

# Implementing Social Knowledge Environments for NGOs: Key Research Questions

Oleksandr Berezko

Social Communication and Information Science Department,  
Lviv Polytechnic National University, UKRAINE, Lviv,  
S. Bandera street 12, E-mail: berezko@gmail.com

**Abstract** – In this paper the creation of effective social knowledge environments for non-governmental organizations is considered as well as key research questions for this kind of study are proposed.

Key words – knowledge, knowledge management, NGO, Web 2.0, social knowledge environments, social software.

## I. Introduction

In recent years online social software dramatically changed the way people live, work and communicate. The emergence of new user-oriented approaches to creating, sharing and managing information such as blogs, wikis, question-answer forums etc. offers organizations of various kind a number of brand new possibilities. Such social tools are increasingly applied to knowledge management within organizations and have significantly changed research and practice in this field [13].

Knowledge has been recognized as a vital asset for all organizations both in its tacit and explicit forms [10]. However the majority of knowledge management research has focused on profit sector organizations [12] despite the fact that nonprofits – non-governmental organizations (NGOs) are seen to be playing a more and more important role in diverse spheres of international development [4].

## II. The Second Chance for NGOs

NGO domain is characterized by [7, 9, 12]:

- a heterogeneous mix of organizational structures;
- highly knowledge-intensive organizations;
- high staff turnover rates due to large numbers of volunteers;
- general lack of funds even for essential activities.

Therefore it is not surprising that NGOs often lack the critical processes, knowledge and technology needed to help them develop, evaluate, document, and share best practices, success/failure stories etc. [3] often resulting in “corporate amnesia” and “reinventing the wheel”.

It should also be noted that volunteers often have enough motivation to share tacit knowledge unlike employees who tend to believe they are reducing their own value to the organization by doing it [11].

In this regard social knowledge environments may “give a second chance” to NGOs as they represent the new hope of knowledge management [5, 13] and several findings have already indicated that social software can improve and add value to knowledge work [1, 8]. Perhaps it’s crucial that social-media-driven knowledge management will require much less of the “management” component [11] being much more flexible and user-oriented.

However, social software also raises new questions: how does it alter the knowledge management practices in organizations? How can organizations design and manage their environment by adopting the new breed of software to ensure they function in social knowledge environment that comprises concepts, methods, and tools that benefit knowledge management purposes [11]?

Although these questions are too complex I propose to start finding approaches to answer them by developing and launching experimental online social knowledge environments for relatively big and distributed NGOs (preferably nationwide and international ones) harnessing Web 2.0 technologies such as personal and collective blogs, question-answer forums, wikis etc.

These approaches present an excellent opportunity to investigate how “amateur knowledge workers” form the organizational memory and how it and the “wisdom of the crowds” can mutually complement.

## III. The Key Questions

Given the above, the key research questions for such a study should be:

- What are the roles of different social media tools and user-generated content types in the knowledge management process of an NGO and how can they complement each other?
- What are the peculiar properties of different website user roles and NGO positions in relation to existing community of practice roles’ definitions and features [6]?
- What community management approaches can be effectively implemented in social knowledge management?
- What are effective ways to engage partners, third-parties of all kinds and simply interested “passers-by” to leverage the “wisdom of the crowds” in relation to the semi-permeable organization concept [11]?

In order to answer these questions a qualitative and quantitative analysis of user-generated content of NGO websites and/or their social media representations (social knowledge environments) should be performed as well as constant community management work in order to boost online communication.

## Conclusion

The purpose of this study is to find research questions in order to experiment with the social knowledge management within big NGO networks with the means of different types of social software. The proposed research is one of the first studies to perform user-generated content analysis in relation to knowledge management purposes. This work is innovative as it seeks “lightweight” social approaches to knowledge work suitable for time-strapped resource-poor volunteer communities.

The findings of how to make Web 2.0 tools benefit the Knowledge society in the NGO domain will help to understand how such organizations can boost creation and dissemination of knowledge in almost any sphere including local and international environments.

Among other promising directions for future research are international and intercultural knowledge transfer and collaboration, knowledge protection and legal issues.

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