning Ways”, the recruitment process, etc.). Job performance also scored 20 as traces of performance results were found (e.g., management levels had a key performance indicator [KPI]/dashboard [balanced] scorecard). According to IHG1, this dashboard is linked to “The Wheel” (InterContinental Hotels Group [IHG], 2011), a circular model subdivided into four segments: our people, guest experience, responsible business and financial results. These focal areas are important for running a commercially successful hotel but, at the IHG, they are not linked to a KM framework.

Overall, the study of publicly available information found clear evidence that the IHG was practising certain KM activities at an advanced level. While the IHG had a KM team until early 2018, the term “knowledge management (KM)” was not commonly used in the organisation other than within the KM team in the corporate office (according to IHG2). Despite the IHG having several KM initiatives (activities/tools), no publicly available evidence could be found that it used an overarching (holistic) KM model or framework (with this confirmed by all four informants). In the publicly available information, no indication was found that the IHG used KM as part of its strategy creation or implementation. As an aside, Accor announced in 2014 (Hospitality Net, 2014) that it was rolling out a digitalisation program (digitalisation being the worldwide trend for internet computer technologies to facilitate electronic knowledge management [KM]).

High-performing global organisations, such as Siemens, Chevron, General Electric, etc., use holistic KM (i.e., a framework) and communicate this throughout the organisation (according to [Heisig \[2009\]](#) who compared the KM frameworks of 160 companies). In the current study, the IHG was found to have knowledge-based initiatives and tools in all five GKMFW categories (and in many subcategories). However, in the results category, only one reference could be unearthed for KM measurement. As reported by IHG2, a template called the KM “value measure” had to be completed for every KM project to provide an approximate financial value for the initiative. This indicated that the IHG was using an estimation of financial benefits for planning initiatives; however, whether these measures were monitored or delivered was not reported externally. Across the IHG, KM in totality, knowledge-related initiatives, and KM implementation were more about aspects of KM technology (information technology/information communications and technology [IT/ICT]). Perhaps this stemmed from the early engagement and success with the DSpace project ([King, 2008](#)) or maybe the IHG was better at reporting the more tangible KM aspects than the human (tacit knowledge) and social implications. This was also quite common in other organisations. In the KM process category, each subcategory provided some evidence that the IHG practised KM, largely guided around the use of IT/ICT tools. Generally, IT/ICT (technological tools) were more concrete and, hence, were favoured by companies. In relation to this point, [Okumus \(2013, p.71\)](#) stated that: “...Disney, Universal, Marriott Hotels, and Southwest Airlines, particularly focus on providing their customers with unique and positive experiences ...they use their organizational knowledge...”

In the category of measures, nothing publicly accessible was initially found. However, IHG2 informally shared a few examples of measures to demonstrate that the IHG had at least some “end-to-end” (KM) initiatives. It was also reported by IHG1 (who held Merlin supervisor-level access) that the level and frequency of Merlin use by unit leaders could be monitored (i.e., the corporate-level manager could see how often the unit General Manager logged on to Merlin) but could not provide actual data to share with the public. It is not clear how actively this monitoring occurred or for what purpose it was carried out. It could be to “encourage” or perhaps control employees in their use of the tools provided or, in a more positive manner, to engage employees in a purposeful way. For example, a good KM practice to encourage people to share ideas and build communities of practice would be to build an understanding of the real numbers and the purpose of this usage to enhance performance, with this carried out and used to generate shared insights. One example of productive use of Merlin was monitoring how many users opened and read the energy-saving ideas. It is possible that other people or departments, unknown to this informant, were using the Merlin tool in such ways, but this could not be determined in the current research. One could assume that this tool would not be maintained if little or no return on investment was generated. In some global organisations previously mentioned in this paper, the measures practised to generate value included portal usage and gathering the impact of shared ideas. Besides portal usage, a number of MNCs (frontrunners) analysed the knowledge flow([K]-flow) (using monitoring and coaching to moderate this flow) through network analysis: “[c]ompanies are living organizations, full of interaction between employees, departments, customers, partners, or external parties ...metadata about these interactions [are] for enhancing the knowledge flow in an organisation” ([Daña et al., 2020, p. 414](#)). It is not clear whether this type of monitoring, in fact, happened at the IHG, if it were simply a technical possibility, or if it comprised a few measures implemented in a stand-alone insular fashion.

