

Knowledge Management

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What is “Knowledge Management?”

There are several commonly accepted definitions;

- a. *Knowledge Management (KM) is a term associated with the processes for the creation, dissemination, testing, integration, and utilisation of knowledge.*
- b. *The collection of processes that govern the creation, dissemination, and leveraging of knowledge to fulfil organisational objectives*
- c. *A business philosophy whereby KM is an emerging set of principles, processes, organisational structures, and technology applications that help people share and leverage their knowledge to meet their business objectives*

Actually, the (KM) term is only a recently refined toolset for managing information. Academic rigor has been matched with what skilled practitioners have been doing with customer-focused information for some years.

The previously information management regime tended to favour the use of “passive” information, usually in published form and the adoption of technology merely converted the formerly printed material into static documents capable of being viewed or perhaps downloaded to the user. The owners/publishers of such information remained largely concerned with document-management, version-control etc.

There are significant problems with the document-view of information, highlighted by the following:

- “Passive” materials (brochures and typical web pages) prevent the user from interrogating (drilling down) to level of information required.
- The information is often out of date before it leaves the printer.

- There are reduced opportunities to create and maintain the information in a “one-time-write” environment, because of preoccupation with the published output.
- Numerous variants may be required to present subsets of the same information in ways meaningful to specific users. For example, an architect may be interested in design, dimensions and broad cost parameters. The maintenance fitter, conversely, is concerned with the functionality, assembly and perhaps replacement of *the same item*.

A more systematic approach to knowledge management requires a flow of information through the stakeholder value chain, encompassing, but largely independent of the type or format of that information. *In this context, all information is assembled in a manner appropriate to the needs of the recipient, subject to suitable access restrictions.*

It must not be assumed that the all information-seekers will use common terminology and for this reason, the effort of producing a glossary, lexicon or cross-reference facility can be invaluable. In many situations, the ability to select products/services by *performance* may be a clear sales benefit. This *parametric* search process is a feature of the better catalogue management software.

There should be a clear distinction between *data* and *information*. Most organizations have an excess of data, often inaccessible to users in the format required to provide the specific information needed.

What Knowledge Management is NOT;

KM is NOT a panacea for all management communications, nor is it a substitute for strategic clarity. The old maxim of "garbage in equals garbage out" is as true today as when the phrase was first coined in the early days of IT. In the simplest terms, sensible and deliverable objectives must be clearly defined along with effective strategies and methodologies for their execution. Failure of any one of these factors will generally be sufficient to derail the desired outcomes, or at least increase the time, cost and disruption factors.

KM is NOT a project that can be handed to the "IT" department OR to the "web designer." Such personnel will surely have an important role in delivering the outcomes, but the overall responsibility of management at all appropriate levels of the organisation cannot be negated.

Structure, functionality & content

Frequently considered to be merely "IT" issues, there is a strong case for considering structure (or architecture), functionality and content as complementary, but separate elements of an effective KM system. Major problems can arise if the strategy for each element is not carefully evolved.

It is likely that many of the stakeholders will be preoccupied with *content* especially if they are involved with technical or professional matters. Actually, while content accuracy is essential, it is probably the least challenging of the three critical elements. With the right management facilities, the content can be changed *on demand* and the "one-time-write" protocol simplifies this process considerably. The responsible author makes changes that are checked and edited for adoption. If "version control" is needed, this is done at this time.

Functionality is another "movable feast" in that it can be modified or extended over time with relative ease as long as the KM strategy was effectively developed in the first place. Unfortunately, a bad (or no) strategy makes progressive functionality much harder and more expensive.

System architecture or structure is often a "given" but even here, clear goals and strategies can at least reduce potential cost and time to acceptable limits. "Bolt-on" applications can be made to work effectively with legacy systems through a "one-way loop" where data from a variety of sources is downloaded on demand and/or on a scheduled data dump basis. The solution lies in defining the characteristics and relationships of data fields and establishing appropriate management processes.

The use of technology

Some years ago, there was a valid concern over the availability (or lack of) appropriate hardware and software for efficient and cost-effective information management. Largely, this is no longer the case. Organisations can still get into trouble by selecting IT solutions that are either too big or too simplistic to answer their requirements. However, the recommended process will usually define the parameters sufficiently to derive practical solutions.

The objective should be to use the most *appropriate* technology relative to the needs and skills of the stakeholders. Our preference is for *browser-driven* systems, but bandwidth, access, ease of use, training etc are critical issues.

The greater danger is a) confusion caused by the proliferation of potential suppliers or b) vested interests and/or bunkered mentality on the part of some stakeholders. Objectivity and logic are the keys to resolving such problems.

