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AFTER ACTION REVIEW AS A TOOL FOR IMPLEMENTATION OF THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT PROGRAM

Abstract

The lack of practical tools enabling the effective management of knowledge flows usually leads to business failures. It is common for organizations to face challenges, but it is also quite reasonable to expect that they will encounter the same problems unless the time is invested in problem analysis and lessons learned are developed. This paper investigates the capabilities of the After-Action Review, a tool designed to systematically manage the knowledge gained from experience as an extremely valuable source. We believe that the knowledge derived from experience becomes a compass that helps organizations understand everything that has happened, anticipate the challenges ahead and prepare their response. Literature review confirmed that After Action Review tool provides support to organizations in their efforts to transform their strategy and make it knowledge oriented. A primary research conducted as part of this paper confirmed that capturing, documenting, and sharing of lessons learned plays a significant role in identifying learning potentials and using experience, while maintaining the focus towards the future.

Key words: Knowledge management, Knowledge transfer, After Action Review, Learning Organization

JEL classification: D83, L29, M11, O31

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AFTER ACTION REVIEW KAO ALAT ZA ИМПЛЕМЕНТАЦИЈУ ПРОГРАМА МЕНАЏМЕНТА ЗНАЊА

Апстракт

Непостојање практичних алата који омогућавају ефикасно управљање токовима знања евидентно резултује појавом пословних неуспеха. Сасвим је уобичајено да се организације сусрећу са разним изазовима, али је исто тако сасвим оправдано очекивати да ће се са истим проблемима сусрести уколико се не инвестира време у анализу истих и науче лекције. У раду су представљене могућности Афтер Ацтион Ревиењ алата, осмишљеног с циљем да се на систематичан начин управља знањем које је стечено из изузетно драгоценог извора, а то је искуство. Верујемо да знање које доводимо у везу са искуством постаје компас који организацијама помаже да разумеју све оно што се већ десило, да предвиде изазове који су испред њих и спреме свој одговор на исте. Детаљни преглед литературе потврђује ставове да Афтер Ацтион Ревиењ алат обезбеђује подршку организацијама у настојању да трансформису своју стратегију, на начин да иста буде окренута ка знању као вредности. Примарно истраживање спроведено у оквиру овог рада потврдило је да прикупљање, документовање и размена научених лекција игра игра значајну улогу у идентификовању потенцијала за учење, користећи се прошлим искуствима, а задржавајући фокус ка будућности.

Кључне речи: Менаџмент знања, Токови знања, Афтер Ацтион Ревиењ, Организационо учење

Introduction

As Albert Einstein once said: “We cannot solve the problem by thinking the same way we thought when we created it.” Following this in a business environment, there is the question: Why do organizations learn? They learn because a challenging and dynamic market leaves a little choice and force the organizations to change, adapt and always be ready to accept something new and different. One of the superior values for an organization is the knowledge it possesses, and its ability to apply this knowledge to its business decision making processes (Ђорђевић Болјановић and Stanković, 2012; Marčetić et al. 2020; Petrov et al. 2020). One of the most actual challenges in the knowledge economy, which preoccupies the attention of authors is the question: How do organizations learn? As the awareness of knowledge as the most valuable resource is increasing, the analysis of tools from the knowledge management program is becoming more relevant (Massingham, 2014; Cerchione and Esposito, 2017).

Only the most experienced sailors sail the most turbulent seas. In modern business it is rare to find an excellent strategy, product or service without initial successes, failures and knowledge learned. Experience is an extremely powerful source of the organizational knowledge. However, unless there is a system in place that enables some knowledge to be discovered, transferred, disseminated, enriched and preserved, it will hardly get a chance to find a useful purpose.

If there is anything more harmful than a mistake, it is certainly a repeated mistake (Ackoff, 2016). The importance of learning from the experience can be depicted by the challenge that Boeing company faced launching its 737 and 747 aircrafts. Fires, fuel leaks and mechanical problems are certainly not something that has been associated with Boeing. However, mistakes were made also by market leaders and the most experienced ones. The company soon formed a team which compared the development of 737 and 747 aircrafts to 707 and 727 aircrafts, which were the most profitable at the time. The result of three year's long work was a special manual with 'lessons learned' to guide the development of 757 and 767 aircrafts. The 757 and 767 aircrafts have been launched with the least errors and achieved the greatest success in Boeing history (Baum, Dahlin, 2007).

