<div align="center">**Research Assessment Exercise 2020**
<u>**Impact Case Study**</u></div>

University: City University of Hong Kong

Unit of Assessment (UoA): 22-Business

Title of case study: Action research to improve knowledge management and business performance

(1)   Summary of the impact

Interventions in a variety of organizations have followed a systematic sequence of activities that include diagnosis, planning, implementation, reflection and evaluation. These interventions have directly improved knowledge management practice and key indicators of overall business performance in several organizations. Interventions in other organizations could not be completed or were evaluated to be unsuccessful or only partly successful in meeting the intended outcomes. In these latter cases, the lessons learned from the efforts have led to the identification of key obstacles as well as prescriptions for what *not* to do in managing organizational knowledge.

(2)   Underpinning research

A series of projects have developed the methodology of action research and applied it to a variety of organizations with the dual aims of advancing theory and improving organizational performance.

A foundation article [6] proposed a set of five principles and associated criteria to help assure both the rigor and the relevance of canonical action research. The first principle relates to the development of an agreement that facilitates collaboration between the action researcher and the client. The second principle is based upon a cyclical process model for action research that consists of five stages: diagnosis, planning, intervention, evaluation, and reflection. Additional principles highlight the critical roles of theory, change through action, and the specification of learning in terms of implications for both research and practice.

In a second article [5], the role of theory in Action Research was explored in greater detail, leading to the identification of two distinct forms of theory: instrumental and focal. Each plays a key role how Action Research is conducted. These two articles were written for the growing community of action researchers who bridge academia and business. Our articles have been collectively cited about 1300 times and shared widely across both public and private sector organizations.

The principles and criteria developed for action research have been applied in a variety of organizations. The interventions in these organizations have aimed to first understand how knowledge is shared (or hoarded) and subsequently to improve the management of knowledge and in turn the overall performance of the organization. The organizations have ranged from private firms in the public relations industry to state-owned firms in the software industry, joint ventures in the hospitality industry and foreign firms in the global logistics industry.

Many of the projects have been successful in terms of improving organizational performance [1,3,4]. However, we have also experienced a few failures and shared the lessons learned from

them in seminars and a peer-reviewed journal article [2]. Through these various projects, we have successfully reified and tested our methodological innovations through an evidence-based approach that privileges the interests of the practitioner clients with whom we work, even as we simultaneously contribute to scholarly knowledge with respect to the theories that we employ and the action research method itself. For instance, we assert that the infinite variety of circumstances that prevails in an organizational context precludes any attempt to create a one-size-fits-all prescriptive solution that can be universally generalized.

Nevertheless, the principles and criteria that we have developed and refined over time can now be applied in a relatively formal action research process to a variety of organizational problems and situations. Our projects with a wide variety of organizations have blended theoretically-driven dynamic analysis with reflexively robust interpretations of why employees do what they do and how we can engineer the impetus for change in organizational processes and procedures. This enables us to address problems at multiple levels, ensuring that solving the problems of senior management will not simultaneously prevent us from enhancing the working experience of junior and front-line employees.

(3)   References to the research

1. RM Davison, CXJ Ou & MG Martinsons (2018). Interpersonal knowledge exchange in China: The impact of guanxi and social media, Information & Management, 55 (2), 224-234

2. MG Martinsons, RM Davison & Q Huang (2017). Strategic knowledge management failures in small professional service firms in China, International Journal of Information Management, 37 (4), 327-338

3. RM Davison & CXJ Ou (2017). Digital work in a digitally challenged organization, Information & Management, 54 (1), 129-137

4. RM Davison, CXJ Ou & MG Martinsons (2013). Information technology to support informal knowledge sharing, Information Systems Journal, 23 (1), 89-109.

5. RM Davison, MG Martinsons & CXJ Ou (2012). The roles of theory in canonical action research, MIS Quarterly, 36 (3), 763-786.

6. RM Davison, MG Martinsons & NF Kock (2004). Principles of canonical action research, Information Systems Journal, 14 (1), 65-86.

(4)   Details of the impact

Our research has had considerable impact, both with the organizations that we studied directly and across the business community in Hong Kong and mainland China. Much of this beneficial impact relates to the way knowledge is managed. For example, our "before and after" analysis in organizations such as Eastwei and Ruder Finn found that knowledge management became more systematic and effective, facilitating employees to locate knowledge more efficiently. Knowledge is often *not* available online, whether in formal and codified corporate resources or on the Internet. Instead, it may only exist in a tacit and implicit form inside the heads of employees, executives, customers, business partners or other stakeholders. Thus, the

management and accessibility of relevant knowledge on an as-needed basis can improve the overall performance of the organizations.

Accessing knowledge commonly involves complex transactive memory systems. By working closely with business leaders including Alex Fong and Glen Burrows as well as different levels of managers and employees, we have helped them to enhance the transactive memories of the people in their networks and the knowledge resources of each connected person. These improvements have collectively improved the effectiveness of knowledge management across entire organizations and even some business networks.

Another aspect of the impact concerns the knowledge culture that prevails in organizations and the way this culture is fostered and promulgated. We have collaborated with organizational leaders to develop a more supportive culture for sharing knowledge, with the introduction of explicit rewards and incentives. In one organization, our proposal to hire a knowledge officer, who would act as a gatekeeper to knowledge resources, was accepted by the board of directors. This knowledge officer subsequently formed a team that helped other employees to access the resources they needed.

Overall, the better understanding of how knowledge can be measured and managed has improved key performance indicators (KPIs) in both large organizations such as Dell and Fedex and smaller ones such as Pharmatech and Tapping Point. These KPIs have included customer satisfaction with the services provided by the organization, internal process efficiency, problem-solving efficiency, knowledge re-use, employee satisfaction, employee engagement, and employee retention.

The knowledge emerging from our Action Research has been shared by us as well as the leaders of the organizations where we have intervened. We have given presentations to audiences of business executives, management practitioners, and other academics. We have also published our research in the aforementioned academic outlets as well as in practitioner-oriented journals and magazines. Meanwhile, the leaders of several of our Action Research-ed organizations have shared their success stories in speeches such as CEO Forums and conference talks.

(5) **Sources to corroborate the impact** (organization leaders):

- **Accor Hotels** – Robert Murray, Senior Vice President, Greater China
- **Eastwei** - Johan Björkstén (former Chairman of Eastwei Relations)
- **Dell EMC** – Glen Burrows, Senior Vice President, Asia-Pacific OEM and IoT (former Managing Director of Dell Hong Kong)
- **Fedex** – Wilson Chung, Regional Vice President, Fedex Express, China
- **Pharmatech Asia Group** – Jason Lee, Managing Director
- **Ruder Finn** – Jean-Michel Dumont, International Strategy head (former Chair of Ruder Finn Asia)
- **Tapping Point** – Alex Fong, Founder and Chief Executive (former Chief Executive, Hong Kong General Chamber of Commerce)