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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

CAPITALIZING ON THE BUSINESS TREND OF
KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

FOR NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

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KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT FOR NON-PROFIT ORGANIZATIONS

I. OVERVIEW AND DEFINITIONS

“The subject is too young for fads, let alone for tried-and-true disciplines; but it is old enough to need a vocabulary.”¹

As with any emerging trend in corporate communication, the early thinkers and authors attempt to describe broad concepts, attaching descriptive names to processes and ideas. Much overlap of definitions exists, which over time tends to evolve into generally recognized terminology. Thus, phrases such as “knowledge management,” “intellectual capital,” and “managed asset” become used, each having the potential to be interpreted differently by the intended audience. Yet this ambiguity is desirable in many ways as a trend emerges. It allows room for questioning, debate, and refining of the concepts.

The term “knowledge management” implies that knowledge is a manageable thing. The term “intellectual capital” implies that intelligence is a measurable asset that has value. But what is knowledge, what is intelligence in an organization? Both have to do with collective brainpower, the mass of experience and information that exists in the brains of people who are part of the organization. But it’s not just the fact that collective brainpower *exists* within an organization. Rather, it is what is done with the collective brainpower. How does knowledge and intelligence, or collective brainpower, become transformed into a measurable asset? What must be communicated, and how?

Thomas A. Stewart², author and early proponent of the concept, states:

“Intelligence becomes an asset when some useful order is created out of free-floating brainpower – that is, when it is given coherent form; when it is captured in a way that allows it to be described, shared, and exploited; and when it can be deployed to do something that could not be done if it remained scattered around like so many coins in a gutter. Intellectual capital is packaged, useful knowledge.”³

Intellectual capital, then, is the intangible assets of skill, knowledge, and information, which has been captured and leveraged to produce a higher-valued asset.⁴ The term *knowledge management* is the act of consciously managing the intellectual capital of a company for the ultimate purpose of creating wealth for the shareholders.

II. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN CORPORATE AMERICA

“Information and knowledge are the thermonuclear competitive weapons of our time.”⁵

Size isn't what it used to be. Nearly 50 percent of the 1980 Fortune 500 companies (the largest industrials in the U.S.) are not in existence today. No longer does the size of a company's balance sheet equate with stability. Markets have changed from predictable to chaotic; from mass to tiny splinters. Worldwide competition continues to compress profits on anything that is uniform, routine and standard, to quote Harvard's Robert Reich. We are entering an age where intangible assets like expertise, intelligence, imagination, responsiveness and innovation – all facets of “knowledge” – become more important than the tangibles reflected on a traditional balance sheet.⁶

This is especially clear when private sector companies have estimated that intellectual assets are worth three or four times tangible book value. (Or in recent Internet-related IPOs, 20 or 30 times tangible book value!) Larry Prusak of Ernst and Young states “Brains are what business runs on. We need more people out there showing how to use them better.”⁷

Companies who recognize this trend are starting to invest millions in major initiatives to manage this newly recognized asset called *knowledge*. For instance, consulting companies recognize that capturing and leveraging knowledge is the primary way they can gain competitive advantage. Charles Paulk, CIO of Anderson Consulting, put it this way: “When one of our consultants shows up, the client should get the best of the firm, not just the best of that consultant.”⁸

Ernst and Young, an early adopter, has been focusing on knowledge management since 1993. Over time, they have created a tool, the Center for Business Knowledge, which is the source of knowledge management initiatives within the company. It was first developed for the purpose of helping people get to the right information fast. “We're trying to leverage our intellectual capital and reuse our practice-based experience to a very high degree and to do it in a structured fashion,” says Dick Loehr, director for Ernst and Young's Center for Business Knowledge.

To facilitate this process, company-wide networks were created to connect people with common interests and expertise, each network supported by its own database. There are currently 70 such networks accessed by 23,000 employees via Lotus Notes or an Internet browser. To keep the constantly expanding knowledge networks under control, two positions are critical. One is the Database Content Manager, who is responsible for the quality of the content. The other is the Knowledge Network Coordinator, a coach to the people using the networks. The coach typically has a training background, but their main role is to drive change in the way people work. “If you want people to work with information and content and do it

in a way that displaces labor, then you need to change the basic things they do every day,” according to Loehr.

