

# The Current State of Knowledge Management in Dubai's Public Sector Organizations: Assessment and Recommendations<sup>1</sup>

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

This policy brief examines the current state of knowledge management (KM) in Dubai's public sector. First, it identifies the implications of recent employment trends on how the skills and knowledge of an increasingly mobile workforce can be captured and documented to serve organizational goals. Second, since KM is a protective mechanism for preserving and retaining the knowledge and know-how of employees, the brief evaluates the source of organizational knowledge and the techniques used in government entities to obtain, capture, share, and store staff knowledge. Finally, it provides recommendations to policy makers and managers of KM departments to help them in their pursuit for more systematic and efficient approaches to KM.

## Introduction

Knowledge management can be defined as "the systematic process of identifying, capturing, and transferring information and knowledge people can use to create, compete and improve" (APQC 2000). As illustrated in the 2009 Arab Knowledge Report, knowledge is a pivotal lever in the service of growth and development. Hence, effective knowledge management is a necessary vehicle for realizing and maximizing the potential of knowledge for sustainable performance in work organizations, as well as in society at large.

The accumulation of abundant revenues from petroleum, and the subsequent adoption of ambitious development plans, dramatically changed the shape of GCC economies, leading to a heavy reliance on expatriate employees to run important institutions and organizations. Since the late 1980s, the United Arab Emirates and other Gulf countries in general have embarked on an unprecedented wave of market liberalization, constructing modern states, building state-of-the-art infrastructures and attracting foreign financial institutions to have branches in these countries. Yet, since GCC countries lacked sufficient local human capital with the necessary skills to run these institutions, they have heavily relied on the expertise and knowledge of foreign consultants, experts and advisors. However, with this heavy reliance on expatriate expertise comes the potential for losing valuable experience and knowledge once these individuals exit the country upon the end of their employment. Thus, local economies lose significant knowledge and experience that could have been transferred, stored, and redeployed in local organizations. Knowledge and talent management have therefore become vitally important for these countries,

<sup>1</sup> This is the second in a series of policy briefs on knowledge management (KM). These briefs rely on primary data that have been collected from the government of Dubai. First, semi-structured and in-depth interviews were conducted in several major entities, including Dubai Electricity and Water Authority (DEWA), Dubai Courts, Knowledge and Human Development Authority (KHDA), Roads and Transportation Authority (RTA) and Dubai Police. Second, a comprehensive survey tool was developed and administered to all government entities in Dubai, with a response rate of 66%, including those which had been previously interviewed. To the authors' knowledge, this is the first time a study on knowledge management of this magnitude has been conducted in Dubai and the UAE.

Organizations surveyed include the following: Community Development Authority, Dubai Customs, The Executive Council, Knowledge and Human Development Authority, Dubai Courts, General Civil Aviation Authority, Department of Finance, Dubai Police, Dubai Municipality, Public Prosecution, Islamic Affairs and Charitable Activities Department, Dubai Chamber of Commerce and Industry, Road and Transportation Authority, Department of Economic Development, Financial Audit Department, Hamdan Bin Mohammed E-university, Mohammed Bin Rashid Establishment for SME Development, Dubai Ambulance, and Mohammed Bin Rashid Housing Establishment.



especially after the advent of the global financial crisis and the subsequent departure of significant numbers of skilled employees.

### Staff Mobility and Departure can Cause Knowledge Loss

Since the late 1980s, there has been a transformation in the management of the public sector, moving away from the traditional model of public administration to a flexible, market-based form of public management. The New Public Management model brought a wave of new ideas and practices, including flexibility in organization and in staffing, as well as administrative decentralization. While these changes have improved performance and enhanced efficiency, they have also created new challenges and risks. Organizational memory and intellectual capital are endangered when employees move from one organization or sector to another without properly documenting and transferring their experiences and knowledge.

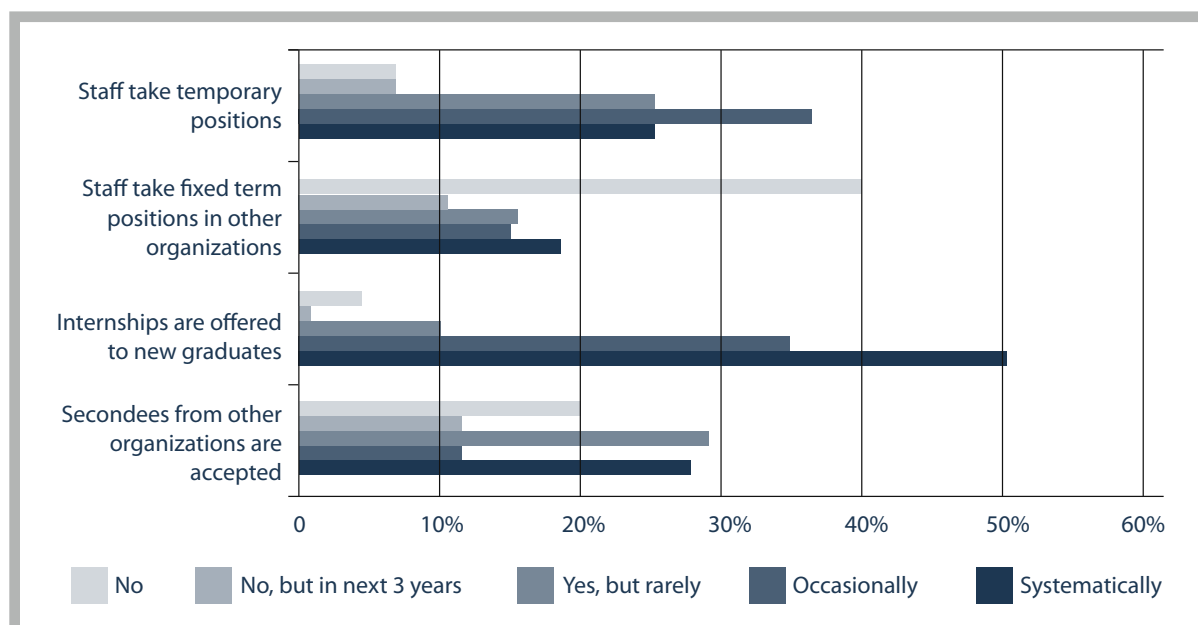
Recent financial conditions have added new pressure on government entities to hire more part-time employees in order to cut costs. The survey we conducted within government entities in Dubai (Figure 1) shows that 24% and 37% of respondents pointed out, respectively, that they systematically or occasionally employed staff with temporary positions. About 50% indicated that they systematically offer internships to new graduates, but only 27% said that they systematically have secondees from other

organizations working for them. In fact, organizations with more temporary staff face more risks of losing knowledge, as their employees have fewer incentives to share or transfer knowledge and less commitment to the organization. These are some of the main factors that motivate employees to play a major role in the success of KM programs.

