KM COLUMN

Developing a knowledge management strategy

Organisations are facing ever-increasing challenges, brought on by marketplace pressures or the nature of the workplace.

Many organisations are now looking to knowledge management (KM) to address these challenges. Such initiatives are often started with the development of a *knowledge management strategy*.

To be successful, a KM strategy must do more than just outline high-level goals such as 'become a knowledge-enabled organisation'.

Instead, the strategy must identify the key needs and issues within the organisation, and provide a framework for addressing these.

This article provides an approach for developing a KM strategy that focuses strongly on an initial *needs analysis*.

Taking this approach ensures that any activities and initiatives are firmly grounded in the real needs and challenges confronting the organisation.

The need for knowledge management

There are a number of common situations that are widely recognised as benefiting from knowledge management approaches.

While they are not the only issues that can be tackled with KM techniques, it is useful to explore a number of these situations in order to provide a context for the development of a KM strategy.

Beyond these typical situations, each organisation will have unique issues and problems to overcome.

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A KM strategy must address the real needs and issues

Call centres

Call centres have increasingly become the main 'public face' for many organisations. This role is made more challenging by the expectations of customers that they can get the answers they need within minutes of ringing up.

Other challenges confront call centres, including

- high-pressure, closely-monitored environment
- high staff turnover
- costly and lengthy training for new staff

In this environment, the need for knowledge management is clear and immediate. Failure to address these issues impacts upon sales, public reputation or legal exposure.

For more on this, see the article *Knowledge management for call centres*.

Front-line staff

Beyond the call centre, many organisations have a wide range of front-line staff who interact with customers or members of the public.

They may operate in the field, such as sales staff or maintenance crews; or be located at branches or behind front-desks.

In large organisations, these front-line staff are often very dispersed geographically, with limited communication channels to head office. Typically, there are also few mechanisms for sharing information between staff working in the same business area but different locations.

The challenge in the front-line environment is to ensure consistency, accuracy and repeatability.

For more on this, see the article *Knowledge management for front-line staff*.

Business managers

The volume of information available to business management has increased greatly. Known as 'information overload' or 'infoglut', the challenge is now to filter out the key information needed to support business decisions.

The pace of organisational change is also increasing, as are the demands on the 'people skills' of management staff.

In this environment, there is a need for sound *decision making*. These decisions are enabled by accurate, complete and relevant information.

Knowledge management can play a key role in supporting the information needs of management staff. It can also assist with the mentoring and coaching skills needed by modern managers.

The loss of key staff can have a major impact

Aging workforce

The public sector is particularly confronted by the impacts of an aging workforce. Increasingly, private sector organisations are also recognising that this issue needs to be addressed if the continuity of business operations are to be maintained.

Long-serving staff have a depth of knowledge that is relied upon by other staff, particularly in environments where little effort has been put into capturing or managing knowledge at an organisational level.

In this situation, the loss of these key staff can have a major impact upon the level of knowledge within the organisation.

Knowledge management can assist by putting in place a structured mechanism for capturing or transferring this knowledge when staff retire.

Supporting innovation

Many organisations have now recognised the importance of innovation in ensuring long-term growth (and even survival).

This is particularly true in fast-moving industry sectors such as IT, consulting, telecommunications and pharmaceuticals.

Most organisations, however, are constructed to ensure consistency, repeatability and efficiency of current processes and products. Innovation is does not tend to sit comfortably with this type of focus, and organisations often need to look to unfamiliar techniques to encourage and drive innovation.

There has been considerable work in the knowledge management field regarding the process of innovation, and how to nurture it in a business environment.

Organisational environment

Every organisation has a unique environment, defined by factors such as:

- purpose and activities of the organisation
- overall strategic direction
- organisational culture
- size of the organisation
- geographic spread
- staff skills and experience
- organisational history
- available resources
- marketplace factors

For this reason, each organisation has a unique set of needs and issues to be addressed by knowledge management.

It is easy to jump into 'solutions mode', recommending approaches such as communities of practice, storytelling, content management systems, and much more.

While these approaches may have widespread success in other organisations, they will only succeed in the current environment if they meet actual staff needs.

In practice, organisations are littered with well-meaning but poorly targeted knowledge management activities. In many cases, these failed because they simply didn't address a clear, concrete and *imperative* problem within the organisation.

