About Knowledge Management

- People seem to like buzzwords and the higher sounding they are the better.

- I worry that buzzwords are also becoming more prominent in science and technology.

- If a bunch of people focus on knowledge management...
  - And stop taking good care of the actual data...
  - Then our science enterprise will be in deep trouble.

- There needs to be a strong focus on business needs
  - Not prime focus on building systems.
  - Not a focus on late fads.

- But "knowledge management" can also be a bit of fun.

8 pages in this bundle

Roy Jenne
28 June 2001
NOW WE HAVE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

- First we had data management.
- Then they said, “information, not data.”
- During 1996 – 99, it is “knowledge.”
- But “wisdom management” is a more durable idea.

Knowledge ‘czars’ fall from grace

Bagged cement

Cement is an unlikely example of a global knowledge-based industry. It has led the way in Asian restructuring

Knowledge Managers Need Business Savvy

Technology background important, but knowing which information matters is key

Swedes call for emphasis on access to knowledge

“No one wants knowledge management”

Two years ago, I made mean sport of the fledgling “knowledge management” movement. Tongue in cheek, I argued that IT departments should ignore this nascent fad in favor of the more durable notion of “wisdom management.”
Knowledge Managers Need Business Savvy

Technology background important, but knowing which information matters is key

BY BARB COLE-GOMOLSKI
Companies often look for information technology professionals who have business experience as well as technical expertise. But in the relatively new discipline of knowledge management, business know-how comes first.

Knowledge management experts develop plans for sharing corporate information that can include everything from competitive analysis to consulting experience. And although companies initially thought appointing a chief knowledge officer was the best way to launch a knowledge management program, many observers view such projects as team efforts driven by the business units [CW, Jan. 4].

For knowledge management experts, understanding technology is key. But even those promoted through the IT ranks tend to have extensive business backgrounds, observers said, because they need to be able to determine what information is worth sharing.

“Knowledge is not an abstract thing, which is how IT tends to see it,” said Thomas Brailsford, research manager for knowledge leadership at Hallmark Cards Inc. in Kansas City, Mo. Brailsford was plucked from the company’s business research group, which does market and competitive analysis. He said a strong business focus is essential because “knowledge is created in the business units.”

For instance, AT&T Corp. in Bedminster, N.J., tapped Jan Scites, vice president for Internet implementation strategy, as one of its key knowledge leaders. Scites had been heavily involved in the firm’s re-engineering. She said her business background helped her set some basic objectives for the knowledge management initiative, such as cutting training for customer service representatives from three-to-six months down to about 20 days.

Susan Barrow is vice president of knowledge management at Monsanto Co. in St. Louis. But before earning her MBA and moving into her current position six months ago, Barrow was a physician.

Her 10-year internal medicine practice and work as a drug researcher has given her a solid understanding of research and development and product marketing. “You have to have a strategic outlook on the business, and understand what is important for business value,” Barrow said. Her medical training has also helped her to understand “psychological and sociological implications” of knowledge sharing.

A knowledge leader has to be conciliatory, she said.

One recent study of 24 companies by The Delphi Group, a research firm in Boston, found that knowledge managers tended to have at least 10 years of IT or business experience, an entrepreneurial spirit and a keen sense of the business.

When you look at the people in this area, you see a group that has an “almost instinctive sense for the business,” said Tom Koulopoulos, president of Delphi. “That understanding often comes from extensive firsthand experience,” he said.

Jan 25, 1999
How expertise could add up to help for developing countries

Developing countries need a capability in cutting edge scientific research — including mathematics — to handle difficult social, economic and political choices, according to Claude Lobry, director of the International Centre for Pure and Applied Mathematics (CIMPA) in Nice, France.

"The problems of the poor countries — health, malnutrition, pollutants, infrastructure, energy and so on — demand rapid decision-taking," says Lobry. "Their development requires a massive mobilization of scientific knowledge to enable them to say: the following steps may be considered, their implementation will take so long, these will be the costs incurred, and so on.

Researchers must play a key role in setting up committees of experts who are competent and trustworthy, argues Lobry. Only those actively involved in the informal network of international research can suggest individuals who are competent to deal with particular issues. "The most important thing is that they be outstanding in their own field, and therefore have access to the best sources of information."