Coopers and Lybrand has its own version called the Knowledge Management Group, which oversees strategy, technology, and learning. Recently, the company launched an Intranet that puts all kinds of company and competitor information in one easy-to-reach place. Coopers and Lybrand estimates that it can save more than \$1 million a year if the Intranet shaves just *one hour a week* from the time that employees spend looking for information.⁹

Other companies practicing knowledge management techniques are popping up:

- Anderson Consulting has created an internal Knowledge Xchange with prefabricated modules of software code;
- Owens Corning has created a “Center of Excellence” for the purpose of facilitating sharing and creating knowledge;¹⁰
- KPMG Peat Marwick has incorporated their Knowledge Manager system;
- Price Waterhouse has Knowledge View;
- A new job title at Philip Morris is Knowledge Champion;
- Monsanto has a Director of Knowledge;
- Chevron and Hughes Space & Communication are undertaking knowledge mapping (compiling guides to in-house experts);
- and any number of small companies have also begun to recognize the value of, and to act on, managing company knowledge.¹¹

But the most outstanding example of a company actually achieving success in utilizing knowledge management has got to be Lucent Technologies’ ability to generate at least one patent per business day.¹²

The Canadian Imperial Bank of Commerce has taken a slightly different approach to knowledge management, one which adapts the concepts for employee development. “Competency components” – described as the abilities that customers expect from employees – were turned into “competency maps” which not only identified specific skills needed for each position, but also where the expertise was located within the company and where to find self-directed training on a subject. Then the bank abolished its formal training programs. While group learning still takes place, it is the employees who take the initiative. Through electronic delivery of much of the information, employees learn when they are receptive to it.¹³ Hubert St. Onge, who led the development of this approach, sees the primary challenge as making an organization’s unarticulated or tacit knowledge explicit so that it can be shared and renewed constantly.¹⁴

III. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT APPLIED TO NON-PROFITS

“The critical resource is now people and the knowledge they carry.”¹⁵

In the last few decades, the non-profit sector has grown faster than either private business or the government.¹⁶ Along the way, a few non-profit organizations, influenced by business management practices, have begun to view the private sector as a role model. Dubbed “entrepreneurial non-profits” by Dr. Richard Stenckel in his book “Filthy Rich and Other Non-Profit Fantasies,” these non-profit entities are subtly shifting the assumptions, expectations, and even definition of what a non-profit is and does.

Traditional non-profits are program driven; the new class of non-profits is becoming market-driven. They are incorporating basic business management techniques, most of which are not new or trendy. They are starting to learn the value of risk-taking, becoming action-oriented with a streamlined decision-making process, and viewing corporations not just as sources of contributions, but as powerful business partners¹⁷ However, they have not yet begun to recognize their own most valuable asset – intellectual capital, or knowledge.

For non-profit organizations, the concept of capitalizing on collective knowledge has special potential for increased productivity because non-profits are human-capital intensive.¹⁸ Human capital is the primary source for innovation and regeneration in an organization; therefore, managing the knowledge of a non-profit organization has the potential to yield disproportionately high results.

In a recent issue of the publication *Public Personnel Management*, Weston Agor writes that “if we hope to generate increased productivity in the non-profit sector, our model of intellectual capital must include the generation of a new and different mix of human brainskills and management processes than was true in the past. This new model must be capable of helping us avoid and transcend our past default tendencies in human thinking (e.g., hasty, narrow, fuzzy) and organizational decision making (e.g., rigid hierarchies, dysfunctional culture, outdated recruitment and training practices.) This is a higher order of thinking skill. It requires the ability to build on what has been learned through experience. . . .”¹⁹

To facilitate transferring the concepts of knowledge management from the corporate arena to the non-profit sector, the following mental exercise may be helpful:

- replace the words “wealth,” “value,” and “competitive advantage” with “clout” or “influence” or “furthering our mission;”
- replace the words “customers,” “shareholders,” and/or “employees” with the word “member” in a dues-based organization; in a volunteer-based organization, replace with the word “volunteer;”
- replace the words “company” or “corporate” with the name of the non-profit entity

- consider individuals employed by the non-profit entity to be employees;
- don't replace the word "productivity" with anything – it's just as important for a non-profit as it is in the private sector.