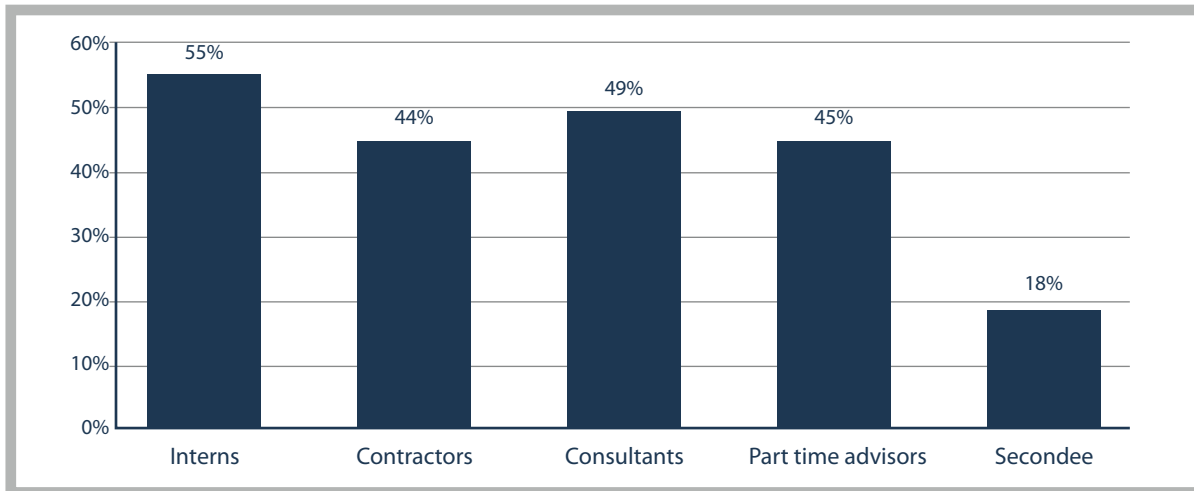
The UAE in general, and Dubai in particular, rely heavily on international consultants for developmental and operational matters. Figure 2 confirms this fact, as 49% of the temporary staff in Dubai’s public sector consists of consultants. Their role is instrumental in providing “rented knowledge,” yet if they leave without properly documenting their experiences, organizations risk losing very expensive knowledge and wasting significant amounts of resources invested in consultancies.

Consultants, contractors and advisors hired on a temporary basis supply a large proportion of the knowledge and know-how for the Dubai Government. The survey data from government entities in Dubai reveals that 45% of temporary staff constitutes advisors, 44% contractors, and interns comprise 55% of part-time staff. Although there is considerable overlap among the categories, as respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer, the figures do indicate a heavy reliance upon temporary staff with limited period contracts. As such, the Dubai Government faces considerable risks involved in losing the competencies of these individuals if they are not properly transferred and integrated into government organizations.

Figure 1: Flexibility of Staff in Dubai’s Public Sector



**Figure 2: Temporary Staff with Limited Period Contracts in Dubai Government Entities (2009-10)**



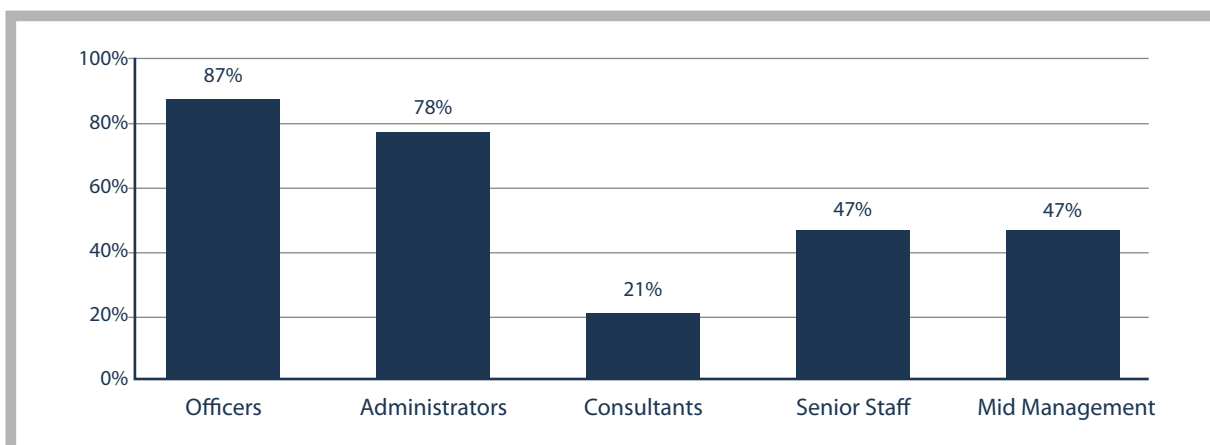
**Note:** Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.

One of the effects of the recent global financial crisis is the increase in turnover. Figure 3 demonstrates that government entities in Dubai lost a significant segment of their senior and middle management. From 43 surveys returned, 47% indicated that their organization lost senior staff. Approximately 21% lost consultants, while 87% lost officers. Some of these employees probably left to other institutions in Dubai or other Emirates, while others left the country in search of other opportunities. In this employment climate, KM strategies and programs can address the risks associated with the departure of knowledge resources, and can help motivate employees to share knowledge and thus ensure sustainable performance.

### Strategies for Protecting Organizational Knowledge

*KM as a priority:* Given these high levels of turnover and dwindling financial resources to develop or attract new talent, Dubai's public sector should implement strategies to safeguard the knowledge and experience of employees in a systematic and accessible way. One of the first steps toward addressing the challenge of KM is to establish knowledge management as a top priority of the organization. However, as Figure 4 demonstrates, less than half of the Dubai Government organizations surveyed consider KM as one of their top five priorities. About 52% indicate that it is not at the moment, but could be in the future, either in the short or long term. Only 44% of those organizations that

**Figure 3: Position Categories Exiting Dubai Government Organizations**



**Note:** Survey respondents were asked to select categories of positions that left their organizations in 2009. They were allowed to choose more than one answer