Lobry says that any significant social issue in a developing country has economic and political implications which affect industrialized countries, and that these countries cannot therefore be left to set up expert committees alone.

"Imagine a country with vast stretches of desert, willing to hire this land out to developed countries as a dump site for their toxic waste," he says. "The safety conditions and a fair remuneration for the service must be discussed. Can the country provide the service expected to put its blind trust in the experts of the country which is buying the service? Obviously not."

The situation would be completely different if this country had a team of efficient physicists, who could draw up an opinion based on the quality of the expertise provided. The South must therefore urgently acquire a research body capable of tapping into the global corpus of scientific knowledge, and it is the duty of the North to assist them in this.

This is even true of mathematics, says Lobry. "Mathematical skills are lost or blunted unless they are maintained by research. Mathematicians must work at their own subject if they are to intervene effectively in other disciplines."

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Swedes call for emphasis on access to knowledge

[London] Unesco is being prompted by Sweden's national commission for the UN agency to play a more proactive role in the World Conference on Science by putting its weight behind calls for full public access to scientific knowledge. The Swedish commission would also like to see social scientists play a greater role at the Budapest conference than is currently planned.

Public access to knowledge, women in science, and investment in Third World universities have emerged as the three priority areas for Sweden's delegation to next month's conference. Swedish delegates are expected to press Unesco to end its position of neutrality and "take a stand" by supporting the interests of the developing world.

Most of Unesco's member countries are in the developing world, says Anders Falk, general secretary of the national commission. "Unesco should support them," he adds. For example, he says, "they need access to knowledge. Without this, they will never be able to develop." Unesco, says Falk, should oppose what he calls the "increasing privatization of knowledge."

Sweden has been at the forefront of developed countries in demanding that investment in basic research and higher education should be considered integral to the process of development. The country has one of the largest overseas research budgets, concentrating its aid on research activities in east and southern Africa.

Swedish strategy for the Budapest conference has been agreed after three preparatory meetings, the last of which took place last week at Uppsala. The conference has generated considerable controversy, says Falk. Many delegates attending the preparatory meetings have voiced criticisms of the conference programme and of draft versions of the two final documents — a declaration and an 'agenda for action' — that the conference will be asked to adopt. One Swedish scientist called the drafts "toothless."

Another senior scientist says he will not attend the Budapest meeting because he is not convinced that his time there would be usefully spent. "I am hesitating in saying this because I know that many people in developing countries have put a lot of effort in preparing for this conference, and rate Unesco highly. But there will be too many people [at the meeting], and too much talk," Falk says.

Falk says that few will disagree with the aims and objectives of the draft declaration. "But we don't know who will be responsible for implementing the recommendations," he says. The agenda for action, according to Falk, should have clear lines of responsibility.

Falk is also concerned that the conference programme could become dominated by natural scientists, even though Unesco had been presented with a rare opportunity to put together a "forward-looking" programme by bringing together natural scientists with social scientists and academics from the liberal arts.

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Nobel laureates lined up for US delegation

[Washingt] A pair of Nobel laureates, President Bill Clinton's science adviser, the president of the National Academy of Sciences, two immediate past presidents of the American Association for the Advancement of Science (AAAS), and a student from Illinois Math and Science Academy, are among a planned 20-strong US delegation to the World Conference on Science.

The list has been put together by the National Academy of Sciences, the main US contact point with the International Council for Science (ICSU) which is organizing the meeting with Unesco.

Although the members of the delegation have yet to be formally approved by the State Department, academy officials expect little change to the final list. This will be headed by Bruce Alberts, the president of the academy, and include Nobel laureates: F. Sherwood Rowland of the University of California, Irvine, and Leon Lederman, director emeritus of the Fermi National Accelerator Centre. Neal Lane, the president's science adviser and head of the Office of Science and Technology Policy, will be accompanied by two of his staff members.

The delegation will include James Lobschenko, AAAS president in 1997, and the AAAS immediate past president M. R. C. Greenwood. Also present will be Maxine Singer, president of the Carnegie Institute of Washington, and Keith Winston, a student from Illinois.
Why no one wants knowledge management

Michael Schrage

Two years ago, I made mean sport of the fledgling “knowledge management” movement. Tongue in cheek, I argued that IT departments should ignore this nascent fad in favor of the more durable notion of “wisdom management.”

After all, I contended, “shouldn’t your company try to train wise leaders rather than just knowledgeable managers?”

