

One of the goals of many knowledge management (KM) projects is to ‘support and/or increase knowledge sharing’. While on the surface this is both a sensible and desirable goal, in practice it is often ineffective.

This briefing explores some of the issues with the goal of ‘knowledge sharing’, and proposes an alternative approach that can be applied to knowledge management projects.

What does it mean?

The first challenge is to define what ‘knowledge sharing’ means in *practice*. On the face of it, the meaning is self-obvious: to encourage the sharing of knowledge or information between members of staff within an organisation.

When this is probed more deeply, however, KM teams tend to start talking about ‘capturing tacit knowledge’ and other similar topics. Unfortunately, this simply introduces further jargon, but no greater clarity.

Knowledge sharing is certainly an important concept for those in the knowledge management and information management disciplines (ie the readers of this article).

The starting point to moving beyond this terminology, however, is to recognise that it means little to anyone else in the organisation.

Generates little enthusiasm

This next issue is that the concept of knowledge sharing will generate little enthusiasm (and therefore action) amongst staff. In fact, when asked (or instructed) to ‘share your knowledge’ staff will typically respond with confusion, passive resistance or hostility.

The simple fact is that staff simply don’t ‘share knowledge’, they conduct whatever work activities are required in their jobs. In our terms this may include sharing knowledge, but to them they are ‘updating client details’, ‘discussing project schedules’ and the like.

The only exception to this is where the target staff for knowledge management initiatives are information managers, who have the responsibility for KM-like duties. Here knowledge sharing may make sense.

Focus on solutions not problems

A danger with the goal of knowledge sharing is that it quickly shifts the KM team into ‘solutions mode’.

For example, knowledge sharing initiatives may focus on implementing a new expertise directory, or on improving collaboration tools.

While these solutions may be potentially useful, if they don’t meet specific business needs they won’t be widely used (if at all).

Many organisations are now littered with unused systems as the result of this emphasis on delivering knowledge management solutions.

Does not direct activities

The final challenge with knowledge sharing as a goal is that it doesn’t provide a clear direction for action.

With such a broad goal, there are many possible targeted staff groups, many possible business processes to focus on, and many individual issues to address.

In many cases, KM teams become trapped at this stage, and are unable to develop a clear and concrete roadmap for their knowledge management activities.

Alternative approach: focus on solving business problems

To avoid these issues, it is recommended that ‘knowledge sharing’ not be discussed beyond the confines of the KM team.

Instead, KM initiatives should take the following approach:

- identify key business needs or issues
- determine appropriate KM initiatives
- communicate these initiatives in business language that matches the problem being solved and the staff being targeted

In this way, ‘knowledge sharing’ could become ‘improve the coordination of project teams’, or ‘increase consistency of interaction with customers’ or ‘reduce processing errors’.

By targeting a specific problem that is meaningful to staff, real action can then be generated.