Figure 4: KM is one of the top Five Priorities of the Organization

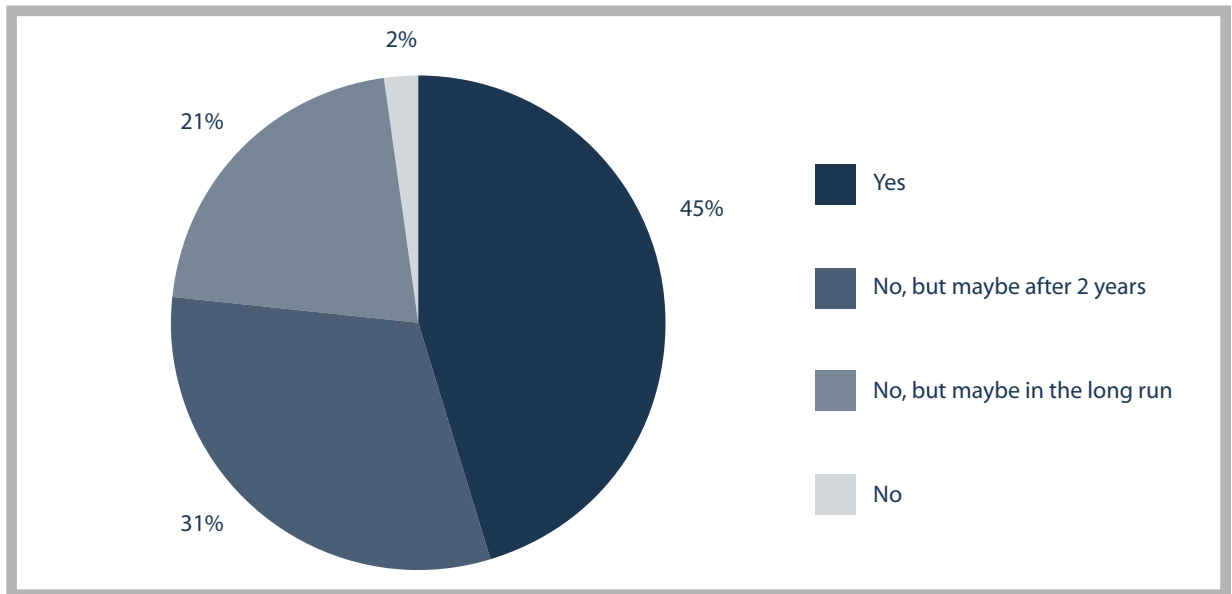
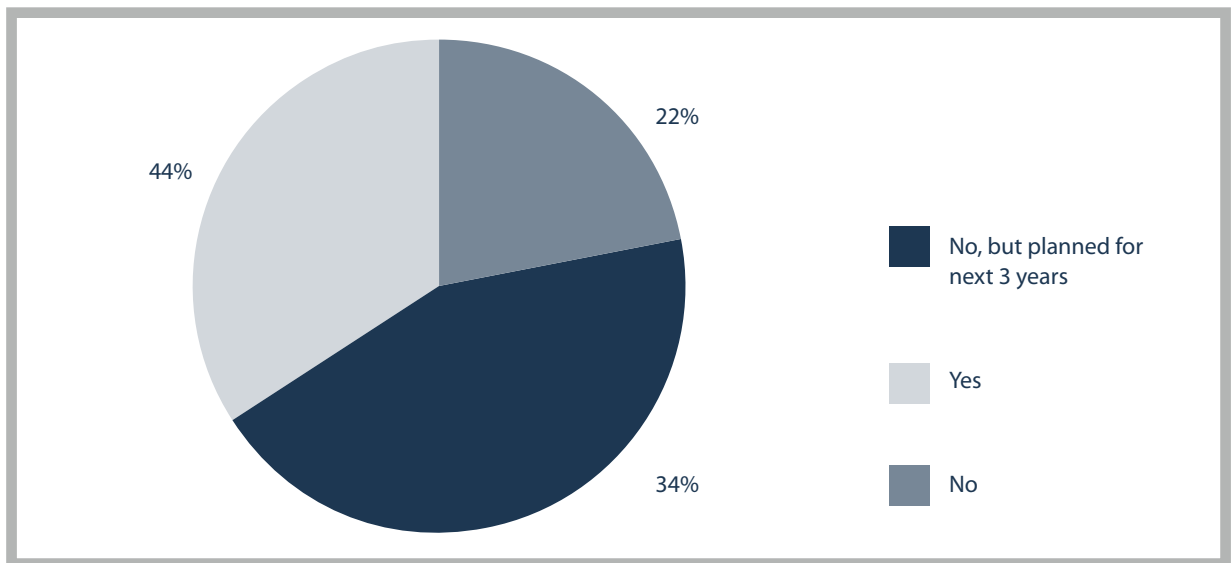


Figure 5: Existence of Written KM Policy or Strategy



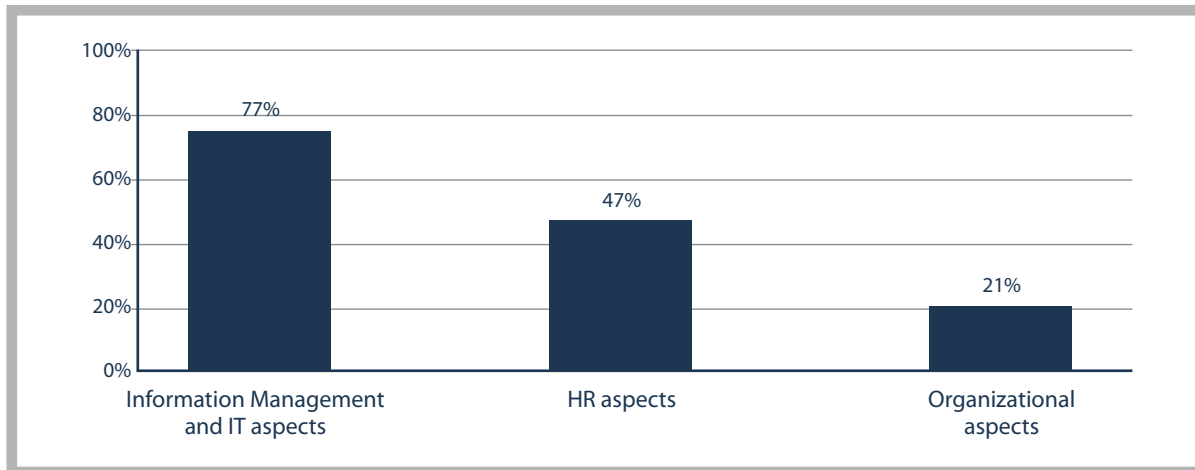
placed KM as one of top five priorities have developed written policies for knowledge management.