Such mild-mannered mockery wasn’t well received. Apparently, there were large segments of the IT community that took the business potential of knowledge management seriously. Very seriously.

Too bad. This is the snooty, I-told-you-so column. Turns out these are lean times for knowledge management. Apparently, knowledge management practices at several major firms — you would know the names and initials — have radically underperformed expectations.

Yes, there are a couple slick knowledge management publications. Good luck to them. But, somehow, I don’t think someone such as IDG Books Worldwide is going to make a mint publishing Knowledge Management for Dummies.

So what’s the problem? Why isn’t knowledge management succeeding totally in quality management and re-engineering as the “wave of the future”? Don’t organizations care about managing knowledge? Shouldn’t IT be the enterprise champion for profitably converting data into information into knowledge?

Let’s answer those questions in reverse order: No. Not really. Because, just like artificial intelligence methodologies, nobody has figured out how to build a sustained profitable business case around it. There’s a big difference between the business of knowledge management and the knowledge management of business.

Knowledge management isn’t catching on in America — and won’t in the near future — because most organizations aren’t prepared to pay a premium for a methodology that they feel they should be doing anyway. There’s no Bill Gates or Larry Ellison of expert systems; yet, who doubts that expert systems methodologies have effectively insinuated into the mainstream of mission-critical software? Artificial intelligence is a nifty technology but a lousy business platform.

Similarly, knowledge management is a perfectly decent set of methodologies that simply can’t command top dollar in an increasingly competitive marketplace. Consider: It would make excellent sense for virtually all Fortune 1,000 companies to have therapists and facilitators employed full time to help ameliorate the interpersonal excessiveness and friction of their managed minions.

But, frankly, these enterprises expect their managers to handle those tasks. Does that mean therapy and facilitation are without value? Of course not. But McKinsey & Co. and Andersen Consulting haven’t gotten rich selling themselves as therapists and facilitators (even though that’s what they often do). That isn’t what firms pay for.

And they aren’t going to pay for knowledge management. Like therapy and facilitation, knowledge management is something managers are expected to manage. Let’s get meta: the knowledge managing knowledge management requires organizations to change how they behave rather than what they think. That isn’t a subtle distinction.

The truth about knowledge management is that the quality of knowledge always matters less than the quality of management. The reason knowledge management isn’t catching on as a business is that most organizations know that knowledge — or the lack thereof — isn’t their real problem or their real opportunity.

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Feds ponder CKO role

BY DIANE FRANK

While agencies begin to embrace the concept of knowledge management to improve federal employees' access to information, observers in and out of government disagree on the role of the chief knowledge officer, a position that has been created to lead the charge into this new territory.

In the past month, two agencies have created positions for a CKO, a "knowledge management czar" who will report directly to or work beside the chief information officer. Although some federal officials believe the position itself may not be needed, most agree there is a need to focus agencywide knowledge management efforts.

"Anything that can focus the idea of using information to make decisions will help," said Kurt Molhom, administrator of the Defense Technical Information Center at the Defense Information Systems Agency. "It may be a change of semantics, but if a change of semantics makes people think about it, that's good."

On the same level as the CIO, she reports directly to GSA administrator David Barram and is responsible for coordinating and managing all knowledge management efforts between the information technology and human resources groups at GSA. The Coast Guard also is looking for a CKO and put out a position announcement last month. The Coast Guard CKO will be under the CIO, heading up the new Office of Knowledge Management and Information, and will be responsible for finding new ways to use IT acquisitions.

GSA had several individual programs running in many of the regional offices throughout the agency to test the idea of knowledge management, said Ann Gladys, director of the IT Solutions Development Center and Acquisitions Division at GSA's Federal Technology Service in San Diego.

The success of those pilots showed the potential of what could be done with knowledge management, but now GSA as a whole can benefit from a single leader for new initiatives, Gladys said.

Remez said after her appointment that much of what she will be doing in her first few months on the job will be focusing on changing the culture at GSA to accept and appreciate what knowledge management can do for the agency. That will include encouraging and rewarding innovation and new processes and meeting personally with employees across the country rather than sending out memos, she said.

The Coast Guard CKO also will take on the same cultural challenge to motivate managers to "incorporate vision, strategic planning and elements of quality management into the full range of the organization's activities; encouraging creative thinking and innovation; influencing others toward a spirit of service; and

One of the CKO's main functions may be getting people to understand the concept that "the real value of knowledge is sharing it."

