

Much is made of the role of knowledge management (KM) in supporting innovation within organisations. This is also closely tied in with enhancing the activities of 'knowledge workers' in dynamic organisations such as consulting firms.

While KM is undoubtedly important for innovation, this aspect has somewhat overtaken another focus of KM: ensuring consistency. In many organisations, it is consistency that must be the key driving factor, rather than innovation.

This briefing will explore and contrast these two facets of KM: innovation and consistency.

KM for innovation

It is widely recognised that the pace of the marketplace has increased considerably over the last decade. In this highly competitive environment, organisations must innovate their products, services and practices in order to survive and prosper.

Knowledge management can help to drive and support innovation within organisations, through a wide variety of approaches and techniques.

For example, 'lateral thinking' and 'brainstorming' techniques (and other similar approaches) can be used very effectively in group settings to improve decision making and enhance creativity.

Narrative techniques, complexity theory (and the like) can be used to gain a better understanding of how organisations actually operate in a changing business environment.

Finally, communities of practice, 'personal KM' tools and collaborative environments can help to support teams as they explore new ideas and approaches.

KM for consistency

In many ways, this is treated as the 'poorer cousin' of knowledge management, and yet it is every bit as important as the focus on innovation.

Knowledge management for consistency focuses on ensuring the repeatability of business activities, and the continuity of services in the face of a changing workforce and environment.

For example, customer service is an area that is greatly in need of KM for consistency. The same advice must be given by all staff, even between branches in different locations.

In this situation, a sensible approach is to focus on capturing the knowledge, and publishing it in a format that can easily (and quickly) be used by staff.

Organisations that have a mandated or legislated function (such as many government agencies) also need to ensure they can continue to provide this service, even when key staff retire.

This issue can be managed through mentoring or skills transfer activities. It may also be appropriate to conduct 'exit interviews' with key staff.

In both cases, the focus of KM activities is on ensuring continuity and consistency, rather than innovation and change.

Managing both

Interestingly, in many organisations there is a need to address both consistency and innovation, with each appropriate in specific areas of the business.

Recognising this can be critical, as the organisation otherwise risks applying a global approach to KM which may be in conflict with the needs of specific business units.

For example, within a large insurance firm, the development of new products may benefit from an emphasis on innovation, in order to compete more effectively with the many other market players.

Simultaneously, the provision of customer service requires a high degree of consistency and repeatability, in order to protect against legal risk and customer relations issues.

In practice, organisations must learn whether innovation or consistency is appropriate, and set the approach for each business unit accordingly. In this way, some areas of the business are given the freedom to 'break the rules', while others are tightly managed.