

Ash Sooknanan on KM in the Public Sector

KMM's Michael Robin talks with the corporate knowledge officer of the Workplace Safety and Insurance Board of Ontario.

By Michael Robins
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This Q&A with Ash Sooknanan is an extension of the "Movers & Shakers" article from the July 2001 edition of Knowledge Management magazine.

Q: Most people would see reporting to five vice presidents as a problem. How does this work out?

A: It has been a challenge and fun in a way. There are advantages and there are disadvantages.

If you have one person who is actually running the KM program, it's good if you're in a mature organization that has a KM initiative that's been endorsed and started from the top down. Because then, you've got the budget, you've got the staff, you've got the mandate to go and do the thing.

When the KM initiative has evolved from bottom up, the more champions you've got, especially at the senior management level, the more successful you'll be. We have these VPs who not only see the value of KM for their particular area, but are also out there--with the C-level management--discussing the value of corporate KM and the way it works into the mandate of the organization as we move forward.

The downside is that I have had situations where I've said [to one or more of the vice presidents], "So-and-so has asked for this or would like feedback," and it would take me three or four weeks to get an answer. But more times than not, it was more or less [a matter of] just getting support and endorsement if I believe there could be an issue. I really made a lot of the decisions. I speak on behalf of the organization, but I would check with the VPs, for example, [if I suspected that] there is something political that I need to know or some history that we need to be aware of. So, more times than not, I would say it was just pretty much getting the endorsement and going ahead rather than waiting for someone to tell you what to do.

[When] you are not a member of a senior management committee you just have to make sure that they are on your side and totally aware of what's going on.

What were the biggest challenges that you encountered for effective knowledge management?

The challenge was initially getting a critical mass so the staff would use the [knowledge] repository. When you get started, you don't have a lot of knowledge in there. People go in and say, "Well, it looks okay, it's pretty, but it doesn't really help me." The challenge was to quickly get material in the repository for the individual groups or working areas. I remember the days when we got a new branch of a division on board; it was a big win. But then you lose some. I remember with HR back in '98, they said they didn't really have the time to do this stuff: "We already have all the paper manuals to take care of and all the procedures and policy."

The first thing was getting people to populate the repository. That tied into the audience, the people who were actually going to use it. So once we gained critical mass, people started going there to get knowledge, to get answers to their questions, rather than going and talking to someone else or searching a paper manual.

Q: What were some specific challenges in your organization?

A: For one, getting the organization to appreciate or see the value of knowledge management. If I have done anything at all with this whole practice over the past years, that is the one single thing I contributed. We had this grassroots practice growing from the 1994-96 timeframe, and at that particular point we did not have the opportunity where the organization saw the value to make it a corporate priority. It would have either continued very low-key, very grassroots and then maybe, not necessarily, die, not have the clout and the value that it had today.

I think one of the biggest things was making that happen. And it happened because the vice president for communications sent me a memo that said a television program in Canada called us up [and asked for specific information and policies regarding a particular disease.] He said to me, it would be great if we could track this sort of thing, who's doing what, who's saying what and how we can respond to them, and in the end find out what kind of coverage we got. It would be great if we had a knowledge management system that did this.

Organizations don't always pay attention to their success unless they hear other people talk about it. We were getting a lot of requests from other ministries in the province of Ontario, from the federal government, from different provincial governments throughout Canada--"We hear you are doing this stuff on knowledge management, could you help us? Could you tell us what you are doing?" Then there started to be some external press coverage on the success story. Last year we won a silver medal, and our VP for IS won gold medal at Canada's Technology in Government Distinction Awards.

When these things started happening, then people started to pay attention. Sometimes success stories like this helped the organization recognize that "gee, I've got a good thing here." Number one, I don't want to lose it. And number two, how can we leverage it, grow it, make it better and make it different? That has also challenged us now to do better and to take what we've learned over the past years and share it with not just the internal and the front line staffs, but with our external constituents--workers, injured workers, employers, safe workplace associations and healthcare providers.

Michael Robin is KMM 's senior editor.