The scope of KM: As Figure 6 demonstrates, 47% of respondents stated that the policies or strategies that their organizations have implemented include HR aspects, while 77% have included information management and IT aspects. The earlier stages of KM program implementation in Dubai witnessed an overreliance on the automation and digitization of KM processes. Information management and IT were the main areas where most governmental entities in Dubai initially established their KM programs and evolved their policies. This pattern confirms one of

the most common problems in understanding and implementing KM—narrowly defining it technical terms, with organizations limiting its application to the use of information systems and automation. Research shows that any definition and implementation of KM should take into account the influences of organizational culture and structure, as well as the fact that knowledge is dynamic and social, and embedded in individuals, social experiences and interactions.

However, interviews conducted for this research indicated an emerging awareness among major government entities in Dubai that KM is about people, with HR policies and management practices

**Figure 6: Reported Components of KM Policies/Strategies**



Note: Respondents were allowed to choose more than one answer.

geared toward finding the means to incentivize and encourage staff to share their knowledge and facilitate the KM process. The focus of KM programs in Dubai has gradually shifted from IT to HR.

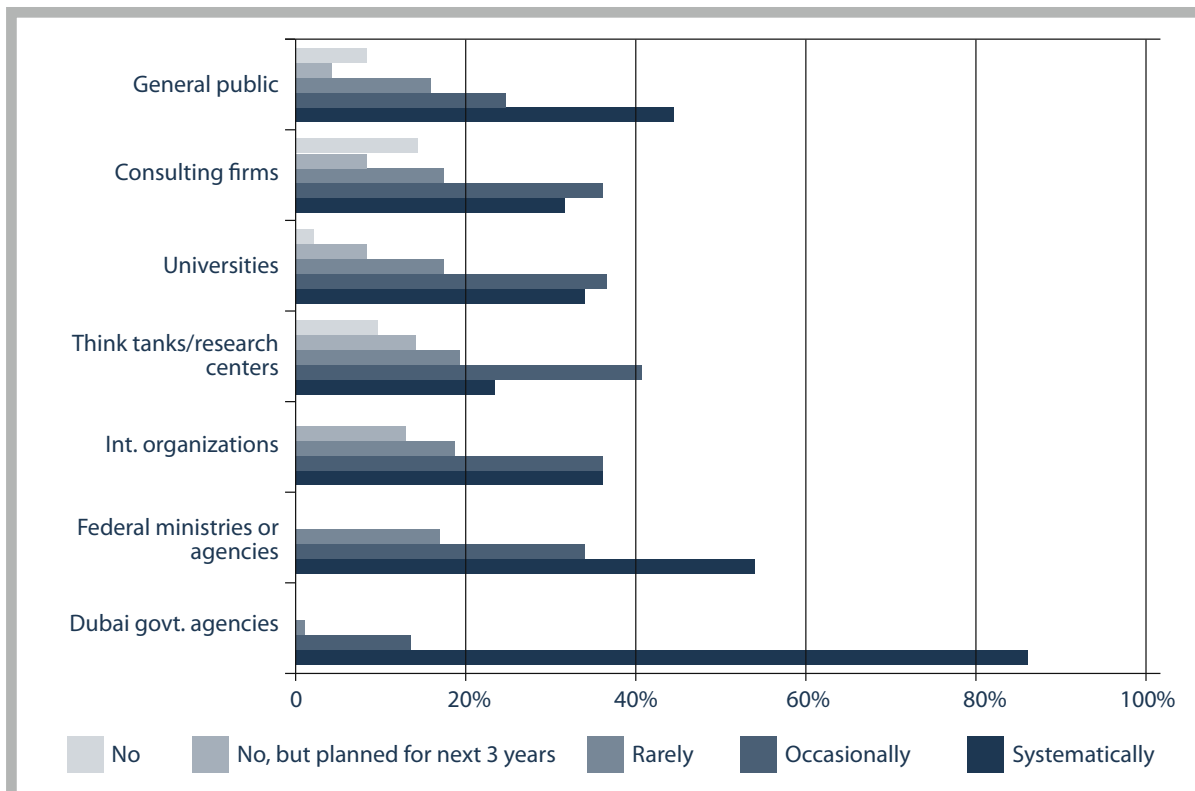
### Sources and Documentation of Knowledge in Dubai’s Public Sector

To have a clear understanding of KM in Dubai, it is essential to know from where government entities

get their information and knowledge,<sup>2</sup> as well as how they document it.

As Figure 7 demonstrates, 86% of respondents pointed out that they systematically rely on other Dubai government agencies and entities for obtaining the information they need. The second most important source of information was federal ministries or agencies, which 54% of Dubai government organizations utilize systematically for information.

**Figure 7: Sources of Information for Government Entities in Dubai**



<sup>2</sup> Information is defined here as an organized and contextualized set of data. Knowledge is the combination of an individual’s judgment, reflection and analysis of the information perceived.

Government entities circulate information among themselves, and to some extent involve the public's input as well, with 46% of respondents indicating that the general public is a valuable source of information as their suggestions, opinions and recommendations are welcomed through online channels and also through the media, which voices their concerns.

The use of research and academic institutions is very low. Only 23% of institutions surveyed systematically rely on think tanks or research centers, and 35% on universities, for getting information. This finding is consistent with findings from interviews conducted with major government entities like The Executive Council, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority, Dubai Courts, and the Road and Transportation Authority.

As far as the sources of knowledge are concerned, as Figure 8 demonstrates, 92% of respondents either agree or strongly agree that they get their knowledge from the individual expertise of consultants, experts and advisors. This result is consistent with findings from the interviews and other segments of the survey that assessed the level of reliance on external consultants and experts.

About 58% of respondents, however, indicated that their second source of knowledge is documents, guidelines and databases. These reflect only the explicit form of the organization's knowledge. It