This is now recognised as one of the 'critical success factors' for knowledge management: identify the needs within the organisation, and then design the activities accordingly.

Avoid jumping directly into 'solutions mode'
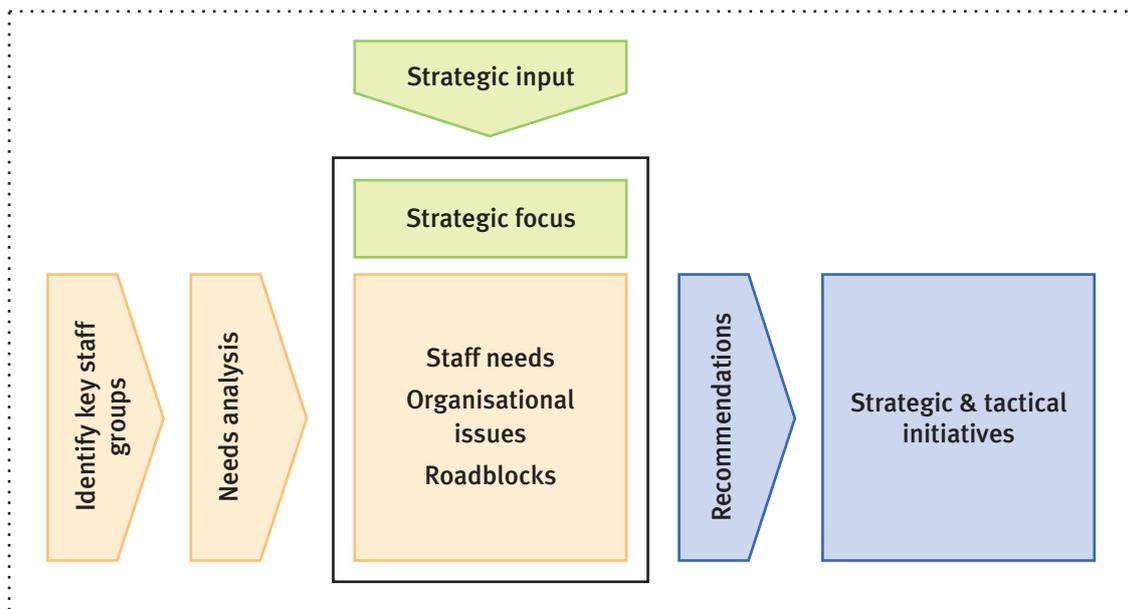
Developing a knowledge management strategy

Developing a KM strategy

There are many approaches for developing a knowledge management strategy, each supported by a holistic model of KM processes.

These can be classified into two main approaches:

- Top-down

  The overall strategic direction of the organisation is used to identify the focus of the knowledge management initiative. This is reflected in a series of activities designed to meet this broad goal.

- Bottom-up

  Research is conducted into the activities of staff involved in key business processes. The findings of this research highlights key staff needs and issues, which are then tackled through a range of knowledge management initiatives.

Each of these approaches has its strengths, and in practice, a success KM programme must encompass both.

This article presents a model that focuses strongly on the needs analysis activities with staff, to drive a primarily bottom-up strategy, as follows:

1. Identify the key staff groups within the organisation. These groups deliver the greatest business value, or are involved in the most important business activities.

2. Conduct comprehensive and holistic needs analysis activities with selected staff groups, to identify key needs and issues.

3. Supplement this research with input from senior management and organisational strategy documents, to determine an overall strategic focus.

4. Based on these findings, develop recommendations for addressing the issues and needs identified.

5. Implement a series of strategic and tactical initiatives, based on the recommendations. These will select suitable knowledge management techniques and approaches.

Benefits of this approach

Historically, many knowledge management strategies have focused solely on the top-down approach, identifying high-level objectives such as 'become a knowledge-enabled organisation'.

With little understanding, of the key issues and needs of staff throughout the organisation, these initiatives found it difficult to engage staff in the required cultural and process changes.

As a result, many of these initiatives had little long-term impact on the organisation, despite initial efforts.

Recognising these issues, this approach focuses much more strongly on the initial needs analysis activities.