After Action Review tool has been developed as one of the most effective tools to help organizations discover the knowledge from the most valuable source - experience. The tool was first introduced back in 1970 and was developed for the needs of the military, with the aim of systematizing learning and observing each activity as an opportunity to learn something new (Dunphy, 1996). After Action Review is a tool that can substantially create the ideal basis for successful implementation of the knowledge management programs in different areas, from profit oriented organizations to policy making sector (Savoia, Agboola, and Biddinger, 2012; Parker, 2020). First of all, it is a tool that aims to shape the organizational culture and provide a set of values that will have a strong message: our strength is knowledge.

A common question encountered in practice relates to whether the After-Action Review is a report, a meeting, or some form of evaluation. We would rather agree with the view that this is a process that certainly involves a meeting, which follows a certain type of evaluation, and results in some type of report. However, the form itself is not of crucial importance, as it is a purpose. That is why we emphasize the substantial value of the mentioned tool, as a great opportunity to create a learning organization, an organization that understands the challenge of putting knowledge in the service of development. That challenge has probably never been greater. Let us take, for example, the number of consulting companies in various fields, from financial consulting, marketing, risk assessment to the information technology. Consulting is present in almost all areas of business, and the reason is in particular the fact that the knowledge becomes significant, and the organizations are willing to allocate significant financial resources for the purposes of acquiring specific knowledge.

The structure of the paper is organized as follows. The first part describes factors and conditions required for the successful implementation of the After-Action Review. This is followed by the purpose and the application of the tool. Third part includes the presentation and illustration of the After-Action Review tool model. To explore potential benefits, a primary research was conducted, and the results are presented in part four. The last two parts of the paper describe the process of organizing After Action Review meeting and highlights the importance of learning from success and failure.

Prerequisites for implementing the After-Action Review tool

To successfully implement After Action Review tool, it is first and foremost necessary for the organization to be aware of all the potential benefits. If we had to enlist the changes that are necessary before the implementation of the tool itself, it would look as follows:

1. Initiative - it is necessary to recognize the need for this tool, and that need should be clearly communicated and promoted throughout the organization. An initiative often occurs after a particular problem or omission is identified, which in the context of knowledge management, may be the constant recurrence of mistakes caused by poor collaboration within the organization. Organizations should be proactive in implementing the tools of the knowledge management program, as it is one of the pillars of the organizations' success.
2. Leadership - as in all domains of business, implementation of something new often takes time and a lot of efforts and dedication. If the question 'Who?' rather than 'Why?' is asked, new knowledge will not be generated, and new ideas and creativity will not be developed. As pointed out by Mayo (1998) and Riege (2007), managers who implement the change in their team, play a major role and should act as leaders in implementation, not just the tool mentioned above, but anything that has elements of the new and the unknown. Resistance is expected because anything new at the beginning can be observed as uneasy. We generally accept with discomfort what we do not understand and what is unknown to us. That is why it is necessary, before the implementation itself, that everyone realizes the purpose and all the positive effects that can be expected after the implementation of the After-Action Review tool.
3. Belief - The moment in which the implementation of the After-Action Review tool gets its purpose, and moment in which everyone creates a vision of their role in the process, is the moment in which the organization is ready to move on. What really matters most is the awareness of the common goal and the sense of belonging to the team and the organization, as only this can be a good enough driver for all good initiatives within the organization.
4. The presence of the above-mentioned items is crucial when it comes to implementing this tool and any other. We can observe that the changes do not originate from business processes or procedures, but rather from a person or a team in whose mental part accepts the change or not.

