

How Organizations Are Using KM



What's Inside This Chapter

In this chapter, you'll learn

- ▶ Why organizations need to manage knowledge
- ▶ What elements make up successful KM systems
- ▶ How your organization can support a KM initiative.

Organizations are deciding to use KM to discover, classify, and validate the knowledge of their employees in answer to essential business needs, such as

- ▶ retention of the expertise and wisdom of personnel
- ▶ acceleration of learning and implementation of new standards, processes, and information
- ▶ increased profits from eliminating duplication of efforts and improving existing processes

- ▶ improvement of ability to make leadership decisions based on historical and practical experiences
- ▶ increased customer satisfaction from more efficient processes and consistency of information they receive from customer service representatives
- ▶ shortened product development time from building on prior successes
- ▶ collaboration on projects by team members in distant locations.

These business needs are a few of the reasons why organizations may realize they have to discover and organize the knowledge of their employees. These reasons often are discovered through a single query or request that prompts the question, “Why isn’t this information readily available?” That was precisely the case in the situation encountered by the U.S. Army’s Combined Joint Task Force 76.

This example from the August 2008 Knowledge Management Section report of the U.S. Department of the Army outlines the task force’s knowledge-sharing issue and how KM was used to improve operations.



Think About This

The need for sharing knowledge is not isolated to business and industry. Government agencies, nonprofit organizations, universities, and even the military are discovering the benefits of organizing and coordinating knowledge assets to reduce duplication, avoid access to outdated information, and shorten the time of search and retrieve functions.

Case Study: U.S. Combined Joint Task Force 76

The U.S. Combined Joint Task Force 76 was working in Afghanistan during Operation Enduring Freedom in 2006. The task force report notes that the need for a KM initiative became clear when the commanding general made the following request: “I want to know how many missions over the last 30 days were conducted by the 3d Brigade Combat Team, and how many utilized aviation assets.”

To answer that request, the task force staff had to search folders manually and make calls to subordinate units. It was a time-consuming process that resulted in a slow and inexact response. According to the report, that was no isolated incident.

The task force KM office examined the procedures used to coordinate information on missions and documented a number of problems, including the following:

- ▶ Each subordinate unit had different methods for tracking mission information such as that requested by the general, with a majority using static spreadsheets.
- ▶ When task force and subordinate staff sections were assigned a mission, each section planned the same mission in different ways.
- ▶ When preparing reports for general officers, operations personnel from different staff sections didn't have access to information from the other sections that was necessary to create a vision of the overall operation.
- ▶ There was no centralized repository for operations information. Much of the information existed only in individual email messages. For example, personnel in subordinate units attached electronic slide presentations to emails they sent to the chief of operations. These were then forwarded to personnel in appropriate staff sections and stored on individual computer stations.
- ▶ On average, supplying the information requested about mission status took 40 hours and involved manual searches by six subordinate units.

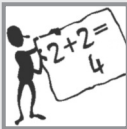
These examples demonstrated that the information-handling process was inefficient, cumbersome, and filled with opportunities for mistakes and breakdowns.

The solution that was developed reduced to 30 seconds the time required to locate the mission-specific information requested. (The specific design process used to create this KM system for the task force is described in more detail in chapter 6.) The solution included the following factors:

- A single format for entering report information. Using this reporting template to enter information directly into the database replaced the

enced employees, presented in formats that match user preferences. These formats range from paper-based file-and-folder setups to combinations of sophisticated software, and they often are built on existing structures, such as additions to the company's current intranet.

- ▶ The systems include step-by-step procedures for compiling, confirming, circulating, and updating organizational knowledge.
- ▶ Job descriptions are created for every member of the KM system development team to ensure that there is accountability for work done at each of the five stages of the KM development initiative.
- ▶ Where applicable, technology such as specialized software, electronic communication systems, and use of the organization's intranet makes the accumulated and archived knowledge available to those who need it in distant locations. (Although high-tech tools are not prerequisites for creating a useful KM system, most organizations that have multiple locations find such tools to be necessary components.)
- ▶ To capture the knowledge and expertise of retiring employees, organizations use formal documentation, video and audio recordings, one-on-one interviews, and succession-focused mentoring.
- ▶ The systems establish "gathering places" such as online communities of practice or collaborative workspaces where current employees can share knowledge and discuss ongoing projects.
- ▶ The organizations work toward creating cultures of knowledge sharing through various incentives, such as rewarding contributions to the knowledge base, spotlighting executive personnel's use of the knowledge base, and recognizing innovations developed from information gathered through the KM system.
- ▶ The systems are updated continually and are revised and upgraded to answer new challenges that occur within the organization.



Basic Rule 2

Knowledge management systems must engage every department in the organization.

- ▶ Request input from the information technology department early in the process. At some point, the KM system will require computer-based tools and access to make it grow. Planning with that growth in mind ensures that the selected input and user formats will make the eventual transition seamless.
- ▶ Start small and expand incrementally. Introducing your KM program on too broad a basis will make inevitable small missteps at rollout appear disastrous.
- ▶ Begin in an area where quick wins are possible—for example, put a troubleshooting guide online for one of the most common equipment or process problems in the company. This is the type of victory that affects the bottom line directly and thus gains favorable attention from management and from employees looking for ways to contribute to the organization's success. Promoting these victories will build enthusiasm for the KM system as a whole.



Think About This

Don't underestimate the importance of small initial projects to draw attention to your knowledge management initiative. These can be more than just quick victories; they can serve as illustrations of KM to those who don't fully understand the concept and examples of what KM can accomplish for those who aren't yet convinced of its merit.

- ▶ At the earliest opportunity, post questions needing answers that will help you discover subject matter experts who may have been missed when the development team first identified the existing and valuable knowledge to be gathered and made accessible to the organization. The broader and deeper the knowledge base, the more productive the KM system.
- ▶ Recruit a group of key employees to serve as champions and spokespersons for the KM initiative. They can help other employees understand the benefits of the KM system and help dispel misconceptions



Getting It Done

Think about and answer these questions:

1. Who are potential champions for knowledge management in your organization?
2. What departments should be represented on the KM steering committee?
3. What knowledge does this system need to provide to members of the organization?
4. Who are some of the subject matter experts in the organization?
5. What goals will the successful implementation of this program accomplish?