The approach to developing a KM strategy outlined in this article provides a number of major benefits:

Holistic

The focus on needs analysis will identify a wide range of issues and requirements. Some will be organisation-wide, while others will be specific to individual business units or job roles.

The use of a range of needs analysis techniques will identify:

- cultural issues
- key business needs
- duplication of effort
- inconsistencies in practices
- inefficiencies in business processes
- opportunities for improved policies or procedures
- major business risks
- and much more…

Solution-independent

The approach used to develop the knowledge management strategy makes no assumptions about the solutions that might be implemented.

As such, the approach is independent of any technologies implemented, or knowledge management techniques applied.

Instead, the approach is to identify the need, and then determine the solution.

Talking with staff is always enlightening

Simple

The use of well-tested needs analysis techniques gives confidence that the true issues in the organisation will be identified.

In practice, these simply 'fall out' of the research activities, with the key strategic and tactical recommendations becoming obvious in most cases.

This simplicity makes the process easy to implement, and ensures that the findings and recommendations are well-understood throughout the organisation.

Efficient

A modest amount of initial research will be sufficient to identify the most crucial problems within the organisation. These can then be tackled with suitable activities and initiatives.

Once this first round of projects have delivered tangible business benefits, additional targeted research can be used to identify further issues to be addressed.

This 'iterative' approach can then be repeated, ensuring that business improvements are seen even as the next round of research is initiated.

Targets resources

There are many 'good ideas' that can be drawn from the field of knowledge management. The challenge is to identify those approaches that will have the greatest impact upon the organisation.

By starting with the needs analysis, approaches can be targeted to address the most critical issues, or to deliver the greatest business benefits.

Target the critical issues with the KM strategy

Identifying key staff groups

The first step in the process is to identify the key staff groups in the organisation. The key staff are typically those directly involved in the most important business activities.

In general, the key staff groups are more likely to be those at the front-line, rather than managers or administrative staff. This will, of course, depend on the nature and structure of the organisation.

Common staff groups involve:

- front-line staff
- call centre staff
- field workers
- researchers
- clinical staff
- production workers
- administrative and support staff
- managers (senior, line)
- IT staff

Each of these groups will have specific needs and issues, as well as those in common with the organisation as a whole.

By targeting the key staff groups, the extent to which the needs vary across the organisation can be identified, and the KM strategy developed accordingly.

Needs analysis techniques are drawn from many fields

Needs analysis techniques

There are a wide range of need analysis techniques, drawn from fields such as knowledge management, user-centred design, ethnography and anthropology.

Techniques include:

- facilitated discussions
- focus groups
- surveys
- staff interviews
- workplace observation
- contextual inquiry
- task analysis

In practice, more than one technique should be used with a selected group of staff, to ensure that a complete picture is built up.

Each of the techniques are briefly described in the sections below.

Facilitated discussions

There are a wide range of facilitated discussion techniques that can be used to explore issues with targeted staff groups. These are most commonly used with management, consultants, and other staff comfortable with these types of meetings.

Techniques such as 'affinity diagrams' can be used to provide structure to the discussions, and to capture the issues identified.

In many cases, facilitated discussions are used as the primary mechanism for gaining the strategic input required for the development of the KM strategy.

Focus groups

These are a specific, and widely-used, form of facilitated discussions that focus on exploring a topic within a group setting.

Often used as a way of gathering input from larger numbers of stakeholders, focus groups must be run carefully if they are to generate meaningful results.

Focus group are best used to explore current issues and problems, rather than to discuss future 'wish-lists' of knowledge management approaches.

Focus groups should always be used in conjunction with techniques such as staff interviews and contextual inquiry, to ensure that the results are meaningful.

Surveys

The use of surveys is widespread, and they are a very efficient way of gaining input from a large number of staff throughout an organisation.

In practice, surveys are best used to gather staff opinions, rather than specific information on which to base decisions.

Care must also be taken when developing the survey questions, and analysing the results.

Survey results must always be supported with the use of other techniques, to provide confidence in the findings.

Interviews are very effective at identifying staff needs

Staff interviews

One-on-one interviews are one of the most effective and often used techniques for identifying staff needs and issues.

For more on applying these as part of a knowledge management project, see the following two articles:

- *Stakeholder interviews as simple knowledge mapping*
- *Selecting staff for stakeholder interviews*

Workplace observation

This involves going 'out into the field' to observe the activities of staff, and the environment in which they work.

