

Knowledge management: shaping the profession

By Judith Lamont

Good companies have been managing knowledge for years, even if they didn't use that term to describe their activities. The people who were helping to implement the process were de facto knowledge managers even if they didn't have "knowledge" in their job titles. Vague boundaries surrounding the function did not prevent organizations and individuals from doing a good job of managing knowledge. However, the absence of a clearly defined profession with its own infrastructure meant that the emerging field lacked some of the elements that help sustain any discipline: an accepted body of knowledge or content, specified standards and processes, and readily available opportunities to interact and share knowledge about the field.

It is ironic that the emerging profession of knowledge management has had a relatively limited collaborative context, given that collaboration is one of the key elements in knowledge management. Several conferences, including those presented by [KMWorld](#) and [E-Gov](#) offer annual opportunities for information sharing and interaction, which prove valuable and energizing to their participants. In addition, a small number of professional societies founded in recent years are providing information resources, training and opportunities for online and in-person discussions. In addition, a growing number of books and Web sites provide explanations of KM basics and implementations.

In search of a CKO

If knowledge management has become a profession, what do the job descriptions sound like? What kinds of backgrounds do the applicants have? In one job posting for an intranet-based knowledge management position, an individual is sought to take on a comprehensive role from "concept to delivery leadership with specific and direct responsibility for knowledge management or intellectual capital." The ad is candid in wanting someone with "previous direct experience ramping up and/or fixing a dysfunctional global knowledge management delivery unit or organization inside a Fortune 1000 corporation."

Jim Baran of [Management Recruiters International](#) (MRI) fielded applications for that job, working closely with the client to refine the position description. "Initially, we were approached by a lot of people with backgrounds in e-commerce or CRM," says Baran. "We also located one candidate with experience running an established KM system, but the skills required to launch a program are different from those needed to maintain one and develop it incrementally." He discovered that a fair number of people have a good theoretical understanding of KM, but may not be able to pull together "people, process and technology."

A global reach for a KM project may strain the capabilities of a leader and a program. "The KM mission often starts out well in North America," says Baran, "but may run into interference overseas." Cross-cultural leadership is essential, and strong skills in relationship building. Although KM projects attempt to overcome parochialism, knowledge sharing can be a tough sell in competitive environments where individual or small group achievement brings in rewards. Strong "people skills" must be combined with a good understanding of how technology can support the process for a KM project to achieve its potential.

Angus Codd of [KnowledgeRecruit](#), the KM recruiting arm of the U.K. consulting firm [TFPL](#), observes that the focus of KM varies significantly from one organization to another, and therefore so do the required skills.

"The CKO does not have just one clearly defined role," says Cobb. Professional services, law firms, large retailers and producers of consumer goods are among the businesses that Codd sees launching KM initiatives that differ in their intent. For example, in professional services, being able to match consultants to projects and create virtual working environments may be the key to success, while for consumer goods, KM tends to be focused on a product development or research viewpoint to further the organization's growth through innovation.

The diversity of required skills reflects the various ways in which KM can serve an organization. In some organizations, the IT director expands his or her role to encompass KM, while in others, the human resources (HR) team revamps the reward structure to foster knowledge sharing. Yet another model emphasizes the content management aspect of KM,

in which case a CKO may take on a journalistic or editorial role and become the organization's storyteller. Each of those positions requires different strengths.

Cobb also sees a shift in the type of KM recruits. "When we started the KnowledgeRecruit service, our applicants came from a content background and were moving up to more sophisticated applications," Cobb recalls. "Now, we are being contacted by strategists who want to make KM a part of the overall forward-looking business strategy."

Applicants for those positions must have a much broader view of the business along with a solid background in the enabling technology. TFPL has created a skills map for KM, based on research conducted in 1999 and 2000 on more than 500 organizations that implemented KM programs. The research team identified roles that had been created for those projects and the associated skills needed both for the KM effort and throughout the organization.

CKO in action

As director of KM at [AARP](#), Shereen Remez is in a good position to evaluate the profession. Previously she served as the first CKO in the federal government, at the [General Services Administration](#). At AARP, Remez has been focusing on effective knowledge sharing. "We are a knowledge-centric organization," says Remez, "and we are considered a trusted source of information." Remez's academic background is in psychology, and before becoming a CKO, she was a CIO. Thus she has a mix of technical and organizational experience that is typical of the CKO role as it is currently manifested.

With more than 35 million members, AARP is also constantly evaluating its services in relation to the interests and needs of its constituents. "We are trying to base decisions made at the highest level of the organization on research, knowledge, information and data," Remez says.