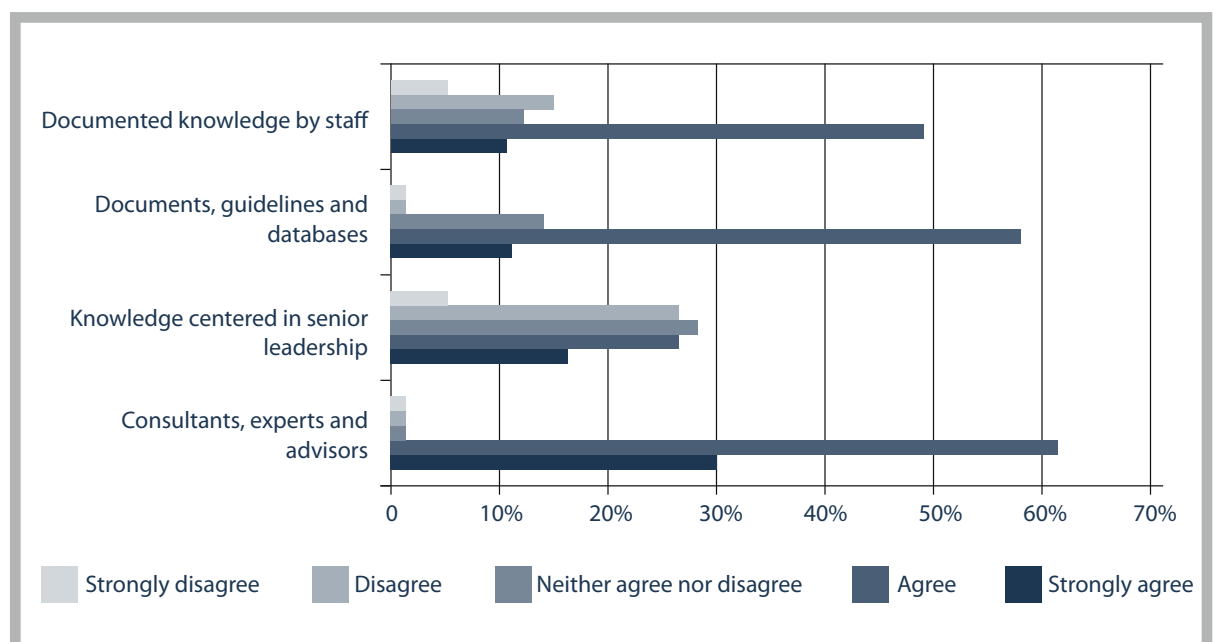
was also found that 49% of surveyed organizations agreed that they relied on documented knowledge by their staff.

The participating organizations in the survey were asked whether their knowledge and good practices were captured, and if so, in what form they were documented. As Figure 9 demonstrates, 72% of respondents considered business mapping and surveys to be equally important in capturing the knowledge of employees. Moreover, another significant source of organizational knowledge is after project or action reviews, which form 49% of respondents' answers. As far as documenting knowledge is concerned, 74% of respondents pointed out that they systematically translated the captured knowledge into guidelines and policies that were implemented and institutionalized within these government entities. Also, best practice collections and statistical databases respectively constituted 47% and 38% of the total responses.

### Means of Sharing and Transferring Knowledge

After the creation and documentation of knowledge comes the task of sharing it with and transferring it to others, both within and outside the organizations. The advent of the Internet and accessibility to computers has made the sharing of knowledge

Figure 8: Sources of Knowledge for Dubai Government Entities



much easier and simpler. However, it is imperative to understand that technological instruments are only a means to facilitate access to and sharing of knowledge, and do not fully constitute KM. In fact, there are numerous organizational, technological and personal processes and techniques that facilitate the transfer of knowledge.

In Figure 10, 72% of respondents pointed out that they systematically relied on document management systems like electronic shared folders, 65% implemented Intranet, and around 62% indicated that they used the Internet to share knowledge. In fact, it is apparent that these government entities rely too heavily on automation and digitalization; other means, like video or telephone conferences, in which tacit knowledge prevails, are not used frequently as means of sharing knowledge. The same thing applies for lessons learned databases, which only account for 14%. These findings are consistent with the interviews’

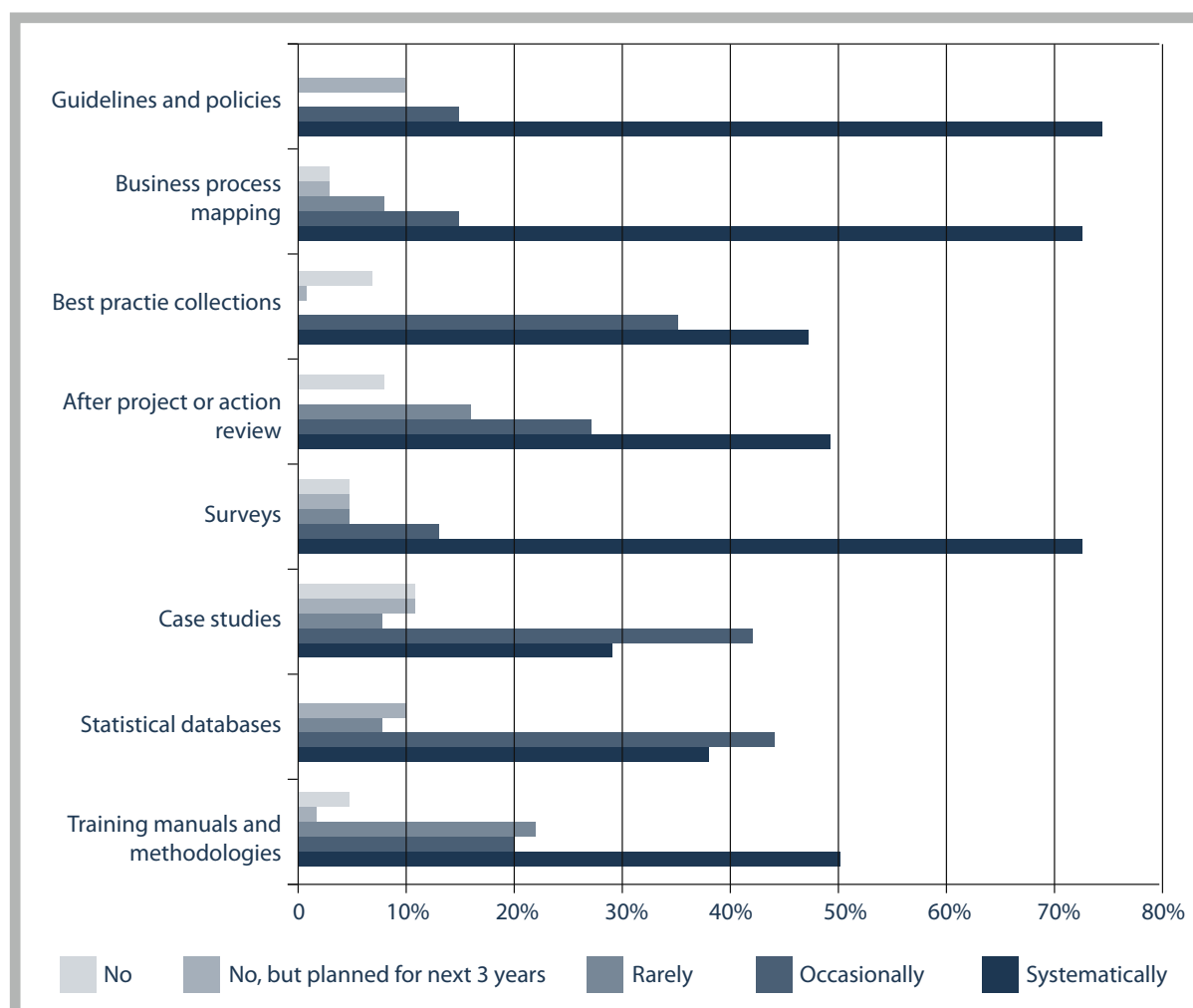
findings. For example, Dubai Electricity and Water Authority, Road and Transportation Authority and Dubai Courts all pointed out that they implemented a system-centered approach put together by IT companies to run KM programs.