Thus, the statement "Knowledge management is the act of consciously managing the intellectual capital of an organization for the ultimate purpose of creating wealth for the shareholders," when applied to a non-profit organization becomes "Knowledge management is the act of consciously managing the intellectual capital of the American Cancer Society for the ultimate purpose of helping our employees and volunteers further our mission." Or, it could read "Knowledge management is the act of consciously managing the intellectual capital of the National Association of the Self-Employed for the ultimate purpose of creating clout for our members."

IV. BENEFITS

*"Human capital is easily dissipated. It needs to be massed and concentrated."*²⁰

The potential benefits of successfully managing knowledge are enormous, which is why companies are willing to spend millions in search of achieving it. Doing business better, faster, and cheaper – the holy grail of most business management decisions and trends – certainly applies to this one as well. It is sometimes put into these terms: creating wealth for the shareholders, or building competitive advantage. But what knowledge management in a corporation really comes down to is increasing the productivity of the employees. Through more rapid sharing of knowledge, collective knowledge growth, and shortened lead times, more satisfied and productive employees will emerge.²¹ As any business consultant will attest, happy and productive employees have a positive impact on the bottom line.

Similarly, the potential benefits for the non-profit sector are also tremendous. Turnover in people (be it employees, volunteers, or members) can be a major problem regardless of organizational type, but the non-profits traditionally have 2-3 times the rate of turnover as other for-profit entities. The numbers are astounding: if the turnover rate is a conservative 10%, the organization loses half its people in just 5 years, even if its total headcount remains the same.²² If the turnover rate is a more realistic (for non-profits) 25%, the organization loses half its people every *two* years! The organization is hemorrhaging its collective brainpower, because each of the departing individuals will take with them knowledge that was worth retaining.

What if all the knowledge carried away due to turnover could be collected, organized, used, and built upon by the remaining (and new) individuals? What would happen? Individuals would

be spending their time on productive ventures rather than spending their time reconstructing the past, searching for missing information, and repeating mistakes. This would result in increased personal satisfaction of the individual, which would lead to decreased turnover.

The same principle applies to organizations in a growth mode. Many non-profits declare goals based on increasing the numbers of volunteers or members, as in “double our membership.” Some may have marketing plans in place to help achieve those goals. But very few will foresee and plan for the problem that being successful creates, that is, what to do with the sudden influx of a large number of new individuals? How to communicate the existing knowledge of the organization? How to involve them in activities that are useful and fulfilling? How to capture and utilize the knowledge they bring with them to the organization? All of these questions have the same root answer: by utilizing knowledge management principles of capturing free-floating brainpower and packaging it so that it can be used.

What happens to a non-profit organization that retains individuals and gives them the tools to be productive? Growth, then exposure, then clout, which leads to more growth, more exposure, more clout – and ultimately the furthering of their mission.

One of the most interesting aspects of successfully incorporating knowledge management in an organization is that by definition the process is self-regenerating. The more that people use the system, the more they understand how to use it and the better their input becomes. The more influence they have on knowledge creation, the better the output is for others to do the same. The process of constant improvement is inherent within the system.

V. THE PROCESS OF IMPLEMENTING

“The whole [organization] should be in the business of creating knowledge. Information is the input and insight is the output. The box in-between is knowledge creation.”²³

In defining knowledge management, the authors I have cited use action verbs:

- “. . . to *capture*, *leverage*, and *capitalize* on [experience] creates stockpiles of proven, useable knowledge.”²⁴
- “. . . processes that support the *creation*, *acquisition*, *sharing* and *renewal* of knowledge.”²⁵
- “One of the most promising recent developments in the management field is the effort to *measure*, *use* and *develop* what has been termed an organization’s most valuable asset – intellectual capital.”²⁶

What they all have in common is the idea of collecting together disparate bits of information, and then doing something with it – leveraging, capitalizing, sharing, renewing, measuring, using and developing it.

But where to start? To conceptualize the implementation process, I have borrowed from Arian Ward of Hughes Space and Communications, who asserts that the problem – indeed the habit – is what she calls “losing the recipe.”²⁷ The process can be simplified into four actions:

- 1.) Collecting (the recipe ingredients and directions);
- 2.) Organizing (the recipe box);
- 3.) Using (cooking, using the recipe); and
- 4.) Creating (making a new recipe.)