In addition to its national headquarters, AARP has 53 state offices, which present both a need and opportunity for information sharing. "We don't want 53 silos," says Remez, "yet we also don't want a cookie cutter approach because each state has some unique issues. AARP is creating an environment in which each state office can share best practices, call each other for help and discuss common issues such as the needs of rural members." Many of AARP's research studies are accessible to employees through its intranet. For its Communities of Practice, AARP has opted for a hosted collaborative environment in order to go live in the shortest possible time, but eventually expects to bring the operation in house.

AARP's recent advertisement for an associate director of KM encompasses all the key elements of the profession: ". . . planning, implementation, and evaluation of AARP's knowledge management initiatives, including collaborative systems, enterprise knowledge sharing, communities of practice, best practices, culture change, business intelligence and data warehousing, and building systems capacity to support knowledge sharing." The job description reflects the growing clarification of the goals and methods of KM as a profession.

Success now and in the future

At the [Delphi Group](#), Carl Frappaolo directs a consulting group that assists companies in planning KM initiatives. "The best person for a CKO position is someone who is familiar with the organization, well connected, and most important, very trusted," says Frappaolo. Trust is a key factor because the CKO's job entails persuading people to share information, and they must get a sense that they will not be vulnerable as a result. Strong communication skills are required in order to explain the mission and process, yet whose ego allows other people to take credit for the knowledge that they bring to the table.

"Knowledge management has not really come of age yet," says Frappaolo, "but organizations are realizing their opportunities to grow through acquisition are limited." Particularly in tough economic times, success can come from leveraging the organization's intellectual capital through tighter communities of practice and improved knowledge exchanges. He cites a metals company that had purchased nearly all the competing firms, and "to their credit, realized that accessing all that knowledge would be a challenge." The company created a knowledge team and conducted a knowledge audit. The resulting plan defined both a culture and technology infrastructure that would foster collaboration and innovation. The company began to discover pockets of knowledge sharing.

"With a little structure and publicity," says Frappaolo, "these successful methods can proliferate throughout an

organization." The effectiveness of the effort hinges on the credibility of individuals promoting change.

Frappaolo envisions a future in which the discipline of KM helps make the processes and techniques explicit, and it becomes a more clearly defined field. He believes that the real sign of success, however, will come further down the road when KM becomes completely integrated with organizational functions. At that point, KM will not be an add-on but will be indistinguishable from the process of running a business. In that sense, the field could come full cycle, losing the KM label but retaining its functions, although at a much more sophisticated level.

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KM professional societies

- **Knowledge Management Consortium International(KMCI)**—Founded in 1997, KMCI views knowledge management from the organizational perspective, with the goal of providing practical applications of KM. It offers certification through its KMCI Institute, publishes a newsletter and a journal, and offers chapter meetings in Washington, D.C. and Denver. ;
- **Knowledge Management Professional(KMPro)**--KM Pro, established in 2001, is dedicated to promoting the practice of knowledge management and supporting the professional development of its members. It provides certification training, workshops, articles and reports about KM, chapter meetings and an Innovation Lab of KM technologies and services. ;
- **Knowledge Management Roundtables**—In the Washington, D.C. area, KM Roundtable meetings are held approximately every three months in conjunction with Virginia's Center for Innovative Technology, the International Center for Applied Studies in Information Technology (ICASIT) and the Internet Technology Innovations Center. The KM Roundtables seek to advance the effectiveness of KM practice in regional organizations. Recent programs covered KM metrics, the Knowledge Sharing Initiative (KSI) at NASA and a look at the future of KM.;

KM reading

"Complete Idiot's Guide to Knowledge Management" Melissie Clemmons Rumizen CWL Publishing Enterprises, 2002

"Enabling Knowledge Creation : How to Unlock the Mystery of Tacit Knowledge and Release the Power of Innovation" Georg Von Krogh, Kazuo Ichijo, Ikujiro Nonaka Oxford University Press, 2000

"Executive Express on Knowledge Management" Carl Frappaolo Capstone/Wiley, 2002

"Knowledge Management: The Bibliography" Paul Burden Information Today, 2000

"Knowledge Management for the Information Professional" T. Kanti Srinikantiah and Michael E.D. Koenig, Information Today, 2000

"Knowledge Management Handbook" Jay Liebowitz (Preface) CRC Press, 1999

"Knowledge Management Toolkit: Practical Techniques for Building a Knowledge Management System" Amrit Tiwana Prentice Hall, 1999

"Smart Things to Know about Knowledge Management" Thomas M. Koulopoulos and Carl Frappaolo Capstone, 1999.

"Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know" Thomas H. Davenport and Laurence Prusak Harvard Business School Press, 2000.