Although technology is instrumental in the success of KM programs, it may also become an impediment if organizations ignore the human and structural aspects, instead over-relying on IT. More importantly, tacit knowledge is more often transferred through formal decision sharing and informal discussions—either in casual discussions, meetings, or by telephone—and not necessarily through the formal technical tools like the ones discussed above.

### Goals for Establishing KM programs in Dubai’s Public Sector

To evaluate the outcomes of KM programs in Dubai’s public sector, it is necessary to highlight the stated goals behind its establishment from the outset. In

Figure 9: Ways of Capturing Knowledge, and Forms in which it is Documented

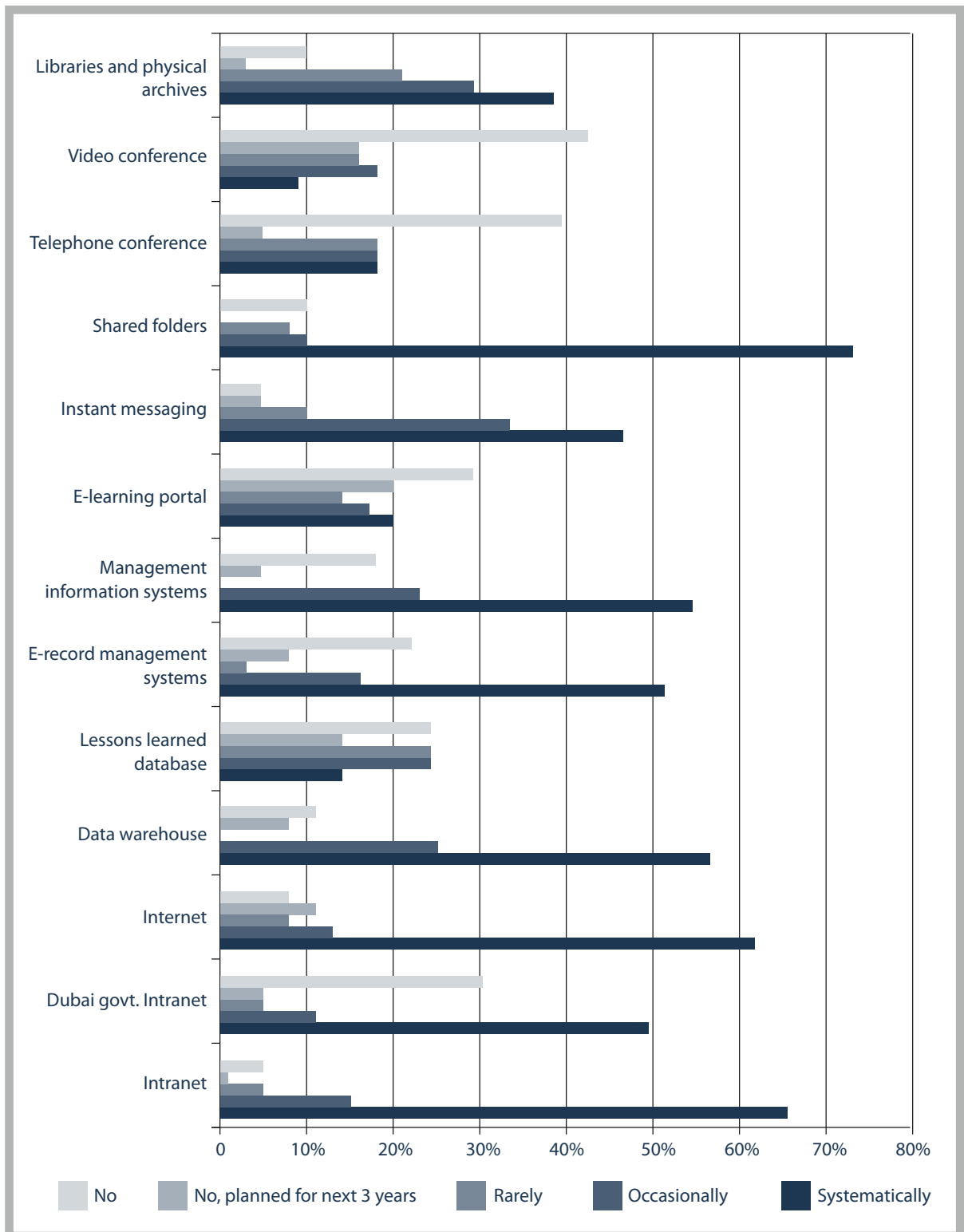


this study, 19 government entities were surveyed and the goals of implementing KM were compared with the level of success they achieved.

Results from the survey demonstrate that efficiency, enhanced productivity and service delivery through

more systematic knowledge sharing were the main goals of establishing KM programs within Dubai's public sector. Approximately 73% of respondents indicated (Figure 11) that the improving work efficiency and productivity was considered a "very

