

Avoiding KM Pitfalls

Last month's article, "The Fundamentals of Effective Knowledge Management", discussed how to create a solid knowledge management program so that there is a high degree of employee compliance, high rates of usage, and high rates of quality data input. After all, a KM program is only as good as the people who interact with it. Having knowledge in a repository adds little value to your enterprise if that knowledge is not exploited. And the exploitation needs to be executed properly, so that the right knowledge gets to the right person and the right time.

For this month's article I thought it would be useful to review the common pitfalls that plague well intentioned KM programs, in the hope that they might be eliminated or avoided by Tudog's dedicated readership.

By way of review, KM projects are only successful when its usage is relevant and useful to its users. A wisely constructed KM program will be both easy to use and easy to manage. Perhaps the greatest pitfall is failing to incorporate these two critical and essential elements. Still, Tudog has identified some additional minefields that need to be avoided. They are:

Collapse of KM Knowledge Foundations

For knowledge management to work well it needs to take into consideration the foundations upon which it operates and succeeds. The five foundations are; people, process, culture, technology, and structure.

The people in the organization are the most critical element. Not only are they called upon to draw from the system, but they also need to be encouraged to contribute to the system. Their doing so depends on how the system is presented and promoted (as well as set up). So make sure your people are a central consideration during each phase of planning and implementation.

The process is also extremely important because it will determine the ease with which people can extract and insert information into the system. It is more effective to have the processes integrated with the workflow. When employees need to go out of their current path to get or give information they generally fail to comply. So make sure your processes are designed for ease of use and workflow convenience.

The culture of the organization goes a long way in defining how people view information, the applications of information, and how they extract and contribute to the data repository. If your company encourages (and even rewards) the effective use of information, if you champion information and make it access simple, you will find that people will respond to your enthusiasm with their own excitement. So make sure you have information as a value in your corporate culture.

Technology is the enabling factor that empowers the people to engage in the process and give life to the culture. The technology you employ will be a contributing factor to the success of your KM program, It is not, however, the key component, as it is sometimes thought to be. The most magnificent technology will fail to bear results if it is not

employed within the context of a supportive culture, by people who are motivated and interested, and by processes that simply interaction.

The structure of your KM program needs to keep in mind both the workflow processes of your users and the typical categories used. When you create a taxonomy for your system and select categories and topic headers, you need to use language that is common within the company and typical of choices that would be selected by users. If you do not, your information will get lost within the system as people input specific under one set of keywords and others search for it under different keywords.

Disregard in Demonstrating Benefits

The demonstration of benefits is required not only to show users how their interactions with the system assist them in implementing their tasks and improving their performance, but also in order to gain and maintain the support of corporate decision makers. As your KM program proceeds, the costs associated with it will experience a slight rise, as additional people are needed to maintain and grow the now active system. Corporate decision makers will see the increase in cost as a red flag and begin to demand justification – that is unless you have made demonstrating benefit an integral component of your program.

Poor Consideration of Time

Time is a critical element in the development and implementation of a successful KM program because it affects both the perceived success of the plan, and the volume of quality knowledge that is deposited within the repository. The need to create reasonable expectations for the implementation timetable and the time needed until full benefits are visible is crucial. Expectations often determine management's perception of success, and too often management expects to be enjoying the benefits of a KM program mere weeks after it has been launched. So make sure you engage in expectation management and provide a clear and realistic schedule by which success can be measures.

In addition to execution timetables, time also plays a huge role in data input. Experts within an organization are often, by definition, the busiest people. Asking them, or requiring of them, the input of knowledge can be a challenge if they fail to find the time to execute (considering they have the will and desire). Ways to address this issue include providing clear input expectations to organization experts (and the time allotments to reach their quotas), developing processes to capture their knowledge without any additional effort on their part, and creating a query system that allows users to seek specific expertise on an as-need basis.

Abandonment of Tacit Knowledge

Approximately 80% of the knowledge in most organizations is tacit, that is, inside the minds of employees. Only 20% of the overall expertise and knowledge is written (known as explicit knowledge). As incredible as this is, most KM programs are designed and orchestrated to capture and exploit explicit knowledge, and not, tacit knowledge. The reasons are obvious. Explicit knowledge is available, tangible and simple to grasp. The very idea of tacit knowledge is considered too abstract to most.

Yet when one considers it, the two types of information allow for four combinations of data that need to be exploited in order for a KM program to be comprehensive. So just as explicit to explicit data and explicit to tacit information need to be captured and utilized, so too does tacit to tacit and tacit to explicit.

By creating the mechanisms and processes that enable this, you will not only tap into the greatest source of expertise within your enterprise, you will also improve efficiencies and increase goodwill, as the burden on internal experts is gradually reduced.

Failure to Meet User Needs

All too often the knowledge within the system is organized by those who design the system or input the content without sufficient thought being given to the needs of the users. A KM that takes the user's needs into account will consider the requirements of people as they search for data, attempting to bring to them data in the context within which they are operating. An example might be people who seek information on Saturn, the car manufacturer and are burdened with information on Saturn the planet as well. A good system will know the user is exploring automobiles and deliver only the most relevant information.

Inability (or Lack of Willingness) to Acknowledge Errors

Naturally, the most dangerous mistake one can make is not noticing one's mistakes. This error causes not only a bottleneck in terms of the way information gets delivered, but also taints the type of information in the system. All KM programs need to be managed and measured to insure optimal operations, with an eye toward constant improvement and a willingness to recognize, admit, and correct mistakes as they pop up.

Conclusion

Knowledge management is a tool within the corporate arsenal that enables faster, more efficient and higher quality execution of task. The lack of KM reduces the potential of a company to maximize its operations, thereby minimizing revenue and profit potential. The value of KM is rarely disputed. What are questioned are best practices and pitfalls. Learning how to approach both brings us closer to efficient use of knowledge.

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