There are several different views when it comes to the most desirable approach for the implementation of a particular change. In the context of the implementation of the knowledge management tool, author Zimmerman (1995) emphasizes that employees are the key to successful implementation, and it is necessary put them in position to actively participate in definition of the process in which the tool will be implemented. This further contributes to the point shared by Robbins (1990) and Dunphy (1996), who state that everything new must be planned, and not spontaneously implemented.

The essence of After-Action Review tool

To understand the After-Action Review tool, it is initially important to emphasize the idea that underlies development of the tool: Spending time analyzing daily activities or projects, those less and more important, does not mean time wasting, but time investing. Why is the time we use to analyze past events considered the investment? Time used for the analysis involves talking, exchanging opinions, attitudes, and as such provides the

opportunity to gain valuable knowledge, which is later materialized in profit and value. This view was confirmed by the famous scientist Albert Einstein, saying, "If I had 1 hour to solve the problem, I would spend 55 minutes analyzing the problem, and 5 minutes to think about the solution". Everyday business activities involve problems, bad decisions, and mistakes, and if we do not dedicate time to analyze the causes of their occurrence, we make the decision to repeat them. Any failure is an opportunity for an organization to learn something new, about its strategy, processes, employees, competitors, and customers, and not just a threat and an indicator of weakness.

Innovation is a value that is directly related to organizational knowledge and thus can be the outcome of an analysis of business success and failure. Parlbay and Taylor (2000) state that the knowledge management is an extremely important element in supporting the development of innovations, ideas, and the ability of the organization to 'think'. Whether organization has launched an attractive product, a new service, or implemented a new strategy, it is important to keep in mind that a competitive market requires an innovative approach 365 days a year.

Very often, big ideas are generated from the simplest questions which inspire curiosity, such as: 'What could we do better?', 'What contributed to the success?', 'What are the weak points of our project?' And similar. Often, big mistakes are the biggest and most important lessons that organizations can take, and thanks to which they achieve even greater results (for example, Coca-Cola New Coke from 1985, Apple-Lisa from 1983). The After-Action Review tool promotes an organizational culture that looks at mistakes and sees the room for progress, whether through success or failure. It can be used as a single tool or in combination with other approaches (Aguinis, Ramani and Cascio, 2020).

The After-Action Review Tool Model

The After-Action Review tool is designed to preserve in a systematic and simple way the knowledge gained through the past experiences. The purpose of the implementation of this tool is to create and document new knowledge through a specific analysis of activities, events or projects in which employees actively participated.

Thus, the subject of analysis may be a project of greater importance, such as the launch of a new product on the market. It is also not common and advisable to analyze the daily business activities, such as sales team coordination, team efficiency, performance, teleshopping activities and similar with After Action Review tools. However, the subject of analysis could be a project that required months of planning, but also an activity that lasted only 2 minutes (for example, a sales discussion). The implementation of the tool is most often referred to in the context of project management in the literature, where it is referred to as Post Project Review. A model illustrating the tool implementation is shown in Figure 1.