Data availability & format

The challenge for most organisations will be the proliferation of information in a variety of formats, locations and varying degrees of accuracy. Even the best-organised organisations may have text and images scattered throughout the world on servers, on CD, in print or in archived artwork.

Although the information may be in analogue formats, conversion to dynamic digital objects is manageable with the right combination of data management tools.

Standards

Knowledge Management is clearly a combination of science and "art." The development of "soft" standards is a welcome development, but ultimately, there is no substitute for clear objectives, realistic strategies, allocation of appropriate resources and effective project-management.

The KM management process

It is common for management to avoid or defer capturing, classifying and cleaning information. This apparently daunting task also leads to a piecemeal approach likely to please no one. The need to produce the right mix of function and content that clearly *demonstrates* value to various stakeholders cannot be overstated.

The actual solution is, as implied throughout this article, to determine clear goals and strategies, ensure

that appropriate resources are applied to manage the project in a series of sequential stages. In this way, real progress will not only be made, but it will be *demonstrable* to the various stakeholders.

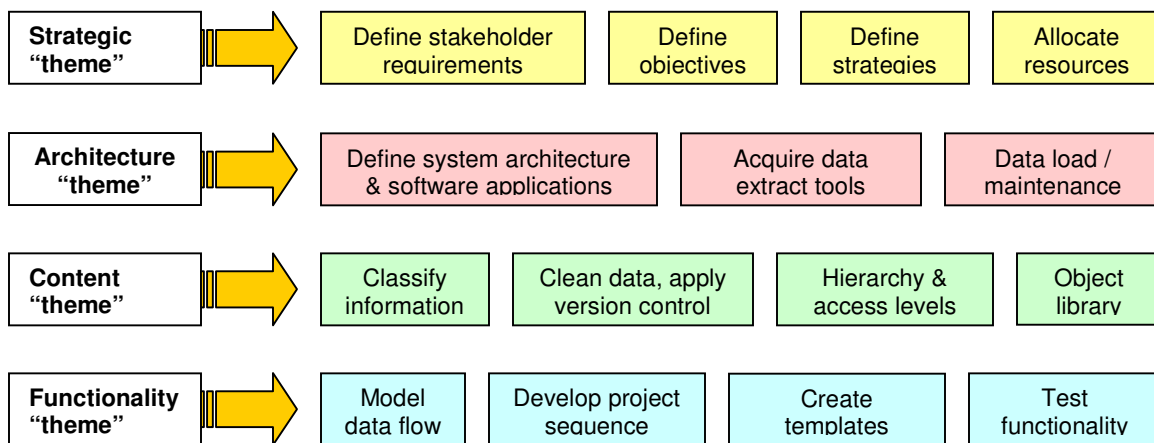
There is no doubt that organisations with appropriate resources can manage KM projects internally. However, realism is the key to on-time, on-budget delivery within acceptable performance parameters. This requires a combination of skill, experience, effective communication and above all - authority.

Without these attributes, the entire project is likely to be fundamentally flawed and the only effective

solution is to allocate authority along with responsibility to a suitably skilled practitioner. While the specific needs of each organisation will vary, there is a fundamental process reasonably common to all KM projects, as illustrated in the table below:

Checklist:
Refer to the diagram below and compare the elements within each "theme" to your own KM processes

Diagram A: Knowledge Management Model



Conclusions

Information should be considered a continuum across the organisation's value chain. Information management then becomes a reasonably simple process – what should be made available to whom, in what format and in what sequence of implementation.

There will be a "critical mass" of function and content that will satisfy an important group of users and this is where the priorities should lie in terms of resource allocation. Adoption of this view will help to resolve the balance between too little and too much information relative to the development time.

For example, if one of the key stakeholder groups needs information on products (or services) derived from several different categories, assigning priority to just one of these categories in the interests of speed or cost might actually be counter-productive. The users may conclude that the information is incomplete, or of little value in its current format. Conversely, a massive level of content may be of limited value without the appropriate functionality to allow users to

select and assemble it in the way best suited to their needs.

Internal stakeholders as well as *external* groups and individuals must be considered. Each will require slightly different views of the information.

Functional departments will perform more efficiently and the members will experience less frustration if they can access *appropriate* information on demand as and when required. Customer service staff will suffer fewer disruptions and their time will be better spent on more productive tasks when agents, resellers, buyers, end-users etc can access *relevant information* they judge to be accurate, in real time and on-demand. Customers *wishing* to speak with a customer-service individual can still do so – entirely as they prefer.

The final judgement regarding the success of a KM process will be its degree of uptake. If it is embraced, it will have succeeded. If not it will have failed.