The Human Side

A successful deployment of KM requires more than selecting tools

by Mary Eisenhart

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The initial deployment of knowledge management tools strongly influences the outcome of any KM initiative. However, choosing technology and proving the concept in a pilot project are only the first steps. Persuading businesspeople to use the tools and making sure these tools help keep people focused on real business goals are crucial to success.

To ensure that the deployment of KM tools goes well, up-front attention to some key issues will greatly improve the odds. While effective technology certainly plays a role in the outcome, business, culture and people issues are at center stage.

"All too often knowledge management is treated as just putting in a system, as if the technology will solve all the problems," says Chuck Seeley, knowledge strategist at Intel Corp. in Chandler, Ariz. "The IT group just rolls out the technology and declares victory, and nobody uses it and nothing changes. So then you've wasted all your money."

Too many managers still seem to expect that once the hardware and software components of the strategy are in place, people will start contributing information into the system and turning to it for knowledge. In reality, KM consultants say, human issues, from appropriate staffing to company culture, are crucial to success. A common adage holds that technology itself represents only about 20 percent of the cost of a knowledge management deployment, the rest being "people" costs. There's an increasing consensus among consultants and analysts, however, that while some costs, such as staffing and training, are an integral part of the project, others, most notably the difficulties in getting management and user support, can be greatly reduced by proper planning and appropriate focus.

Choose targets strategically

In the wake of a successful pilot project, it's rarely practical -- or appropriate -- to implement identical KM tools company-wide. An indiscriminate deployment of tools in the hopes of getting employees to share knowledge simply because they have access to a new set of tools is likely to consume vast resources while doing little to advance the company's business goals. Says Susan Hanley, managing director of the enterprise collaboration and content management consulting practice at Plural Inc. in Bethesda, Md., "The best advice I can give is think globally, act locally." What she refers to as the "boil the ocean solution" is the worst way to start a new KM program. This is when a company begins by trying to do something enterprise-wide. Hanley says this approach makes it harder to successfully implement anything and to see results in a meaningful amount of time. It is important to stay focused on a particular strategic operation and avoid mission creep from the planning stage through deployment and day-to-day operations.

While a company may have a single mission statement, the role of each department within the company in contributing to that overall mission will vary. Knowledge management tools will have the biggest payoff -- in terms of the company's objectives, and in terms of their own future implementations -- if the first deployments are closely focused on core processes, such as improving customer satisfaction, reducing time to market, or expediting fulfillment. "Staying focused on a single process and a single business problem is important," says David Goldstein, principal at Knowledge Management Associates, Waltham, Mass. "I don't think you want to build a KM solution for everybody."

It is crucial to maintain that business focus when presenting a new KM program to various constituencies in an organization. Dan Rasmus, vice president and research leader at Giga Information Group Inc. in Aliso Viejo, Calif., recalls looking at a presentation through which a bank's KM group was seeking approval from its board of directors for a project. The board was balked, Rasmus recalls, because it was a great knowledge management presentation, but there was nothing in it about banking. It didn't say what the value would be to the bank.

While the CEO needs a clear practical understanding of how KM tools will help the company, he or she must also ensure that the leaders of each targeted department understand this in their own terms. In each individual deployment, managers must have a clear sense of how and why the new tools will help the department deliver the intended results, in terms relevant to the department's mission within the company. Sharing knowledge may offer major value to R&D, manufacturing, logistics, and sales, but the nature of the knowledge shared, as well as the terminology and tools of each discipline will vary in each context. A cookie-cutter approach to design and deployment can be fatal.

Equally important throughout the project is to deliver the message in the vernacular of each audience of stakeholders. A project may involve collaboration among such diverse constituencies as engineering, manufacturing, logistics and sales, and each group will frame the central issues differently. Avoid jargon imported from business theory or psychology, and don't speak to one group in the terminology of another.

Address staffing issues

Another crucial and often ignored issue is planning to meet staffing requirements. This can range from an entire department, with its own director, vice president and platoon of dedicated personnel, to a part-time responsibility of a few designated people in the relevant departments. The implementation may require people to maintain the information, manage communities of practice, evaluate new knowledge and provide domain expertise. There is no one-size-fits-all solution -- the nature of the project determines the level of staff necessary to sustain it.

Each deployment may entail one-time staffing issues related to specific deployments. For example, extra workers may be needed to enter documents into an archive or to conduct user training. Once these tasks have been performed, though, there's an ongoing need for appropriate specialists to keep information fresh, facilitate discussions, and in general help the right piece of knowledge get to the right person.

The role of people as support and as facilitators in any knowledge management system is crucial. "Firms often underestimate the organizational effort involved in putting a knowledge management system in place," says Goldstein. "Without knowledge brokers or some kind of human infrastructure to make sure that the information is edited, organized and easily accessible, the whole implementation becomes problematic."

