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Creating knowledge management systems

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KNOWLEDGE management (KM) may carry a firm to an unexpected new stage of value. Open criticism is essential to a valuable KM programme. How often have the research director and the other members of top echelon been exposed to direct, clear criticism of their plans, programmes, comments or orders? Unless that happens, the one-way flow carries a message that urges restraint and resistance. In order to make KM works, the directors have to create an environment in which it is perfectly safe for people to stick their necks out.

In ample ways managing knowledge is no different from managing other aspects of an organisation. First, there must be a vision that links with the organisation objectives and strategies. Second, people must be aligned with that vision and third, the alignment must be from the top down and all across the organisation. In fact, it is the process, which organisations gain value through their knowledge-based assets.

Managing knowledge is a multidimensional process. It requires the effective concurrent management of four domains, which are content, culture, process and infrastructure.

Content: At the outset, management in the organisation has to identify all the knowledge elements and understand the importance of each element to individuals, groups and its corporate objectives. This understanding is extremely critical to plan and set priorities effectively. In addition, it is needed to understand the context for the different knowledge elements, which is where and how they are used or could be used.

Once the system is up and running, it becomes critical to monitor the content – to know what has been used, by whom, how and to what advantage. In order to leverage knowledge to the fullest, organisation must refresh old content and add new content over the time.

In this area, the organisation could also treat its KM system like a public domain and establish a system to track the customers' demographic information. As a result, the organisation is able to study and gain better insight into the customers' needs and wants.

Culture: Another impediment to effective KM is the social and cultural isolation as one moves up in the organisation. There is good research documenting that in large organisations intellectual and behavioural deviants are squeezed out from day one. They don't get fired; the environment becomes so unpleasant that they simply leave. By the time one reaches the executive level, you have an excess of groupthink. Recognising carries the seeds of possible correction.

Hence KM has to be inculcated as a discipline that applies to every level of an organisation. For KM to be successful, it requires all staff to implement it. However cultural realities may act as barriers or enablers for KM, organisation has to understand its own cultural realities and take them into account. Once the cultural realities have been identified, organisation has to set forth a compelling vision of its need to succeed despite those realities in order to manage knowledge well, as the direct linkage of KM is critical to both the organisation's culture and values.

Process: The process domain exists at several levels. First is the process by which we manage knowledge – how we capture, evaluate, cleanse, store, provide and use it. An organisation should assess and program this process to ascertain the way it functions, and thus work to modify and enhance it to bring it into alignment with the organisation's future vision.

Process also includes roles. It is imperative for organisation to design new roles to focus people's attention on performing the processes of KM. Note that these are roles, not jobs; some staffers, who perform client-facing roles, are expected to restructure their workloads and perform the new KM roles as well.

Organisations should select primary roles, particularly to champion and shoulder operational responsibility for KM within a practice, becoming involved at key times to help ensure success. These individuals execute KM tasks and oversee the virtual KM process. Since they cannot do all of the work themselves, they involve other people in their practices as well.

Finally, these individuals work to establish a community interest among their peers to advance the cause of KM across the organisation. These roles have formal expectations associated with them that have become a standard part of the evaluation process for the people who perform them.

KM processes require ongoing training and support, with the KM approach being a central part of the induction of new employees and of team members from outside the organisation. In addition other considerations are important to promoting KM. The size of the organisation, the number of customers and the number of competitors stretch knowledge capabilities to the limit.

Infrastructure: This includes not only computer system, but also elements such as teaching, training and coaching – and support in general – that ensure the organisation's computer applications and digital repository are used efficiently.

Although technology is said to be as little as 10% of a KM implementation, the intelligent use of KM tools can support the key elements of the processes required to introduce and develop a successful KM strategy. Technology has a clear role to play not only in the KM solution, but also in the influencing of organisational culture.

The effective KM model for a particular organisation will be one that is culturally acceptable to the workforce. By integrating KM with other aspects of the team-based working model (with team formation, intra- and extra-organisational collaboration support, document management and repository searching), such solutions will become more rapidly the accepted way of working.

While understanding and focusing on the four domains above is important, it is not sufficient. An organisation needs a really good plan of attack and makes many decisions, including which knowledge elements to start with, what to automate first, what platforms to use and what roles and governance process to establish. With the pace of technology change and the rapid and ongoing change in the users' understanding of their needs and of the potential of KM, a standard planning approach or a top-down, three- to five- year implementation plan would not work.

Instead, an organisation could outline a long list of significant initiatives (more than could be implemented in a year), set priorities and work on the highest priorities first. At the top of the list may be the need for an extendible architecture for the organisation's systems, one that would provide an underlying framework that would accommodate the rapid changes occurring.

The organisation should embark on the applications and process changes, with the highest priority initiatives coming first. Not only that, the organisation should revisit the initiatives, recasting, reshaping and setting new priorities in light of the current reality. In a chaotic environment, short time cycles and frequent re-planning are critical elements of success.

The creation of a KM system is a never-ending effort. Organisations should start working today to build an infrastructure to support today – and most importantly, to be ready for tomorrow, as KM reflects the high value of intellectual property that should be nurtured, cultivated and harvested.