The Fundamentals of Effective Knowledge Management

Knowledge Management (or KM) is a relatively broad term meant to define the discipline of organizing information within an enterprise so that it can be accessed and utilized by employees and others to the benefit of the enterprise. Good knowledge management provides data in context so that the individual accessing the information is not overloaded with irrelevant data that he or she then needs to sift through in order to find the information needed. In essence, good knowledge management could be said to be providing the appropriate information at the moment a person needs it.

For this month's article I thought it would be interesting to delineate the fundamentals of good knowledge management, saving for next month an article on the pitfalls that often turn good intentions into bad KM projects.

In order for your KM project to be successful it needs to be relevant to its users, easy to use, and easy to manage. Without these critical components, the compliance levels will be so low that the benefits will be hard to extract. And the benefits of knowledge management include vast improvements on everything within your organization that is dependent on information – which, let's face it, is virtually everything within your organization.

Tudog has some fundamental rules for effective knowledge management that we believe exploits the technology by placing it within a structure that your employees can appreciate. Our fundamentals are:

Let It Be By the People and For the People

One of the greatest challenges to KM is user compliance. One wonders what managers expected after they closed off most of the information and regulated access in the strictest of manners. People need to feel ownership if they are to participate in your KM effort. Break down your hierarchical system and allow free access to all but the most sensitive of information.

Make it as Easy to Submit as it is to Retrieve

Often when designing your KM infrastructure you see as the primary objective the ability of users to retrieve information out of the repository. This is indeed a core objective, but it is not the only objective. Again, if we want people to feel ownership and utilize the system to its maximum capacity, we need to provide them with easy mechanisms to submit information. Moreover, your repository is a growing entity and your employees are creating valuable data daily. If they cannot submit their knowledge creations easily they will not submit them at all – making the loss that of the company as information that could have turned into a corporate asset is lost.

Keep Your Taxonomy Simple

Again, the purpose of your KM system is to not only afford people access to information, but also to encourage them to seek information that will enhance their performance. People get frustrated when they cannot easily find information they are seeking. If your taxonomy – or the structure within which the information is categorized – is complex, it will lead to low usage. Similarly, if people do not understand where to place information

they wish to input into the system, they will resist doing so, weakening the value of your KM program.

Promote KM Internally

KM requires some internal marketing efforts in order to get people committed to using it. People need to understand the benefits to the company, how it makes their own jobs easier, and how their cooperation is appreciated (and perhaps even rewarded). The internal campaign promoting KM should not be executed only at the time the program is launched, but rather periodically and consistently, so that compliance remains constant.

Make the Benefits Genuine

If your employees genuinely benefit from your KM program they will utilize it, passing on the benefits to your company. Some ways to make the benefits apparent include having:

1. Excellent search capabilities so finding wanted information is fast, easy and accurate.
2. Document descriptions or brief summaries so people do not need to read the entire document to determine relevancy.
3. A separate discussion arena so people can access the opinions of experts within the company.
4. New data notification capability, so people can know when new information consistent with their user habits and interests has been placed into the system.
5. A document relevancy rating system that includes time and other criteria to set importance level. People need to know if the information they are accessing is current (or still in the system because of the historical perspective it provides).

Actively Manage Your Repository

You should ideally have an individual mandated to maintaining the content of the repository. This includes basic yet critical functions like reviewing submissions to insure that they have been classified properly and assigned uniform keywords. Similarly, the Repository Manager can move older information out of the active flow and make sure the search and summary systems are working up to par. Having an individual devoted to maintaining the repository also serves to send a clear message to your employees about the importance you place on KM.

Knowledge Management is a key component to every company dependent on information to remain competitive and profitable. The complexities of implementing a good KM program have led to some confusion over its true value. Still, when properly executed, KM can provide a company with significant advantages in a highly competitive world.