By having a clear sense of exactly what's needed to deliver the desired benefit and get the job done, a company can see a high payoff from a relatively low investment in personnel. The experience of global business integrator Hewlett-Packard Consulting in San Jose, Calif. bears this out. The company has 6,000 consultants worldwide who rely on the wealth of knowledge available via the company's intranet. Dave Golias, a program manager in the company's Fort Collins, Colo. office, was responsible for setting up K-Desk, a program designed to get information to consultants who were unable to access HP's intranet because of their location or because they were unfamiliar with the search tools on the network. The company hoped that improved access would enable the consultants to be more productive, spending less time on searches and more focusing on client needs and their own specialties.

K-Desk gave consultants the opportunity to call a knowledge broker -- someone with extensive business expertise and the ability to rapidly find and filter the relevant information. The consultant could wait for a real-time answer on the phone or receive the information via e-mail within an agreed-upon period from the knowledge broker. While the original idea was to ensure that a consultant could always reach a live human capable of delivering a real-time answer on a 24/7 basis regardless of location, the staffing to sustain that level of service was prohibitively expensive. After evaluating the consultant's needs, it was discovered that they rarely needed an immediate response. Instead, what they needed was the information within a particular period, usually 24 hours. The program currently runs with a total of three knowledge brokers worldwide, each taking an 8-hour shift of calls from consultants in the nearby time zones. Adding to its ability to deliver a high payoff for a low investment, the K-Desk required no technology costs, as it used existing phone and e-mail connectivity.

Knowledge broker is only one label for a role that is usually filled by a business or subject matter expert who helps to connect employees with the knowledge they need. This includes facilitating discussions, evaluating and maintaining archives, helping users find documents as well as locate people within the company with specialized knowledge, and encouraging use of the system. They may disseminate success stories, send e-mail pointers to relevant constituencies when an interesting piece of information has been added to the system, or locate the resident expert to answer a particular question. (For more on knowledge brokers, see "For Knowledge, Look Within," September 2000 KMM.)

Approach change proactively

Resistance to change among the intended users and a lack of managerial support are common roadblocks to successful KM deployments. In some cases these problems are sufficiently serious to derail the effort entirely; in others, they consume valuable resources and delay the delivery of the system's intended benefit. Perhaps for this reason, KM projects often carry the expectation of high costs for training and internal marketing from the executive suite to the factory floor. KM practitioners and consultants increasingly say that these problems can be minimized, if not eliminated, by improved focus and communication in the planning stages. "You'd better involve all those people from the beginning," says Hanley of Plural. She adds that a major historic roadblock has been a mismatch of the technology with the work style of its intended users.

In any change, including a KM deployment, all the stakeholders, regardless of where they fit on the organization chart, are concerned with such fundamental issues as:

- Why are we doing this?
- How is it relevant to what I do?
- What will be expected of me?
- How will my performance be evaluated?
- What's in it for me?

While each of these questions must be addressed, rigorous attention to two key aspects of a successful deployment -- focus and inclusion -- will go a long way toward smoothing the transition.

Involve stakeholders

Along with failure to clearly articulate the KM deployment's business goal, one of the biggest hazards is user resistance and high training costs caused by it. Hard-won wisdom suggests that user resistance is largely the result of failing to involve constituencies until too late in the process. "They need to get engaged, they need to see that their voice is being heard in terms of the capabilities and the user interface; they need to be involved in communicating that, and developing the plans for communicating and training for their colleagues, so that this is no longer something being imposed on them, but they're part of the solution," says Seeley of Intel.

Seeley recommends beginning each deployment by analyzing who the stakeholders are and then identifying representative "thought leaders" in each group by name in order to involve them in the planning stages. As part of that analysis, he says, determine who needs to know what when, and what types of communication are most effective. Use the analysis as the foundation for the deployment's communications, training and rollout strategies.

A growing consensus suggests, for example, that when it comes to getting people to use the tools, extensive training at the deployment stage is a poor substitute for involving users in the design of the tool in the first place. "Don't require me to be trained -- make it work like I work," says Hanley. "If you have to train people extensively in the use of a product to help them do their job better, you're probably not going to get them to use it."

Seeley cites a project he once worked on at a large pharmaceutical company. Medical liaisons -- professionals within the company who facilitate collaboration with outside experts such as physicians and researchers -- needed rapid access to pertinent documents and data including meeting notes, research papers and related company projects. Knowing that such a tool was needed, the information technology department went off and designed one, presenting the prototype to the intended users with great fanfare.