**Figure 10: Means of Sharing Knowledge within Dubai's Public Sector**



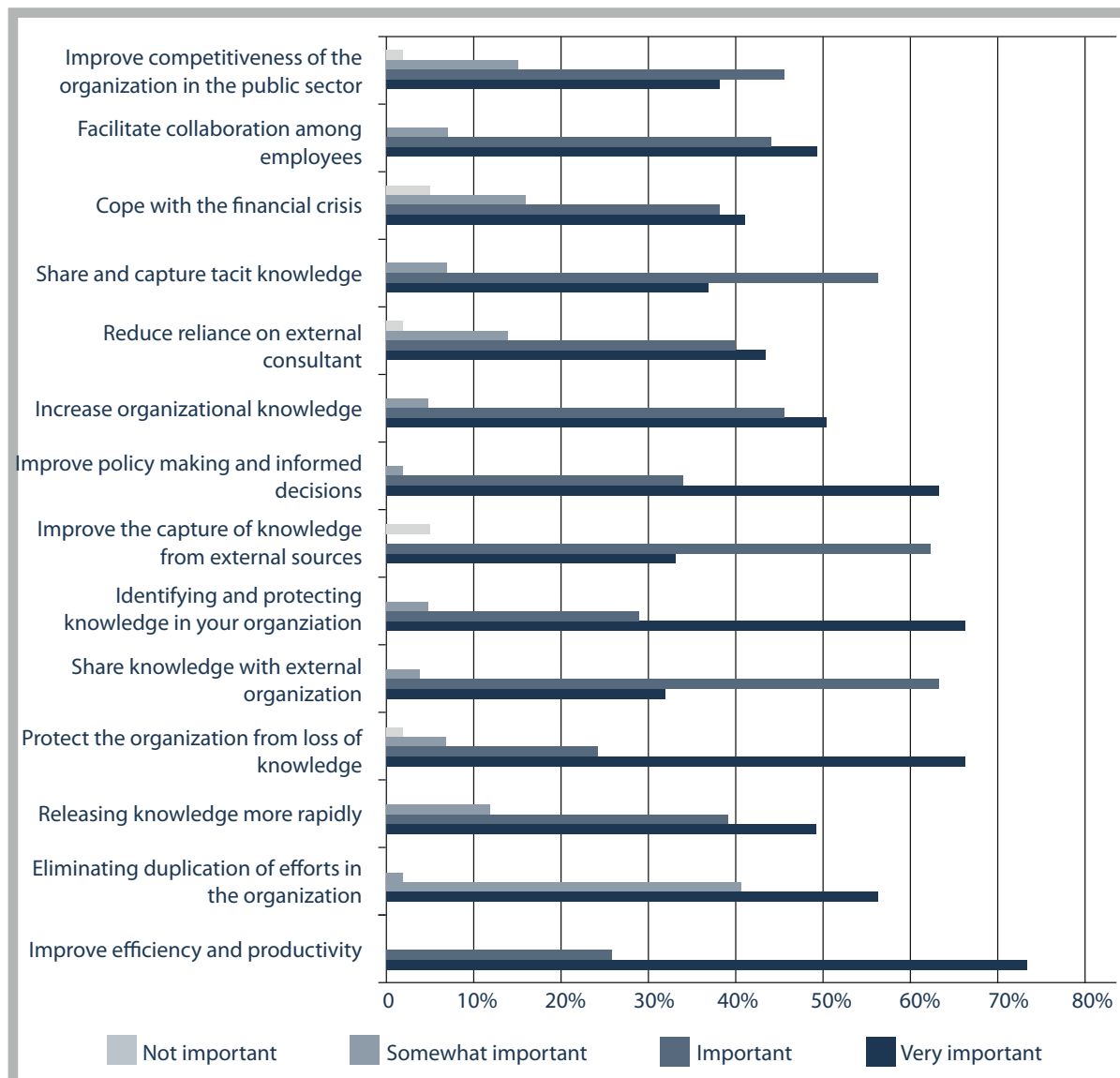


important” goal of the KM programs within their organizations. Other “very important” reasons were included protecting the organization from loss of knowledge due to departure of staff, and identifying and protecting the strategic knowledge currently present in the organization (both at 66%). The third “very important” reason was to improve policy making within the organization and to make more informed decisions. However, only 37% of respondents pointed out that capturing and sharing tacit knowledge was a “very important” reason for establishing their organization’s KM program.

## Results of the Current KM Programs in Dubai’s Public Sector

This study provides insights into the realized impacts of KM in Dubai’s public sector. As stated earlier, improving work efficiency and productivity was the most important goal behind establishing KM programs in Dubai government entities (73%). As Figure 12 demonstrates, 23% and 43% of respondents pointed out, respectively, that they were very successful or successful in achieving this goal. However, current KM programs achieved only marginal success in the second important goal,

