Success in Knowledge Management: Against the Revolutionary Approach

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Abstract

KM (Knowledge Management) programs are introduced to organizations as a means of making the most of the information and expertise that exists within them. The creation of such programs, and new roles to implement them, can be justified by expected long-term savings made by the exploitation of internal assets and elimination of duplication. They are often initiated by senior executives recognizing a need for change because the organization is missing opportunities by not sharing information or learning from past lessons. This article argues that such programs are not the best way to bring about organizational change and better knowledge management. The author argues that for the core activities of a business to adopt a more open and systematic approach to sharing knowledge, it should be seen as the solution to their problems, and an organic part of the way they do their jobs.

Paper

Background to Knowledge Management

Knowledge Management (KM) is a range of systematic approaches taken to enable organizations to achieve success through making the best use of the knowledge and expertise available to them. From its origins in business studies and information technology, it has become an artefact of the corporate world, discussed at management conferences, in MBA dissertations and in boardrooms. As library staff are seen as less of a necessity in providing published information, so their inherent skills of finding and organizing have been increasingly turned towards internally-generated knowledge and expertise. Yet even successful organizations admit that KM is not perfect in their organization and some have even admitted full-scale failure (Braganza and Möllenkramer, 2002; Akhavan and Pezeshkan, 2014). This paper seeks to explore reasons why this should be by examining case studies from the author's experience and suggestions for an alternative approach which may be more successful.

Knowledge management theory emerged in the 1970s from such differing disciplines as psychology, computer science and economics. Researchers at institutions such as Stanford University and Massachusetts Insitute of Technology had become interested in how the way that organizations were structured could affect their productivity. In response, certain pioneering organizations began to question traditional existing organizational divisions, for example, for a manufacturing company 'research', 'production', 'sales' and 'distribution' and consider instead how certain spheres of expertise could be found across all of them. Researchers started to consider how information, knowledge and expertise flowed through organizations and crucially, whether it was lost during daily business processes. At this stage, before the disciplinary artefact of 'Knowledge Management' was fully fashioned, theorists and early practitioners tended to talk about 'business process re-engineering' and ‘organizational design’. Early-adopting organizations considered nothing less than a total restructure as a means of harnessing their organizational knowledge.

Over the next twenty years more organizations were encouraged to adopt such tactics by a range of motivations. The Hawley Committee (1995), formed from the CEOs of a number of leading UK commercial bodies, pointed to the need for lower costs, better services and greater speed and flexibility (p1) at a time when, in the western world at least, higher labour costs and increased competition from abroad threatened traditional markets. It seemed increasingly important for organizations to harness the knowledge and information which flowed around their organizations and make the best possible use of it, particularly when they were increasingly offering services, rather than making products (of course corporate knowledge is very important in manufacturing, but in service industries, it can make the crucial difference between competitors). Moreover the increasing mobility of the workforce, no longer wed to organizations for life, meant knowledge loss was a real and constant threat. And developments in IT seemed to offer opportunities to make ideas about knowledge processes into a concrete reality, enabling staff to record their expertise into well-structured repositories.

Knowledge Programs

With this is mind, it is hardly surprising that our legacy of knowledge management has been around the introduction of wholesale organizational knowledge programs. Such initiatves are hailed as bringing a revolutionary approach to the progress of everyday business, bringing efficiency and a far better use of corporate assets in its wake. It is usual for organizations referring to themselves as ‘doing’ or ‘introducing’ KM. Programmes may comprise the acquisition of new IT tools, a corporate restructure and, usually, the appointment of new knowledge manager roles. The author herself has held four KM roles which were newly-created as part of new KM initiatives.

Yet, as Orna suggests (2004, p9), there are many different ways of ‘doing’ KM. She outlines activities which might be part of knowledge management:

- Organizational knowledge needs
- Knowledge in employees’ heads
- The activity of maintaining and safeguarding it
- Support given to transform knowledge into information
- Advising on rights and obligations
- Promoting knowledge exchange
- Systems and technical support
- Organizational learning

To this we might add, since Orna wrote this, ‘Use of social media for internal knowledge sharing’.