Unfortunately, the research professionals took such exception to the design and to the fact that they were not involved in that design (an issue the IT department failed to consider) that they pronounced the product unusable. It took several additional months of discussion and redesign to create a satisfactory version. The second time around, however, key representatives of the user community were involved in all aspects of the project, including the development of communications and training plans and materials.

By not involving intended users early in the deployment process, companies run the risk of providing something nobody sees the need for. "If you want to avoid the Emperor's New Clothes phenomenon, get people involved in the fashion design," says French Caldwell, research director of knowledge management for Gartner Inc. in Bethesda, Md.

Deploy with high visibility

The initial deployment of what will ultimately be a company-wide program will also be highly visible. Early success will enhance the credibility of the program's supporters and help drive its adoption elsewhere in the company.

Dan Falvey, director of organization effectiveness, human resources programs and planning at Sprint Communications Co. in Overland Park, Kansas, tells of a recent highly visible project in which Sprint deployed after-action reviews for the launch of what was its newest and most exciting product line. When Sprint entered the Digital Subscriber Line (DSL) high speed data market in 1999, it was an entirely new business for them, and they had to build products, policies, and procedures essentially from scratch. An integral part of the product launch, the after-action review was used both in rolling out the product in each new market and kept as an ongoing tool for continuously improving Sprint's DSL products and services.

Originally developed by the U.S. Army, after-action reviews were designed as a simple tool for rapid learning and improvement of processes. After each targeted action, all those involved gather to discuss: What was supposed to happen? What actually happened? What went well that we want to sustain? What did not go as planned that we need to improve next time? The resulting lessons learned form the basis for ongoing refinement of processes and improvement of their effectiveness.

As evidence of the power of the after-action review, Falvey cites the sessions conducted by the first group of DSL sales reps. "Since a portion of the reps' compensation is based upon their sales volume," he explains, "they had a compelling interest in tools that would help them sell more effectively. Thus, when they had the opportunity to participate in an after-action review with Sprint's DSL product managers and other experts following their first morning's rehearsal fielding simulated customer calls, the after-action review ran well over the scheduled one hour. Then, as observers listened in on the reps' afternoon rehearsal calls, they noted a remarkable improvement in their ability to answer technical questions, provide competitive product information, and question customers to determine their requirements."

Using after-action review methods with twice-daily reviews, he adds, the DSL sales reps were able not only to improve their own sales effectiveness, but also to rapidly develop procedures, sheets of frequently asked questions (FAQ) and other support materials, which they were able to pass on to their colleagues as Sprint's DSL deployment extended to additional markets. Having used after-action reviews to good effect themselves, the first participants made a persuasive case for the tools' usefulness to their colleagues.

As this example shows, one reason it's vital to include thought leaders or teams that are highly motivated to test new processes is that they become the most effective marketers of the tools in their own departments. If these people come away from their experience convinced of the tool's utility for doing their jobs better and carry a sense of participation in the tool's creation instead of a feeling that it was imposed on them, they're likely to be valuable advocates of the KM project as it expands.

Stay flexible

As events of the last year have shown all too dramatically, the business conditions which prevailed at the beginning of a deployment may be significantly different shortly afterwards. The experiences gleaned from the initial deployment make a foundation for extending the KM tools further into the business, but they should not be treated as inflexible templates.

As conditions change and the initiative spreads into different regions and departments, the tools and practices must be sufficiently flexible to accommodate new situations and challenges. Staffing, whether it is knowledge brokers data entry personnel or analysts, must be adequate to ensure that the information is fresh and easily accessible to its intended user, and the company's culture as a whole must nurture and support use of the tools.

In dealing with the problem of resistance to change, success stories from credible sources are a powerful tool, because would-be users find them easy to relate to their own work experience. From the first deployments, it's important to collect these stories from participants and to make them available to their present and future colleagues. It's also important to target and present the stories appropriately; an engineer, for instance, is unlikely to regard success stories about the accounting department as anything but spam. While it's important to keep workers aware of how the company's overall mission is progressing, they will relate most closely to success stories that clearly relate to their own specialty and help them work better.

By the same token, it's important to vary both the tools and the way in which the message is delivered. While everything from email newsletters to dramatic skits have their roles in propagating success stories and other useful information throughout the company, overuse of any one technique can rapidly make it counterproductive. For example, says Falvey, as a project runs more smoothly, after-action reviews are held less frequently; when some change requires more intensive review, they come into greater prominence again.

Some employees will need more training than others; some will need extra persuasion; some may adamantly resist the change and ultimately leave the company. Take all of these variables into account as each deployment is being planned. Generally speaking, though, experts maintain that employees who are convinced the new tools will help them do their job better and reap higher rewards embrace rather than resist the tools, and that laying the proper groundwork early on will make future deployments run smoothly.

[Mary Eisenhart is a freelance writer and editor in Oakland, Calif.]