Workplace observation is particularly effective in environments such as call centres, manufacturing areas, field working, or on-the-road staff.

It is a very holistic technique that will identify patterns of work and environment issues

that are impossible to gather using techniques such as surveys or focus groups.

Contextual inquiry

This is a combination of staff interviews and workplace observation that involves exploring issues with a staff person, while situated within their normal working environment.

By conducting the interview 'in context', it becomes possible to see the resources used by staff when conducting work activities.

The interviewer can also ask the staff person to show them how they complete specific activities, for example, showing how they find a piece of information on the intranet.

This technique is very effective at identifying issues with currently-available information sources and tools.

Task analysis

Not all activities within an organisation are of equal value. Key business tasks should be identified, and investigated to gain an understanding of the steps involved, and the knowledge required at each step.

The existing sources of the knowledge can then be identified, along with the key issues and roadblocks impacting upon the effectiveness and efficiency of the task.

This type of research will identify mechanisms for both improving the task itself, as well as indicating how to improve the provision of knowledge to those involved in completing the task.

Supplement the needs analysis with a strategic focus

Strategic input

While the needs analysis activities focused on the 'bottom-up' aspects of the KM project, the overall strategic focus must also be identified.

This strategic focus then guides the knowledge management strategy, providing a framework for the selection and prioritisation of individual projects and activities.

In this way, both the bottom-up and top-down aspects of the knowledge management strategy are addressed.

There are a number of sources of input that can be drawn upon when determining the strategic focus, including:

- Senior management involvement, via interviews, facilitated discussions, or other interactions.

- Organisational strategy documents, such as the corporate plan or annual report.

- Results of other strategic research projects, such as 'staff satisfaction surveys'.

- External market research.

- Industry 'best practices', and other reports drawn from relevant industry or sector bodies.

These inputs can then be synthesised into a strategic focus for the knowledge management initiatives.

Use corporate documents as a key strategic input

Common findings

The needs analysis and strategic input will highlight a broad range of issues and needs throughout the organisation.

In past projects, we have identified issues such as:

- difficulty in finding key corporate information

- inconsistent and unstructured approach to information management

- ineffective dissemination of corporate and regional news

- reliance on 'rumour' and 'gossip' as the key sources of organisational news

- lack of knowledge sharing between related business units

- difficulties in determining and disseminating 'best practices'

- inconsistency in advice given by call centre and front-line staff

- over reliance on long-service members of staff as sources of knowledge

- cultural barriers between head office and regional staff

- duplication of effort between regions

- roadblocks between policy development and programme implementation

These are just a small sampling of possible findings, to provide an idea of the types of issues that will often drive the implementation of a knowledge management strategy.

Acting on the findings

With an in-depth understanding of the problems, issues and needs within the organisation, it is then possible to meaningfully determine appropriate strategies for addressing them.

This will undoubtedly include a range of both strategic (long-term) and tactical (short-term) initiatives.

Depending on the issues identified, these might include:

- improving the corporate intranet
- formalising communities of practice
- implementing coaching and mentoring programmes
- improving document and records management
- facilitating skills transfer from retiring staff
- capturing staff knowledge in a documented form
- improving policies and procedures
- implementing new learning approaches, including e-learning
- enhancing the corporate staff directory
- implementing team collaboration tools and processes
- establishing after-action review processes

- formalising the role of 'knowledge brokers' within the organisation

These are just a small cross-section of the many possible approaches that can be taken to knowledge management.

As highlighted throughout this article, only the needs analysis activities allow a meaningful selection to be made between these different approaches.

In practice, each organisation will apply a unique mix of short-term 'quick wins' and longer-term projects to meet knowledge management needs.

Conclusion

Developing a knowledge management strategy provides a unique opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the way the organisation operates, and the challenges that confront it.

By focusing on identifying staff needs and issues, activities and initiatives can be recommended with the confidence that these will have a clear and measurable impact upon the organisation.

Supplementing this 'bottom-up' research with a strategic focus then ensures that the KM initiative is aligned with broader organisational directions.

Taking this approach to the development of a KM strategy allows limited resources to be targeted to the key needs within the organisation, delivering the greatest business benefits while positioning the organisation for long-term growth and stability.

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