

6 Principles of Knowledge Sharing

By Flemming Pouffelt, Professor at the Copenhagen Business School & Nicoline Jacoby Petersen, Programme Co-ordinator of the Master of Knowledge Management programme

Knowledge sharing is often ranked side-by-side with IT: databases, intranet and email systems. "It's on the Internet" or "I sent you an email about that" are the answers one most frequently receives when requesting information about something or the other. This has resulted in a paradoxical situation where – despite the accessibility of increasing amounts of information - many feel that they don't have enough information...

The fact that information is available by no means makes it visible or usable by the receiver. Building a knowledge sharing organisation on databases brings along a range of other problems: motivation of employees to contribute and to utilise them, updating the data and assuring the quality. So just because knowledge is available does not necessarily mean that one has created knowledge sharing. For this reason it is lamentable when companies adopt knowledge strategies purely based on making knowledge available or accessible – availability is only one of the many elements in a good knowledge sharing culture.

In a culture that encourages knowledge sharing there are many different channels through which knowledge can be *disposed* and many channels through which you can *acquire* it. Therefore the following six principles must all be considered in a knowledge strategy:

1. Knowledge storing

Knowledge storing deals with – as described above – *availability*. The Intranet or databases appear to be splendid ways of storing knowledge, such as, for example, when it comes to finding out where one can order new visiting cards or what that bloke who's boss of the XX department is called. But they are often inappropriate for storing professional knowledge or "problem solving" knowledge. In a knowledge sharing process, there is always a sender and a receiver. The sender is not always able to convey his knowledge: *We always know more than we can say – and we*

always say more than we can write down. So not all knowledge can be made explicit, written down and categorised. But even in those occasions where this is actually possible, there can be "noise" in the receiver end. It is a common belief that the knowledge keyed into a database by one person is not necessarily the same as that extracted by another person, since our mental models are different. Hence the way in which we receive and understand information vary greatly, and therefore, we interpret it differently. There's an old saying: brain, heart, feet. In other words, *understanding* what is written is not the same as *agreeing* with it, let alone that one is able *to act* on it.

2. Knowledge distribution

Knowledge distribution is about *preavailability*. Good staff journals containing information on the organisation's woes and joys are a good idea, and the enhanced effectiveness of a printed version compared to an electronic version must not be ignored – typically this is reading matter that employees read while commuting or at home. Corporate news sites are also a way of ensuring preavailability. But in a knowledge sharing culture, preavailability should not only be about expecting employees to seek information actively. It is time consuming and some people are less curious than others, even though seeking information might help them do a better job. In other words, some information should be "served up on a plate". This is not to be confused with spamming inboxes, but instead about getting relevant information instead of seeking it. In larger companies it could be an idea to let employees subscribe to selected subject areas, and let the company librarian handle the subscription scheme in order to ensure that *relevant* knowledge is distributed to the right people.

3. Knowledge exposure

Knowledge exposure is about *visibility*. The daily journey to the canteen could be made into a long stream of information and input by

hanging up boards, pictures, product displays and other symbols illustrating the knowledge that resides in the company. In one company a particular project team hung up a poster on their project office door explaining their project and they received an amazing number of inquiries from their colleagues because what they were doing had suddenly become visible. Manufacturing companies often have display cabinets and exhibitions showing the company's products throughout the ages, thus relating the history of the company to new employees and outside visitors alike, and contributing to the creation of a company identity. Obviously it is more difficult to display production results when they exclusively consist of knowledge, as is the case in the engineering, legal and consultancy industries for instance. But instead of displaying (indifferent) artworks on the walls, as is often the case in such companies, they could benefit from using office space and corridors to show who they are and current projects.

4. Knowledge transfer

Knowledge transfer is about old-fashioned *education* such as courses, workshops and lectures. It is important for all companies to get and assimilate *new* knowledge. Often the companies seek to solve this problem by sending employees on external courses, but this is not always the ideal solution. Even if every system needs a breath of fresh air and although employees benefit from meeting employees from other companies, the knowledge gained in the course activities is seldom put to good use back home in the company. Courses run under the auspices of the company makes it more natural to use the expertise and skills of company seniors, thus securing that some of the company knowledge pool is transferred to younger generations and stays within the company. In-house educational activities also give employees an opportunity to meet across departmental boundaries and give them a chance to talk with each other.

