

[Implementing knowledge management systems in plantations](#)

Development in information technology (IT) has enabled firms in manufacturing, agro-based and food-based industries to implement their knowledge management systems (KMS) initiatives to produce more value-added products. KMS are application's computer-based communication and information processing systems to support specific knowledge management (KM) processes.

They have been recognised as a strategic tool to increase competitiveness and productivity of a firm. Even though it is a young topic in Sri Lanka, it has attracted many researchers. Most of these researchers focused their works, either on technologies or management information systems in public organisations or industries. Studies on the application in the agricultural sector especially in the area of supply chain management (SCM) have been very scarce. Sri Lankan firms are adopting and implementing using their capabilities of KMS and IT aggressively along their supply chain to enhance their competitiveness.

Tea plantation industry

The tea plantation industry is considered as one of the pioneers in this endeavour. Since its beginning, the success of the industry is the result of the ideal climate, efficient agro and processing technologies, research and development (R&D), effective marketing tools and marketing strategies. The Sri Lankan government has been fully committed to expand the plantation industry and encouraged global expansion of production.

To remain competitive and profitable, this industry has continued to seek ways to improve performance by using better production and marketing strategies. This has contributed significantly to the growth of the agricultural sector in the past. To preserve its position in the regional and international markets, the plantation industry is striving to improve its productivity and competitiveness through continual technology innovation.

Knowledge management

Knowledge management is a relatively new terminology in business management and is an innovative interdisciplinary field. The most concise and acceptable definition is that proposed by Malhotra in 1997 which states, "Knowledge management caters to the critical issues of organisational adoption, survival and competence in face of increasingly dynamic environmental change. Essentially it embodies organisational processes that seek synergistic combination of the processing capacity of information technologies and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings, which are harnessed and applied as a management strategy in the plantation industry.

The tea plantation industry forms a crucial segment of the economy of this country. This industry which comprises tea, a beverage, rubber, a strategic raw material for industrial use, coconut, sugarcane and palm oil, being multi-faceted, is expected to play a very significant role in the current competitive global marketing environment.

The global economic environment is undergoing a major transformation process from traditional labour intensive to knowledge-based technologies, due to globalization. Far reaching changes have been taking place in the tea plantation industry both in Sri Lanka and throughout the plantation economies of the world.



Professionally managed plantation organisations have a human resources component that assumes massive proportions: 150 senior executives and supporting staff in the head office, 2000 superintendents/managers and assistant superintendents, 10000 operational estate staff and as many as about 500,000 workers.

The first priority of the plantation companies is the achievement of its organisational goal, one of its objectives is to create opportunities for the use and development of human knowledge and skills to the mutual advantage of the company and the employees.

Training is a tool by which these objectives can be achieved. In the conventional plantation model, training is carried out informally at various levels, both for new recruits and those in service, through what is known as 'on-the-job-training'. For senior executives, this involves the senior superintendents taking young entrants under their wing and disseminating the benefit of their knowledge and experience. While there is much merit in this time-tested system, it has been found necessary to supplement it with a more professional approach to training and retraining.

The government's policy framework encourages greater private sector participation as it has been recognized that the state's involvement in the provision of goods and services that would be more efficiently undertaken by the private sector. It is the 'training' or 'knowledge management' that creates this distinction between public and private sectors. It is generally accepted that private sector training may be systematic, mission driven, goal oriented and cost-effective in terms of investment and expected outcome.

In line with these concepts and to take forward the UPFA government's policy in revitalizing the plantation sector, it is proposed that the task of meeting the human resource development needs of the plantation sector be assigned to a private company which would function as a self-reliant commercial business venture.

The roles and responsibilities of the private sector company that is expected to work very closely with the National Institute of Plantation Management (NIPM) and the Plantations Crop Research Institutes (TRI, RRI and CRI) on all subjects related to training and consultancy should be defined in keeping with the changing demands of the government and its clients in the plantation sector.

It is proposed that the training organisation/company would have the mandate to undertake the training functions currently performed by NIPM, TRI, RRI and CRI.

The functions of the training organisation should include the formulation of training strategies to cater to the needs of the plantation industry, designing of academic courses/programmes, development of learning modules and learning resources, assisting these institutes to provide consultancy services on plantation management to state plantation companies and other organisations, publications, seeking out affiliations with national or/and international institutions for conducting of academic/professional studies, organising training programmes and generally perform as a reputable training institution in plantation management and a self-reliant organisation utilizing national and international experts in the sector/industry.

The evolution of the plantation model in the modern context affirming the economies of large scale agriculture and the benefits of integrated processing should be that it helps to transform traditional labour intensive agriculture into a technology driven one. A management strategy encompassing 'knowledge management' concept as a management strategy to remain competitive in the current environment.

Recommendations, based on the emerging needs of the plantation industry, improvements to the conventional style of professional training of plantation employees, identifying and assigning priorities have been proposed and appropriate organisational structures to ensure their effective implementation have also been proposed with the singular purpose of enhancing the