

David Brett on Issues in Knowledge Management

by Stephanie Dodge

Introduction

It happens in every company: employees hoard information. When those employees leave the company they take with them a vast amount of knowledge that isn't known by anyone else.

"I worked for a mining company years ago and we hired a geologist to work on a property," says David Brett, CEO of Kenexa. "He had specific knowledge and experience related to geochemistry in that particular area. He even had written a detailed report on it but he never gave anyone a copy. When he left, the other geologists were left scrambling because he had not shared his knowledge."

Brett says the company could have avoided this problem if it had three things in place:

- A very explicit culture that encourages everyone to share their knowledge.
- A means to capture some of that knowledge for posterity.
- An incentive for people to share knowledge.

These three things reinforce each other – and one won't deliver the full benefits of knowledge management without the others.

Is Sharing Knowledge Part of the Job?

At its most basic level sharing knowledge is just informal, on-going sharing of information face-to-face. Face-to-face sharing occurs, or fails to occur, depending on what employees are rewarded and recognized for.

"Employees may say they're too busy to share their knowledge face-to-face, but this almost implies that knowledge sharing is not part of the job description – instead it's extracurricular," says Brett. "For knowledge sharing to occur, it has to be interwoven within the job description. If management conveys that knowledge sharing is an extracurricular idea, then it will never flourish."

Ensuring that knowledge sharing is understood to be a part of the job, not just a nice-to-have add-on, is the first step in making knowledge management work.

Using Technology to Go Beyond Face to Face Sharing

Face-to-face sharing is great within an office however a large organization needs to expand the number of people who share knowledge. Technology plays an important role in helping to reinforce the development of knowledge sharing communities within organizations. People are naturally attracted to other people of like-minds and the Internet is a fantastic tool for extending communities beyond geographical boundaries. The most common way people use the Internet to communicate an extend community is email.

Going Beyond The Limitations of Email Sharing

Brett notes the problem with email is that it tends to decentralize the information. Only those involved in a group discussion can access the information, making it difficult for newcomers to join.

“By using an intranet knowledge management application, people can set up a centralized repository, where information can be more widely accessed and distributed,” he says.

“However, many companies have set up intranets because the efficiencies are obvious, but find that the use of those intranet sites is not what management had hoped.” Something is stopping employees from embracing some of the information technology tools that make knowledge sharing work better.

More Than Just Building A System

Once again, Brett says that it’s not enough to simply build these systems. The “if you build it they will come” approach has not worked. This gets back to the whole question of the management commitment to sharing knowledge.

“Some senior managers hold the view that employees surfing around on a knowledge portal are not doing their job,” says Brett. “They think it’s a time waster, distracting people from doing their jobs.” This presents a barrier that no amount of snazzy technology can overcome.

Even without managerial resistance there are other barriers to people contributing to knowledge management systems. One is simply the learning curve, it takes time to learn how to use the system and time to get in the habit of using it. Another, more potent reason, is that knowledge hoarding may still benefit an individual employee.

For a knowledge management system to work, there must be an incentive for people to contribute to it.

Implementing Incentives

Brett says that reward and recognition systems are key elements in making a knowledge management program work.

“In a small organization it is relatively easy for people to see how knowledge sharing leads to organizational success, and rewards linked to organizational success, such as stock options, can be enough to encourage people to share what they know.

“In a larger organization, the minutiae of sharing knowledge on a day-to-day basis is hard to link to the bottom-line success of the organization. So you need to go to a more granular level to reward what specific people do, for example a knowledge market.”

Brett says the knowledge market concept is a well-established notion. Even without formal systems people share their knowledge with others based on reciprocity. For example: if I’m a sales person and I have knowledge of a specific client, my motivation in sharing that information with the next sales person is likely that that person is going to share something with me later on.

“In sharing this information with you, you will be more successful and you’re going to reap the benefits. I’m not going to reap the benefits directly myself, but I’m expecting something back. So when I’m in a pickle I will get some knowledge from you in return.

When you take that basic idea and apply it to an intranet knowledge sharing application, you can reward people for sharing their information,” he says.

How a Knowledge Market Works

The key in a knowledge market is simply to provide some reward every time an employee shares valuable information.

Several companies are adopting innovative ways to reward employees such as internal currencies that are redeemable from everything from books, to time off, to attending seminars. Rewards could also be metrics that are part of an employee's performance review.

For a knowledge market to work, the system has to be able to distinguish between truly valuable knowledge and useless information someone has entered just to get a perk.

"The knowledge exchange has been designed so that people are able to provide feedback and ratings on other people's knowledge contributions," Brett says. "The best and the most useful knowledge entries will be those most accessed and will garner the best feedback from peers. This allows you to determine the quality of the knowledge contributed."

Benefits of Knowledge Exchange

The knowledge exchange system can have a variety of benefits for a company. Most importantly it rewards knowledge capture and knowledge sharing. Moreover, it gives management the tools to track the types of knowledge flows occurring in the organization. It can even help attract new employees who are keen to learn from the company's knowledge exchange.

Conclusion

Brett says, "Employees aren't necessarily after monetary rewards; they're after recognition as well. If an employee has made the effort to share their knowledge they don't want it to go unnoticed. Kenexa is trying to make people notice the activity of knowledge sharing. I think that's a missing link in knowledge management right now."

David H. Brett (david.brett@kenexa.com) conceived Kenexa in March of 1999 and has been engaged with the Knowledge Exchange vision ever since then. Prior to Kenexa, David was Executive Vice President of a NASDAQ/Toronto Stock Exchange listed gold producer, a job that took him from Canada's Yukon Territory to Brazil's Amazon Jungle. David holds a BA in Religious Studies from the University of British Columbia and an MBA from Simon Fraser University.

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