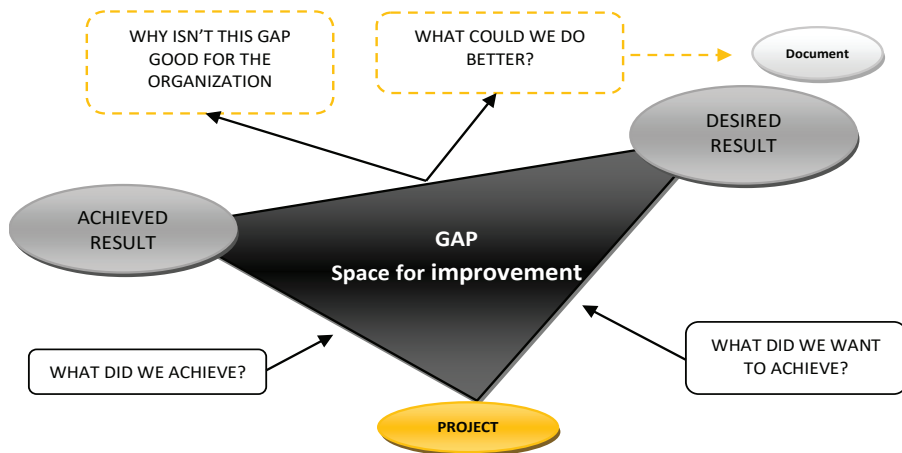


Figure 1 After Action Review Tool Model

After Action Review tool involves organizing a meeting and the analysis upon nearly completed project or activity. The meeting is attended by everyone who directly (sometimes indirectly) participated in the project or activity, usually led by the facilitator or the organizer of the meeting. The facilitator determines the timeframe, venue and topic of the meeting and informs the participants in a timely manner accordingly. Before analyzing the project or activity itself, the facilitator presents a set of rules that everyone is bound to follow (not required to repeat every time, except when everyone is not familiar with the rules).

As shown in the model (Figure 1), the task is to determine the deviation of what has been realized from what has been the expected, and to come up with the new conclusions, ideas, and knowledge by asking 3 key questions:

1. What is it that we wanted to achieve with the project/activity?
 - Determine whether all employees were aware of the project/activity objective and whether they had a clear picture of their role in the implementation.
 - Determine whether, in the opinion of the employees, the necessary resources were allocated in time, whether there was support from the managers, whether the planning process could have been more thorough, etc.
2. What have we achieved, what results have we accomplished?
 - Determine the result the team has achieved while emphasizing success.
 - Motivate the team so they understand the result accomplished, regardless of deviation from the desired, which is a product of the dedicated teamwork.
 - Determine how the process was going on.
3. What caused this deviation (gap)?
 - Determine the deviation from the desired result (target).
 - Determine the cause of the deviation by sending the following questions: what we performed right, what could have we done better and what difficulties we encounter during the process?

4. What can we do in a different way the second time, what have we learned?
 - Determine what is the key - what have we learned from this project/activity?
 - Brainstorm ideas and suggestions for improving processes related to project/activity, team relationships.
 - Identify and document lessons learned and knowledge.

The basic purpose of the process is to identify the potential for learning, space for advancement, and therefore use past experiences, while maintaining a focus on the future. What is very important is the continuity in implementation of the After-Action Review tool, because only in this way the values that this tool supports can be accepted and become part of the organizational culture. Some of the numerous benefits of implementation of the After-Action Review tool are:

- Creating a Learning Organization.
- Providing basis for innovation and continuous process improvement.
- Shaping organizational culture around knowledge.
- Discovering, sharing, and preserving tacit knowledge.
- Creating a sense of team and team values.
- Improving team relationships, managing teams effectively.
- Documenting and storing key knowledge and lessons.
- Basis for creating and evaluating action plans.

Research on After-Action Review Application

In order to quantify and measure the above-mentioned benefits of After-Action Review tool, a primary research was concluded among the students of Singidunum University in Belgrade. The primary goal of this short experiment was to determine the general efficiency of lessons learned based on After Action Review tool in teaching process.

A simulation project, which is part of a regular exercises in Project Management course, was given to a total number of 95 students. The simulation software deals with schedule and cost related inputs, and for each student it provides an overall score based on several variables, using a normalized scale 10-100. After their first simulation the average score for all 95 students was 65.43 points, with standard deviation of 16.32. Once they completed their first simulation run, students were divided in two groups (41 and 54 students).

The first group of students (41) had an After-Action Review meeting where lessons learned were defined, documented, and exchanged between participants. The second group of students (54) was used as a control group and did not have any interaction between each other before taking a second try. These were relying solely on their individual experience gained in their first try. For the second run a similar project simulation was given to all students and their performance was measured once again. Table 1. provides the descriptive statistics of the results gained from the second run for both data sets. The average score for the group of students that had AAR meeting increased to 82.80 in comparison to the average score of the control group of 68.35.

