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Knowledge management

Basic definition

Knowledge management (KM) is the creation and subsequent management of an environment that encourages knowledge to be created, shared, learnt, enhanced, and organised for the benefit of the organisation and its customers.

An organisation's strength includes its physical assets and also, increasingly importantly, its knowledge assets, which are made up of information, insight and experience. KM is the systematic gathering and exploitation of those assets, which may be explicit or hidden. It includes the recognition, capture and spreading of good practice, the utilisation of collective intelligence and the sharing of lessons learnt.

KM and information management (IM) are sometimes used interchangeably, however it is important to understand the differences. In brief, one advantage of the term KM is that it clearly distances the topic from the technology, whereas IM can be too closely associated with information communications technology (ICT).

A useful illustration of the difference between data, information and knowledge management is provided by the Society of IT managers (SOCITM) in their publication "Investing in information", 2001:

Example of **data**:

- a care home has 100 beds

Example of **information**:

- this figure represents the bedding capacity of a care home, calculated as theoretical capacity based on floor space, or actual number of physical beds available at the home, or number of beds that the home is resourced to support based on staffing levels, health and safety, etc.

Example of **knowledge management**:

- a large home is likely to be difficult to manage (e.g. because of known staffing difficulties in this area of the city) and tends to be the home where old people go if they cannot afford private care

Therefore KM is about helping people communicate and share information. KM is about getting the right information, in the right context, to the right person, at the right time, for the right business purpose. KM is as much a cultural change as a technology change.

How a KM system works

Knowledge is collected from all existing sources including people, systems, databases, filing cabinets and desktops. All knowledge of value is stored and categorised as data in an organised repository. This knowledge can be immediately conveyed to the people and systems that need it, whether it's through an intranet, collaboration tool, or knowledge transfer process. The right knowledge will go to the right person or system at the right time.

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Current knowledge can be retrieved from the system's archives at any time, and knowledge that becomes obsolete is automatically removed from the system.

Technical definition

Obviously, a good piece of software or a good system solution is required but KM does not just concern software. Underestimating what it takes just to build the knowledge correctly is a big risk, as is underestimating the integration task into an already complex environment.

It is important to realise that the job is not done when the content is complete; over time the content must be updated and supplemented as products change and new problems are reported.

Authorities implementing KM from a basic level are advised to choose one area that needs real improvement or has limited resources, and then build a robust knowledge base for that subject matter. The authority can then use that experience implement KM throughout the whole organisation; for example, concentrate on one call centre and learn from there. It is much better to be comprehensive for a narrow topic than fail to get enough depth.

Authorities already have established data centres, so they are not only building a knowledge base but also integrating it into their existing environment, for example, their call tracking system, email, and other e-support systems. Underestimating the complexity of the existing environment can jeopardise the entire initiative.

For successful implementation an authority should plan to have dedicated resources to build and maintain the knowledge and also regular and timely maintenance of the knowledge base. It is also important to build in a mechanism that identifies gaps in content (information sought but not found), and a process for filling those gaps. If people repeatedly fail to find what they are looking for they will stop using the system.

Finally, buy-in is needed at all levels, and this may require cultural change. The people that are going to use the tools have to be part of the design in order for implementation to be successful. It is vital that this management decision includes people from the various groups that will directly or indirectly use the system.

What is a KM strategy?

A KM strategy helps an authority to:

- understand what it collectively knows and does
- capture experiential learning
- store and signpost explicit knowledge in order for it to be readily accessible to others
- share insights, experience and creativity more easily across organisational boundaries and externally
- creatively re-use rather than constantly reinvent what it knows

Objectives

Mobilising a KM strategy will deliver a structured, phased and co-ordinated programme to:

- mobilise knowledge for business and strategic planning
- promote the need to foster a knowledge sharing culture

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- deliver information systems and KM resources
- encourage the capture and sharing of learning
- create the IT infrastructure to underpin knowledge mobilisation
- develop the roles and skills required to foster information and knowledge exchange
- manage the KM programme

The implementation of KM allows authorities to harness what they know and use it to the best purpose in serving their citizens.