— Kathy Adams
Assistant deputy commissioner for systems
Social Security Administration

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designing and implementing new or cutting-edge programs/processes," according to the position announcement.

"The function of the CKO is crucial to the success of the nation's transportation system in an age of growth, increasing complexity and decentralization," the announcement said.

But the decision by GSA and the Coast Guard to make the CKO a position closely linked to the CIO may cause problems for the agencies by confusing priorities and employees, experts said.

Al Pesachowitz, CIO at the Environmental Protection Agency, agreed. Agencies are spending a lot more time collecting information rather than analyzing and using it, he said. That makes it difficult for agencies to keep track of what information they have at hand. "Having a chief knowledge officer is important in terms of trying to capture knowledge so [that] we don't have to re-create it," Pesachowitz said.

Kathy Adams, assistant deputy commissioner for systems at the Social Security Administration, said agency employees need to learn how knowledge management can help them in their jobs and help their agency, and a CKO can direct that effort.

The real key to knowledge management is not using a tool but getting people to understand what knowledge management is and what they can do with it, Adams said. One of the CKO's main functions may be getting people to understand the concept that "the real value of knowledge is in sharing it," she said.

The Delphi Group, a Boston-based consulting firm, recently did a survey of knowledge workers in multiple industries about how they defined knowledge management. The survey included questions about the role of the CKO.

One thing that came through in the survey is that GSAs and the Coast Guard's approach is almost the opposite of what organizations have found to work for their employees, said Richard DiLondo, director of international operations at Delphi.

"A bad place for a chief knowledge officer to be is in the same place or same person as a CIO," DiLondo said. "Knowledge management is only peripherally related to technology. Knowledge management relates to the culture of an organization; technology isn't the focus."

But the EPA's Pesachowitz said he thought GSA chose a good organization by having an executive focused on knowledge management separate from but working with the CIO.

In such a situation, the CKO can bring a focus on knowledge management that otherwise would get lost in the CIO office, where employees are so busy with issues such as the Year 2000, security, privacy and program management. "In my time in government, I haven't seen it slow down and I don't think it's going to," he said.

Elana Varon contributed to this article.
Knowledge ‘czars’ fall from grace

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of knowledge sharing happens within business units. “So having a CKO sends out the wrong message,” said Delphi President Tom Kouloupooulos.

Instead, Kouloupooulos said, he sees many companies creating a team that helps each business unit understand the benefits of sharing knowledge. Spreading the responsibility for knowledge management also combats the cultural barriers involved in getting people to share information, he said.

“It’s too difficult to start [knowledge management] at the enterprise level,” said Jan Scites, vice president for Internet implementation strategy at AT&T Corp. in Bedminster, N.J. The company began its knowledge management efforts in its customer care department and has since rolled out similar applications. “I don’t think we’ll ever have a CKO,” Scites said.

Similarly, The Mutual Group, an insurance holding company in Waterloo, Ontario, has a vice president who oversees the knowledge management team, two knowledge architects and more than 20 team members from IT and the business units.

This organization works because “there is a tendency for the [knowledge management] effort to lose momentum when we get into the trenches,” said Betsy Lewis-Chan (betsy.lewischan@themutualgroup.com), a Mutual Group knowledge architect.

It’s not so much that people don’t want to share information, though there is some of that, she said. The resistance comes from the fact that “people are already so busy,” she said. Sharing knowledge may mean changing the way they work or adding an extra step to the process to enter some data into a corporate repository or publish it to a Web site.

Because workers are already strapped for time, the knowledge management team at Mutual Group sells them on the idea that the knowledge management effort will save them time. “It may mean that they can spend less time looking for information or read fewer E-mails, but the benefit is efficiency,” Lewis-Chan said.

Participants in the Delphi study also said that, for many companies, knowledge management positions were seen as an interim step designed to bring knowledge management to critical mass — essentially a statement of corporate priorities.

Sharon Oriel, director of intellectual asset management at Dow Chemical Co. in Midland, Mich., said that over time, knowledge management will become part of the corporate culture. “It’s kind of like safety was years ago,” Oriel said. “It used to be that you had a safety person in every department, but now safety is expected and is a condition of employment.”