A KM programme might include some or all of these activities and methods used might vary considerably from business to business, depending on the corporate culture. For example, the author observed a large media organization embrace discussion forums, to the extent that some discipline had to be introduced after participation had become widespread. In a financial services organization, all efforts at interactivity failed, because staff were uncomfortable being seen to use their time to add comments to discussion forums or articles. The knowledge revolution in every organization will vary according to its character.

In the author's experience, they have certain features in common. KM initiatives tend to emerge directly from senior staff, many of whom have acquired ideas from attending conferences or observing their competitors. Senior staff support the development of new roles and, to greater or lesser extent, mandate postholders to introduce better knowledge-sharing, create a corporate memory, encourage better information management and make existing knowledge and expertise more easily findable by current and future staff. The expenditure on staff and technology is warranted by an understanding that lack of knowledge-sharing damages the organization's performance or restricts its potential. As befits a revolutionary approach, great changes are expected from the investment.

Case Studies of Failure

Yet the achievements are not always easy to realise. The following three case studies, taken from the author's direct observations and some informal interviews, illustrate how the hopes of a new knowledge programme can be disappointed. In some cases, the very novelty of the initiative may backfire.

In the first case study, Organization A, a senior role was created with the specific task of writing an organizational Knowledge and Information Strategy and introducing it across each department. The Organization, a research body supporting a traditional and hierarchical establishment, employed a large number of subject experts and other staff involved with the dissemination of knowledge to administrators, policy-makers and the public. Although the strategy was signed off at senior level, attempts to persuade subject experts to adopt it encountered barriers. In most cases, staff, who were on the same grade or higher as the post-holder, either refused to meet them, or pleaded that their position made adopting new means of working impossible. Successful in delivering an extremely high level of work in special circumstances, they saw no reason to share their knowledge more widely or follow any new procedures. When this was addressed at more senior level, it was acknowledged that the special status of these staff meant that it was unlikely they would ever embrace new ways of working. From this point of view, the investment in knowledge management was accepted as not having achieved its aims and the team disappeared in a subsequent restructure.

In the second example, Organization B had already implemented a highly successful information management program over their core data. They saw this achievement as opening the way to expand their influence further by addressing internal unstructured knowledge. They did this by appointing a knowledge manager who, however, had limited influence outside of the immediate department. The investment in the new role was a leap of faith for an organization with limited financial resources. This intensified the disappointment felt when the achievements gained in the first few months were not more impressive. As a result, the initiative was discontinued in favour of investing further in their structured data program.

In Organization C, the knowledge management program was large-scale and structural. A new senior post and subsequently several middle-management positions were appointed and large existing sections of the organization were brought under the senior role's control. Although no new technology was acquired, a major investment was made in developing, populating and training in existing tools. New knowledge-sharing hubs were established and outlets for connecting public-facing staff with the highly-specialist expert staff at the top of the organization. Despite some success, after two years the barriers between different departments remained firmly in place. Departments considered less important were denied access to some of the most valuable knowledge in the organization. Indeed, online knowledge repositories that had been open to many, were subsequently restricted to a very small number of users. Although the knowledge department remained, efforts at breaking down silos were refocused to achievable aims such as better information management processes.

In all three examples, the knowledge team involved some of the newest staff in the organization. Although senior staff and even the Chief Executive in one case had mandated knowledge management, the knowledge facilitators did not have the influence to change the behaviours of core or senior staff. The latter recognised their unique value to the organization and considered themselves exempt from knowledge management initiatives which, to them, were an external activity being 'done' to them. And senior staff were reluctant to challenge them when resistance appeared. When the organizational change which senior staff expected as the outcome of their investment did not happen, knowledge management work was discontinued or refocused.

The key here is that in each case the knowledge managers were seen as outsiders, challenging the way that the most valued core employees did their jobs. The attempt to introduce a revolution in working habits failed, as the company aristocracy remained firmly in place. Rather than implementing a KM program, better results might have been achieved by focusing on how the principles of good knowledge management could enable these key post-holders to do their jobs. The following three case studies illustrate examples of where this alternative approach has achieved results.