Figure 11: Goals of Implementing KM Programs in Dubai’s Public Sector



Note: Respondents were allowed to select more than one answer

Figure 12: Results of Implementing KM in Dubai’s Public Sector

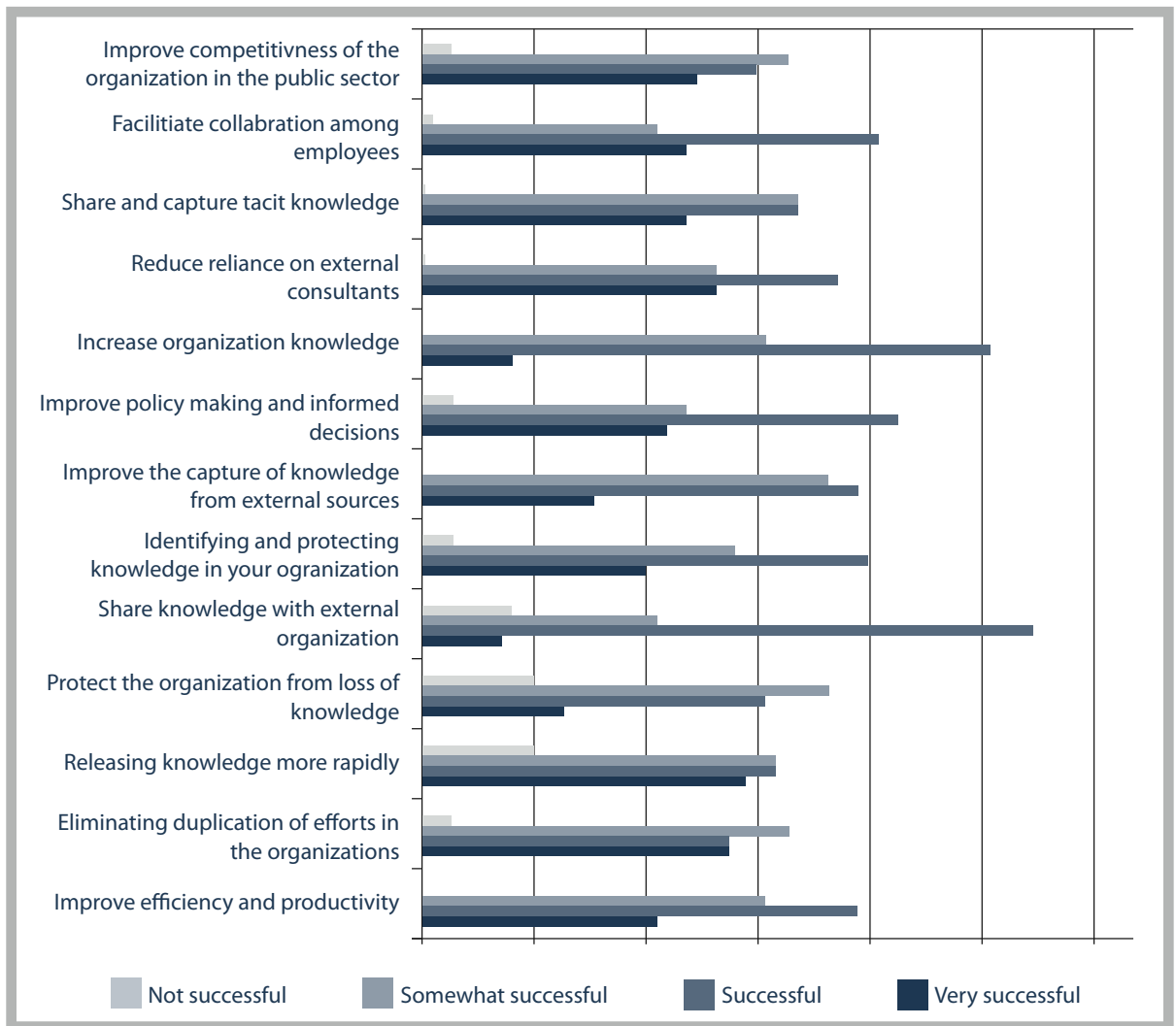
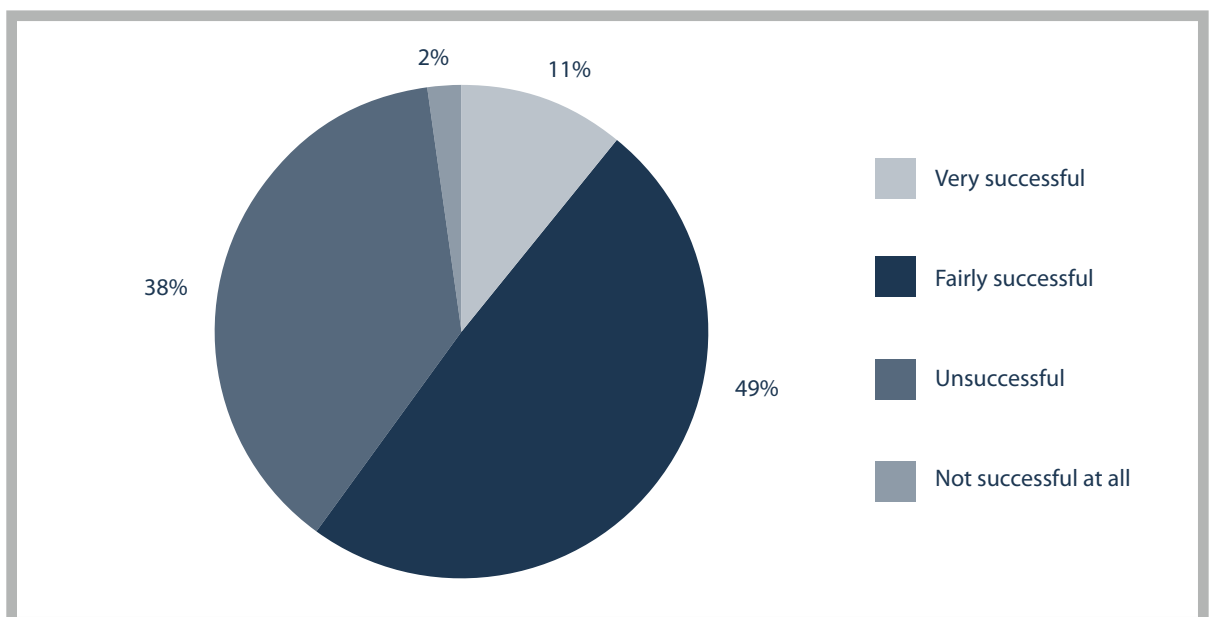


Figure 13: Results of Implementing KM Programs in Dubai’s Public Sector



protecting the organization from loss of knowledge due to departure of staff; just 14% and 34% of respondents, respectively, indicated that they were very successful or successful in attaining this objective. With respect to the goal of identifying and protecting the knowledge residing within the organization, 22% and 44% respectively mentioned that they were very successful and successful in reaching this objective. As far as improving policy making and facilitating informed decisions, 47% said that they were successful in achieving this objective, and 23% indicated that they were very successful.

KM programs seemed more effective in achieving other results. For example, 32% of respondents indicated that they were very successful in releasing knowledge more rapidly, and 30% were very successful in eliminating duplication of tasks among government organizations and agencies. Improving the sharing of knowledge with external organizations was among the top achievements of the current KM project, as 60% of respondents pointed out that they were successful in this aspect. Likewise, 56% indicated that through the current KM program they were successful in increasing their organizational knowledge.

The survey respondents were asked to assess the overall success of their KM programs. Figure 13 demonstrates that only 11% of respondents considered their programs to be very successful, with 49% indicating that they were fairly successful, and 38% unsuccessful.

## Recommendations

This study assesses the current state of knowledge management in the Dubai Government. It advances our understanding of some of the challenges and weaknesses in the ways knowledge and talent are created and managed in public sector organizations. This, in turn, affects the effectiveness and success of KM activities. The results indicate that decision makers and managers should consider the following recommendations:

1. **Make KM a top priority for government organizations.** This will help in re-directing the attention and efforts of management to the establishment of proper human, technological and organizational tools. That will enhance the creation, documentation and sharing of knowledge, and create the right conditions for successful KM projects.
2. **Develop a more holistic and integrative approach to knowledge management,** which goes beyond the technical application of advanced information and communication technologies. This approach should include an awareness of the influences of organizational culture, and that knowledge is dynamic and social, embedded in individuals, social experiences and interactions. Addressing the human side of knowledge and its management is the key factor in creating sustainable knowledge-based organizations and economies.
3. **Fully recognize the risks associated with hiring employees on a temporary basis, and implement sufficient mechanisms to protect and store their knowledge, as well as to make it accessible to others within the organization.** Employees with temporary contracts tend to be less motivated, less driven and less committed to the organization where they work.
4. **Develop clear, written policies and strategies for KM.** It is crucial to create formal guidelines, requirements, obligations, and incentives that would encourage employees within the organizations to both document and share their knowledge.
5. **Activate and use the capacity of local universities and think tanks as sources of knowledge and information.** Currently, government entities in Dubai rely heavily for knowledge on other entities' consultants and experts. Relatively little attention has been paid to the role of local universities and think tanks. In western countries, schools of management and public policy are a major source for policy advice and guidance.
6. **Focus on bridging the gaps between the desired and realized results of KM programs.** The current KM programs do not appear to have achieved the primary objectives that were set for them. Therefore, it is important to understand and improve the structural and human conditions necessary for the success of these programs in order to maximize their effects on organizational sustainability and resilience.

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