Table 1. Descriptive statistics of both groups

	<i>ARR Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Mean	82.80487805	68.35185185
Standard Error	1.906413921	1.87617327
Median	85	67.5
Standard Deviation	12.20700519	13.78700154
Range	47	45
Minimum	53	47
Maximum	100	92
Count	41	54

Source: Authors calculation

To examine the significance of the difference between the mean performance values of both groups obtained results were tested using t-test statistics. Before using t-test statistics, normality test (Shapiro-Wilk test) and test of equality of variances (F-test) were executed. The main statistical analysis confirmed that there is a significant difference in performance of two groups. The results of t-test provided in Table 2, confirmed that there is a statistically significant difference ($p=0.000<0.05$) in the mean scores of students that used after-action review (82.8) and the control group of students (68.35). Generally, students that participated in lessons learned session recorded significant improvement in relation to the first simulation try.

Table 2. Two-sample t-test assuming equal variances

	<i>ARR Group</i>	<i>Control Group</i>
Mean	82.80487805	68.35185185
Variance	149.0109756	190.0814116
Observations	41	54
Hypothesized Mean Difference	0	
df	93	
t Stat	5.313688863	
P(T<=t) two-tail	7.3232E-07	
t Critical two-tail	1.985801814	

Source: Authors calculation

Primary research illustrated the value of using lessons learned, knowledge definition, information exchange, and proper documentation. As one of the key preconditions of using the acquired knowledge students defined an adequate presentation, documentation, and structure (Keiser and Arthur, 2020). Only this way a tacit knowledge that was acquired within the first simulation by every single student could be transformed to a more explicit form and used by other students. This certainly implies a good organization of the After-Action Review meeting which will be discussed in more detail within the following section.

Analysis and organization of the After-Action Review meeting

Before implementing the After-Action Review tool, it is necessary to define and adopt the rules that are crucial and a prerequisite for the success of this process. Research shows that behavior in meetings significantly impacts meeting outcomes (Allen, 2010, 2014; Kauffeld and Lehmann-Willenbrock, 2012; Scott, 2013). Regardless of whether the subject is one of the organization's key projects or an activity at the operational level, an identical set of rules applies:

1. All employees involved in the project or activity are invited to participate in the After-Action Review analysis.
2. All participants are encouraged to actively participate in the analysis. They should be objective, creative and open to new ideas.
3. There is no wrong opinion, attitude, and personal attachment. Everyone is free to express their views.
4. It is not allowed to criticize others or to make mistakes in the context of individual responsibility.
5. The goal is to learn something new, not to define who is to blame.
6. The subject of the analysis is the team, not the individual.

The analysis of the subject matter of the After-Action Review meeting should be approached with objectivity and an effort to observe the project or activity from multiple angles, giving everyone an opportunity to present their opinion and point of view. Participation in conversation and decision making relates to increased levels of engagement (Yoerger, 2015). Also, it is of great importance for all employees to feel free to express the attitude that is different from majority, which can lead to an innovative approach.

The analysis includes a structured meeting, where all employees who directly participated in the activity, event or project that is the subject of the analysis are invited. When it comes to organizing a After Action Review meeting, the following dilemmas can arise:

- How often to organize a meeting?

Formal meetings are approached somehow more profoundly in terms of planning and implementation because the key strategic issues, important projects and decisions are usually the subject of analysis. Therefore, formal meetings of this type are much less frequently organized. On the other hand, informal meetings where the subject matter is generally operational usually allows for daily or weekly analyzes. Basically, there is no single and common rule (Miami University, 2020). It is recommended that the organizations rely on their needs and adjust the meeting plan. Ideally, organizations should organize the After-Action Review meeting daily, with the aim to analyze the key activities, adopt new conclusions, knowledge and identify the areas where improvements are possible and desirable.

No matter how innovative presented ideas are, meetings are an opportunity for teams to connect, motivate and serve as reminder of a common mission and vision. It seems logical that revolutionary changes do not occur every day, but incremental ones will certainly showcase their development potential. When the approach to business becomes multidimensional, success is not only related to the increased productivity, efficiency, and planning. The focus is rather on a need to develop employees' awareness and commitment to a common goal

(Komazec, 2012). Finally, we can conclude that every meeting of this type is valuable and unique opportunity to create and maintain a sense of organizational value.

- What is the optimal time for the meeting?