Case Studies of Success

In Organization X, a team of dispersed sales staff had to produce feedback as one of their monthly targets. They resented it, feeling it was a box-ticking exercise which brought them less value than the informal communications they shared with colleagues. A knowledge manager developed an online community of practice, structured according to the categories they already used in their work (for example, around sales regions). Once it was seeded with content and 'tame' sales staff were encouraged to adopt it, its value was recognised. Now, instead of a monthly report published in a word document, staff added content as and when they had something to share. Because of the value they gained themselves from the site, they visited it frequently and were encouraged to pass on up-to-the-minute knowledge gained in the field. The success helped establish trust between the knowledge manager and the team and made them more receptive to listening to proposed changes in the future.

In Organization Y, the expansion of a small business and departure of key staff had caused a knowledge vacuum. Remaining staff carried out their work feeling insecure, and without any standards to refer to. As the only repository of organizational knowledge, an increasing load was put on the company principle, herself overworked from an increase in new clients. A knowledge manager working closely with practitioners agreed an established set of procedures based on the best practice carried out by all of them and oversaw their adoption in the normal execution of daily work. Having regularly felt unsure of the correct means of carrying out many tasks, staff felt more secure following the new shared procedures which also removed some of the burden from the company principle. A greater awareness emerged of the need for shared awareness of activity. To this end, new email procedures were established, so staff knew which emails had been actioned, and a flipchart put in place for asynchronous workers to share tasks.

In Organization Z, a large team of librarians supervising an enquiry desk had only a basic manual and their own experience to guide them when dealing with new problems and developments. As the library was open late and at weekends, solutions to problems and updated information were often lost at the end of staff shifts. At best, staff would email the shared enquiries email, but this had a limited memory and no structure for staff to refer to beyond a few days. One team member was given permission to establish a blog to which all staff were encouraged to add during their shift should any new information appear. Staff working only anti-social hours were thus given a means of learning important new information and being able to contribute themselves. Staff found that having found useful information on the blog, they were themselves motivated to update it. It proved to be a valuable tool in passing on information between staff working entirely asynchronously.

Conclusions

In each of these examples, knowledge management activities took place not as part of a program, but as a means of helping key staff do their jobs better. In all three cases they specifically addressed the concerns of staff who might have felt marginalised by being offsite, working non-standard hours or because they felt underskilled. In all three cases improvements were achieved and appreciated by staff. They may not have constituted a change affecting the organization as a whole, but the staff who adopted them were able to work more efficiently and improve the value chain as a whole. In each case the activity demonstrated to staff the value of sharing knowledge. In two of the cases, the successes established a basis for trust with the knowledge managers who were seen as enablers rather than blockers.

The author does not suggest that all top-down activity be abandoned in favour of incremental problem-solving solutions. It is important to establish the principles by which an organization should be managing its knowledge and information and to have the support of senior staff should the principles be breached. And balancing different departmental needs requires an overview of the organization as a whole. But too often policies and strategies are written, stored on the intranet and ignored. Senior staff, even the very ones who initiated the knowledge program, can be less than supportive if the problem involves confronting an influential member of staff or if positive changes are not seen quickly enough. Change is often feared and resented by staff as both a distraction and an implied condemnation to how they currently do their jobs. And staff are bound to resent someone who knows less than they do about the organization’s core business telling them how to do their job.

Instead, the author suggests that policy should be developed as the answer to problems experienced and perceived by staff. It should indeed be agreed at senior level, but understood to apply equally to all employees (and this should be seen to happen). Implementation must be through facilitating and easing employee work and winning their trust by clearing blockages and solving problems. Knowledge managers need to work alongside staff to demonstrate that sharing knowledge and recording it in a way that it can be found again is no threat to their status and benefits themselves and the organization as a whole. Using this approach, the organization may be ready to collaborate on a knowledge management program without even knowing they are already doing it. For the revolution to occur, it must come from within the organization. A palace coup in knowledge management is unlikely to achieve results.

References

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