During conversations with informants IHG2, IHG3 and IHG4 in the second validation cycle, the two separate layers of KM within the IHG became clear. The layer at the corporate level was mostly occupied with data, insights, and sourcing and acquiring information to support C-level executives in decision making, as well as the generation and editing of information for dissemination within the organisation. The other layer, at the operation level, was concerned with knowledge sharing, learning and development, culture and behaviour (e.g., the “5 Winning Ways” initiative), and benchmarking, all of which were shared and distributed via Merlin. Unfortunately, little interaction was apparent between these two layers. During a conversation when the research was well advanced, the author asked IHG2, “Isn’t Merlin a strong indicator that KM is practised and very much alive?” The informant replied: “Ah, that is the only marketing and showing off ... it’s just a toy... but not ‘real KM’”. This surprising response highlighted the communication disconnects that can often disrupt the flow of knowledge across organisations ([Shelley, 2017](#)). At this point, the author noted that the informant was an expert from a library management background. Based on non-scientific information (i.e., anecdotal), it appeared that KM experts from a library background had a stronger focus on information management. Hence, they were not very concerned about the change management and communication aspects of KM (both of which were supported by Merlin). Given that the IHG has invested in and is practising KM, albeit in a disconnected and somewhat inefficient manner, it is surprising that the company has not leveraged KM more to accelerate the potential benefits. It was evident that the IHG had the opportunity to leverage this investment more for greater benefits inside and external to the organisation as a competitive advantage (if people were more aware and proactive...which would require the IHG to make KM part of its overall strategy).

It seemed unusual that a very large company would apply a system and concept, without explaining to, and guiding, its employees about what was going to happen. The various reasons included the following:

- KM was not well known by key decision-makers.
- KM was not yet a fully established (uniform) management tool.
- Resistance/objection might be expressed by hotel owners (franchisees).

- Although the IHG was generating benefits, it wanted to keep KM and its benefits secure.
- IHG associates became “overwhelmed” by the term “KM”.
- The IHG was concerned about KM risks (Durst & Zieba, 2019), such as loss, leakage, and IP theft.

Generally, it can be said that the IHG was applying multiple KM-related activities through various initiatives, but that these did not appear to be strategically implemented or well-connected across the organisation. Initiatives appeared to focus more on the technological (IT) aspects of KM (D Space; Merlin; Learning Management System [LMS]; artificial intelligence [AI] in the interview process; and artificial intelligence [AI] to auto-generate quality continuous improvement [QCI is the IHG terminology for total quality management (TQM)] action plans). Some negative aspects of the IHG knowledge-related projects were highlighted by two informants (IHG3 and IHG4 who had carried out consulting work for the IHG) in a conversation after the first validation cycle. As IHG3 stated, “[w]e started our work and had to get a green light to implement; it was a disaster since the responsibility was bounced from one office to another”. This highlights a common problem in many large organisations where working as a team can be an uncoordinated process. These challenges disrupt the flow of knowledge and place stress on relationships which, in turn, negatively impacts on knowledge initiatives (Shelley, 2017). During the second validation cycle, IHG2, when discussing with the author about working across various departments, stated that department silos existed within the organisation. Finally, IHG2 mentioned that the IHG had laid off the entire KM team in the first half of 2018 and, shortly after, the same occurred to a department called “Insights” which had previously had close links with that team. This massive loss of KM experience has had a major disruptive effect on the IHG’s understanding and coordination of KM programs. This has been observed in other organisations, where KM teams have not highlighted the benefits they brought and, consequently, were made redundant.

RECOMMENDATIONS

This research highlights several considerations that the IHG (and possibly other large hotel companies [HCs]) could use for greater KM (value) impact. The development and implementation of a strategic KM (approach) program should be anchored to an overall strategy to provide a unifying (and directional) effect. Considering the transactional nature and high employee turnover for which the hotel industry is known, a program (model) that is clear (simple and sharply focused) should be considered. Areas with great potential (importance) should be prioritised. The three recommendations below comprise actions that address critical elements that the IHG is currently lacking.

Recommendation 1

Connect your KM program with critical activities and align it with business goals.

The IHG should consider developing a (simple) KM model (program/framework) that clearly links targets (measures), with excellent communication about the benefits (purpose) of the initiatives. Potential KM opportunities may be in the area of owner relationship/communication and guest knowledge. These KM initiatives could be structured in the following way:

- Ensure that managers with good communication and social skills are in the team and have their relationships and communication measured by an owner (and operator) satisfaction survey.
- Use software to collect and share ownership information (e.g., owner/directors, owning company/subsidiaries/shareholdings, owner/directors’ preferences, birthdays, and contact details) with this measured by an owner (and operator) satisfaction survey.
- Establish a robust communication structure (e.g., monthly reporting/meeting, quarterly pamphlet/update to owner, yearly owners’ conference, bi-annual vice-president [VP]/owner meeting/visit), measured by an owner (and operator) satisfaction survey.