The time required for an After-Action Review meeting depends primarily on the subject of the analysis. If it is a formal meeting, analysis itself will be deeper and more time consuming. Of course, this does not mean that meetings of a more informal type are characterized by superficiality.

- Is it advisable for the meeting to be attended by a facilitator?

A meeting facilitator or organizer ensures that the time allocated for the meeting is well-invested. The role of the facilitator is to maintain focus on the subject matter of the analysis, while remaining completely neutral. The facilitator must have a ‘soft skill’ in terms of communication management and human relations. Resistance and discomfort are expected to occur as employees are encouraged to discuss objectively pros and cons related to the subject matter of the analysis. This is where the key role of the facilitator becomes significant, for both those who ‘talk too much’ and those who need time to adjust. If needed the facilitator must be skilled in preventing and managing conflicts.

The importance of learning from success and failure

When it comes to implementing the After-Action Review tool, there are certain expectations, in terms of the goals that organizations want to achieve, values they want to adopt and changes they want to accept. Therefore, organizations expect a certain result from the implementation process. The existing literature on the effects of After-Action Review tool is not unanimous. While Yourdon (1998) strongly believes that the tool rarely succeeds in fulfilling its purpose, Highsmith (2009) believes that it can contribute to the success of any future project in the organization.

Some research tried to prove that learning from success has a more significant effect than learning from failure (Baum and Dahlin, 2007), while there are also analyzes that show the opposite (Li and Rajagopalan, 1997; Madsen and Desai, 2010). However, it is certain that past successes, as well as failures can serve as a landmark for all future activities of the organization. The value is related to the possibility to point out and record valuable lessons that will allow good practices to be repeated, and those not so bright to be improved.

According to Bill Gates, celebrating success is fine, but learning from mistakes and failure is much more meaningful. Success and failure provide equal opportunities for learning, although learning from failure is a somewhat unpopular approach. For the implementation of the After-Action Review tool, both learning sources are equally important, as the whole mechanism and model relies upon the analysis of past events. Of course, there is no room for criticism.

Very often, organizations repeat mistakes, failures, and they express the syndrome that Schindler and Eppler (2003) defined as project amnesia. Establishing a system where everything learned will be documented and available in form of a knowledge base is not an easy task. The need to have a system for documenting this type of knowledge is emphasized,

as it comes from the experience, not only of individuals, but of teams who work together on projects or activities. However, it is advisable to implement a documentation system only after it has started implementing some of the tools of the knowledge management program.

Conclusion

One of the biggest challenges of contemporary organizations is the conversion of knowledge, as an intangible, imaginary, and hard-to-acquire resource, into the intellectual property of an organization. Intellectual property and knowledge have become more valuable than any kind of material and perceived. Knowledge flow management is a process that many authors in the field of management are trying to unravel, so we believe that this paper has makes additional step in that direction and provides a valuable contribution.

With the aim of creating a knowledge-based strategy, paper first described the environment that is necessary to implement the tools of a knowledge management program. As a tool that fully supports all processes related to knowledge flows in an organization, the paper defined possible implementation model of the After-Action Review tool. The value of the lessons learned, and After-Action Review was tested in research conducted among students, and the obtained results quantify and clearly depicts how significant is to collect, document, structure and disseminate acquired knowledge.

At the end question was also raised - whether organizations learn better from success or failure and which knowledge is more valuable for future performance. With an adequate approach, learning from success and learning from failure are equally important, although learning from failure is considered a less 'popular' process. As the first reason for this standpoint, paper identified organizational culture that fails to recognize mistakes as a development potential, but rather as something that necessarily relates to responsibility of an individual or group. In such cases, the knowledge that remains behind such omission stays uncaptured, and very difficult to access.

Therefore, one of the key goals of modern organizations is creation of environment capable of implementing knowledge management program and application of appropriate tools. The first step in this process includes recognition of potential advantages, which is followed by a challenge of finding the best practice for the implementation of such a program and accompanying tools. We hope that following research will provide organizations and practitioners with additional information and guidelines, that will help them to shape their organizational culture around knowledge.

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