5. Knowledge exchange

Knowledge exchange is about *communication* across time and place. Many employees find that the most valuable knowledge sharing

takes place while *talking* to colleagues about a *specific* problem or assignment. For this reason it is important that employees can get in contact with colleagues experienced in the area and have a dialogue. This can be difficult if you are a large multinational company operating across time and space, but it is not impossible. Shell, for instance, has built up a couple of large electronic networks (or communities, if you like). Whenever employees have a problem, they pose their questions online within their community, and in general they have an answer from a colleague within three hours - and usually three-four answers are submitted to each question. Their colleagues have often been in a similar position and therefore replies are personal (e.g.: "I had a similar problem, see the attached file but notice on page 15, that...") and hence more contextual than if the answer is extracted from a database. In this way, Shell has given the employees a platform where they can connect whenever a need arises and it enables them to discuss with each other in a goal-oriented and efficient manner. As a result, knowledge exchange is one of the most important principles of knowledge sharing that exists.

6. Knowledge collectivism

Knowledge collectivism is about *cohesion*. Trust is essential to a good knowledge sharing culture and trust is created when people know each other and feel secure. For this reason, it is important that there is time to talk to each other on an informal level to promote social relations between employees - this does not necessarily imply that employees should become each other's "best friend" or "one big happy family". Most people find their colleagues incredibly helpful when they pose them questions or ask for help. But unfortunately, all too few are inquisitive and people don't offer their help unless they are asked to do so. In companies where knowledge is the core product, employees are hesitant to exhibit a lack of knowledge by asking the advice of others or posing "stupid questions". A culture of this type is unprofitable in many ways: The employees often choose to struggle with the problem in their own mind, and thus waste a lot of time, and "what you do" is never questioned, thus

turning the company into a society of back scratchers with a consequent deterioration in product quality. So in many cases it would be beneficial to introduce an “asking culture” instead of an “answering culture”.

The above six principles of knowledge sharing all require employees to be ready to share. Management literature often stresses the fact that incentives are crucial if knowledge sharing is to succeed. Traditionally, incentives equal bonus and promotion, i.e. visible testimonials that it is advantageous to share knowledge – both economically and career-wise. However, companies that have implemented such incentive systems, e.g. in connection with performance appraisals, still have problems with motivation and other barriers related to knowledge management. And rewarding quantitative knowledge sharing instead of qualitative knowledge sharing does not necessarily improve the value of the company’s knowledge! In Denmark very few employees will mention money when questioned about what could make them share knowledge. Instead they will talk about *culture, structure and management*. It has to be a part of the company culture, that knowledge sharing is *expected*, and that it matters whether you do it or not. Knowledge sharing should be incorporated into daily

procedures and routines, thus making it part of the work and not an extracurricular, time-consuming activity where you feed reports into some system and you never know if someone else might use it. The structure must promote knowledge sharing rather than create barriers. For example, project organisations enhance the chance of keeping knowledge in the company when an employee leaves, because their project colleagues to a certain degree possess the same knowledge. Separate profit centres are often a barrier because departments rake in assignments which they are not the most competent one to solve. And there is a reluctance to lend out one’s employees to other departments, thus hindering mobility and thus also the knowledge flow in the company.

And finally. It is still possible to trace a discrepancy between what is said and what is done within the knowledge sharing area in many companies. Ambiguous signals are often given by top management: They make statements like “knowledge sharing is important” while, at the same time, they don’t alter some of the structures which contribute to raising barriers. Maybe it would be an idea to reduce the difference between saying and doing while setting in resources on more fronts.

Flemming Poufelt is Professor of Management and Strategy and director of the LOK Research Center at Copenhagen Business School (www.cbs.dk). He holds a Ph.D. from the CBS in management and he has written numerous books and articles on the subjects of professional service firms, knowledge management, management consulting, the use of consultants, service management, and strategy. Flemming is also module coordinator at the MKM Programme, where he is in charge of the module about “Business and Knowledge strategies”. He has served on various corporate boards and acted as a consultant to companies and organizations. He is a frequent presenter at seminars, courses and conferences.

Nicoline Jacoby Petersen is Programme Co-ordinator of the master programme Master of Knowledge Management, which is offered by Copenhagen Business School (www.cbs.dk) and Learning Lab Denmark (www.ild.dk). Nicoline is Master of Science in Communication and Psychology from Roskilde University. She has conducted research about knowledge management in the Danish engineering industry and the management consulting industry and has published articles in Danish and international journals and magazines. Her research interests are managing knowledge intensive firms, organisational learning and research methods.

Learn more about **Master of Knowledge Management** on the website
www.masterkm.net