Benefits of KM implementation

Direct benefits will flow at three levels:

- 1) Individual Whilst KM implies some new responsibilities for individuals, significant benefits in terms of time and quality of work will be the primary deliverable. KM seeks to minimise non-productive time by ensuring:
 - the knowledge required to undertake a task is available and accessible.
 - rapid access to information or knowledge, wherever and whenever it is required
 - accurate data, previous examples of similar work as well as the insights and experience of peers
 - the minimisation of wheel reinvention with individuals able to build on the work of others rather than completely reproduce.
 - greater credibility through being able to talk knowledgeably about previous work conducted within an authority
 - better internal communication
 - more effective use of information systems
 - increased experiential learning
 - recognition that individuals have valuable learning or insights that should be shared with others
- 2) Teams Group based experiential learning is at the heart of high performing team working. KM introduces built in opportunities for teams to pause and reflect on the effectiveness of their work before progressing to the next activity. This has vital benefits not only to the individuals in terms of learning and growth but also for team cohesion, mutual understanding and communication.
- 3) Authority Benefits to an authority will operate at a number of levels:
 - a single integrated strategy to manage the knowledge infrastructure
 - an explicit framework to support client and project management
 - up-to-date information held centrally and accessibly that allows people to tap the information capacity of the whole authority rather than just a limited circle of contacts
 - formal processes and roles to facilitate, capture and disseminate experiential learning from projects
 - a growing library of knowledge assets
 - the development of a culture that more directly values the honest and open sharing of knowledge between individuals, teams and across organisational boundaries

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- transparency of an authority's product and service information to facilitate greater agency cohesion and opportunities for collaboration
- increase formal and informal communication by staff through team meetings, communities of interest, and ad-hoc staff interactions
- encourage the flexible use of staff resources across organisational boundaries and the swift movement of resources to priority areas
- base information to utilise when developing future business strategy

What is the effect of KM in local government?

Staff-a good KM initiative can reduce training time and speed up employee skills. By having access to a knowledge base, staff can get answers to common questions without having to constantly ask others - something that often has a stigma attached to it.

Citizens-benefit from faster resolution, and direct access to the knowledge base. A growing number of people now prefer self-service to live interaction, especially if the implementation is fast and efficient.

Costs-should be reduced, improved quality of service and increased sharing of knowledge across the authority. One large council estimated that around 250 people change their address details every day. Multiplying this by 10, a conservative estimate of the number of times an address is held, involves 2,500 alterations to address data alone every day. Moreover, if all staff involved in maintaining different databases are not informed of customer changes, data becomes out of date and unreliable, which ultimately affects the council's ability to do its job.

Critical success factors

Staff are shifting from a system where being a tower of knowledge is rewarded, to a system where they share their expertise with everybody. Therefore, it is important to plan for the motivation of each team, particularly throughout the implementation.

Failing to see how KM is going to fit in to the rest of the organisation is a mistake. Time and energy must be invested to understand the culture, identify motivations and ensure change happens where needed.

To be successful, the project must have several advocates within the organisation who enthusiastically support and encourage KM and have the clout to make things happen. Projects that don't allocate specific advocates usually don't get off the ground and those with only one are at serious risk, especially if this person transfers, retires or leaves the company, as then the project often loses its momentum. This is a real problem for KM initiatives, due to their ongoing nature. Ideally, a dual sponsorship approach to KM is key, i.e. one advocate at the operational level and one at the executive level. By having a dual track of vision the project is less likely to derail.

A big pitfall is the failure of knowledge management proponents in helping executive management set appropriate expectations. It is important that citizens, employees and management alike know what they can expect from KM, what it will take to get those results and how success will be measured.

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Authorities should remember that in order to remain active it is essential to be knowledge-enabled. As citizens increasingly deal with companies that are knowledge enabled and can quickly and efficiently answer their questions, they will expect that level of service from their local authorities too.

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Useful links:

DfES

<http://www.dfes.gov.uk/index.htm>

Common data, common sense Accounts Commission, 2000

<http://www.audit-scotland.gov.uk/search/ndx/01ar01ac.htm>

ServiceWare Technologies Inc.

<http://www.serviceware.com>

Eight Lessons for KM Success

<http://www.serviceware.com/pdf/successwp.pdf>

IDeA

<http://www.idea.gov.uk>

SOCITIM

<http://www.socitm.gov.uk>