Guest knowledge: possible activities and tools:

- Guest stay/profile and loyalty data (administered and analysed through customer relationship management [CRM] software, using a system with automated communication functions, such as pre-arrival messaging to guest and hotel on service preferences/email blasts, promotions, birthday greetings, etc.)
- Guest travel pattern (artificial intelligence [AI] that predicts geographic moves) to suggest future stays.
- Measured by the number of (repeat) guests and dollars spent (on room and other expenses).

The KM program should identify what activities and tools would be best suited to put KM to use for value creation, with this linked to relevant business targets. In contrast to what was found at the IHG by this study, the KM structure works better when it connects all units and spans all levels, rather than being in isolated pieces.

Recommendation 2

Clearly define the purpose of your KM program and rationalise structures to deliver optimal outcomes, before engaging in KM strategy creation.

A good starting point is often a knowledge audit (mapping) to identify gaps and knowledge opportunities for the organisation. Initiatives in KM should be presented to company leadership as strategies to fill the gaps, highlighting the (tangible and intangible) benefits these initiatives would generate. This would help to communicate that KM can address business opportunities and issues in a way that would generate returns on investment. When these ideas are pitched well, company leadership would be more likely to support the KM program. Strong leadership support would empower the KM team and secure the KM budget. The best KM programs are usually a balance of cultural and process transformation, supported by appropriate technology.

Recommendation 3

Reinforce that it is the responsibility of the KM team to co-facilitate KM initiatives with relevant internal business partners.

The benefits need to be monitored and widely communicated. This would generate awareness of KM initiatives and ensure that people across the organisation would see the connection between KM activities and performance enhancement. This awareness would then stimulate interest and engagement with the KM team and would generate a business case (projections) to engage company leadership's higher levels of commitment and confidence.

Summary of Recommendations

The IHG (and possibly other SSHCs/HCs) would benefit from considering the basic steps in these three recommendations as a starting approach towards an effective KM program. This would take the organisation from a reactive mindset to using knowledge to help form a strategy.

Taking a strategic angle that aims for a holistic KM hybrid program (cultural, soft skills, and process, supported by technology) would stimulate the "free flow" of knowledge, leading to performance enhancement. With the study finding that the IHG was already using artificial intelligence (AI) and LMS, it was expected that technology would take a larger role so the company could become more efficient, thus driving service consistency and, perhaps, being less employee-dependent (e.g., check-in kiosks similar to airline kiosks already present in airports). The Ph.D. study behind this paper has generated several additional insights from which the author is building a KM framework for the hotel industry. This Hotel Knowledge Management Framework is to be published soon in a subsequent publication: it is anticipated that this framework will enable the widespread application of KM across the hotel industry.

CONCLUSION

This research supports the observation that, although KM has been practised at the IHG, it has not been done in a coordinated manner, especially since the removal of the dedicated KM team in 2018. This limited use of KM has not generated sustainable results, with (presumably) the loss of the whole (KM) team occurring through a lack of communication of the benefits generated by the team. The IHG has used KM in an insular fashion which is disconnected and segregated and not part of strategy creation, thus limiting what it can achieve. The current research also highlights the challenges of performing research on commercial operations. Much of the information was not publicly available as this knowledge was regarded as providing a competitive advantage. While it was clear that more was happening at the IHG than was publicly available, it was also clear that the IHG was not connecting its KM in a strategic program and that this was limiting the benefits that could be delivered.

LIMITATIONS AND FUTURE RESEARCH

With hotel KM identified as an under-researched space, an in-depth case study of one of the global SSHCs was determined to be the way to help gain an understanding of the KM dynamics in a large (global) HC setting. As none of the SSHCs granted access to this research, the information in this study had to be based on publicly available data. Therefore, information on certain elements may have been missed as the IHG had not made this publicly available. While the results of a single case study are not generalisable, they are still helpful for filling the research void on this very specific topic. It is hoped that future research would cover other similar SSHCs (or other HCs), with the findings then compared, cross-examined, and correlated to performance. Moreover, studies with a qualitative, quantitative, mixed-methods, or longitudinal reach are required to fully understand hotel KM's depth and complexity. To develop an understanding of the full breadth of this topic, employees' perceptions should be included in future research (e.g., by using a globally distributed stratified survey). Finally, comparing the findings from SSHCs with findings from small and medium-sized enterprises (SMEs) and small hotel groups should be undertaken to understand what structure and tools work for HCs of various sizes and with varying business models. In addition to the need for a high level of integration of the over 60 (sub)categories in the GKMF (Pawlowski & Bick, 2015), as reflected in the current study, more recently another KM category (business intelligence) appears to be attracting increased attention based on the growing number of studies on this topic (Mariani et al., 2018). Intelligence (especially business intelligence, sometimes called organisation intelligence) has claimed more prominence over the past few years. However, Mariani et al. (2018, p.1) still labelled this new and growing KM category as *terra incognita*.

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