Collecting

Identifying the intellectual capital, or the knowledge assets, of the organization is the starting point. Thomas Stewart terms it “the semi-permanent body of knowledge, the expertise that grows up around a task, a person, or an organization.” Examples of knowledge assets for non-profits might include competencies and capabilities (the “how to” category), programs, understanding of legislative issues, influential contacts and networks, successful practices, competitor information, directories of volunteers and members.

Using the organization's own strategic priorities, keep the organization focused at this point. "Knowledge assets, like money and equipment, exist and are worth cultivating only in the context of strategy."²⁸

Knowledge may be explicit or tacit. Explicit knowledge is procedural, where following defined steps produces a certain result. Most knowledge, however, is less structured and varies with context and experience. This is the hard-to-capture *tacit* knowledge.

Once the knowledge assets are identified, the knowledge itself must be collected. Useless information often masquerades as knowledge, and its essential to winnow the knowledge from the "noise." Collecting existing explicit knowledge may be compiled from lists, notebooks, computer files, and handbooks. Collecting tacit knowledge requires systematic communication with the bearers of the knowledge, and methodical annotation in a common format of the specifics. It may involve interviews and following experts around to see what they do differently. Consequently, the process of collecting tacit knowledge may turn some of it into explicit knowledge. This is a desirable outcome, but not all tacit knowledge can be made explicit. Either way, this is no small task.

Organizing

The collected intellectual capital is useless unless it can be put into a form, a delivery system that will facilitate its use. The delivery system must be accessible to all, timely, interactive, and easy to use. The obvious answer, and one which all cited companies are using, is to rely on technology with an Internet-enabled, interactive database as the core delivery system of knowledge.

At its most basic, the knowledge database is an index, which is searchable by keyword, topic, or category. As the content increases in volume and complexity, though, a giant index becomes unwieldy. Classification problems quickly emerge, particularly in attempting to codify tacit knowledge. Too, the nature of some knowledge is extremely fluid, and cannot be accurately posted, even in real-time. To solve these problems, knowledge maps are used to indicate the path to where the expertise is within an organization, like a guide to in-house experts.

The database and knowledge maps can be thought of as a part of the *infrastructure* of communication that supports knowledge. The infrastructure could include: technology support (information systems, databases, communication technologies, Web and E-mail); equipment (whiteboards and groupware); tools (knowledge maps, computer-based training); and sometimes physical structures (learning centers.)²⁹

Whatever form the infrastructure may take, a repository of accurate information and user-friendly delivery systems will not assure successful knowledge management outcomes. Ultimately, it must be *used* by the individuals within the organizations.

Using and Creating

If people can't find the recipe, they'll attempt to re-write it, cook the wrong thing, or go away. It's not only important to have the infrastructure in place, it's essential that people know how to use it, when to use it, are encouraged to use it, and are rewarded for using it. Knowledge transfer is not a one-way street; some companies have poured information into Lotus databases only to find that no one ever goes there.

“In a brain-based economy, the organizations that emerge as winners will be those committed to spreading the flow of knowledge so that their people can quickly gather it raw and then do something interesting with it fast. The goal, therefore, is to create an environment where information, expertise, and data are available to people to draw upon, and add to, as they see fit, on their timetables. The more quickly people can access critical information without having to depend on the largesse of others, the faster they can capitalize and add to the organization's “brain” and the more innovative and effective their decisions will be.”³⁰

Inevitably, people will not only use the information as it exists; they will draw upon it in new ways. The goal is to learn *before* doing (find the best-known way it was done before), learn *while* doing (adapt that learning to the task at hand), and learn *after* doing (decide what you learned and capture it.)³¹

VI. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND COMMUNICATION ISSUES

“Whatever their formal plans, companies that attempt to manage knowledge soon find themselves deep in the business of changing their cultures.”³²

Knowledge management is a business management concept, but in implementation it's a communication issue.

The previous section discussed tools and structures for gathering and transferring knowledge so that it becomes an asset that remains with the organization. The act of gathering and transferring knowledge constitutes communication, but how does knowledge management affect the day-to-day communication behaviors in an organization?

Traditionally, knowledge within an organization has been time- and place-bound, with knowledge transfer happening in seminars or classes, or at events. Even if technology was incorporated as a delivery mechanism, the content was still very much curriculum-based. Successful incorporation of knowledge management concepts will shift the learning environment to availability anytime, anywhere, as well as shifting from events to systems. The focus will be on collected documentation, packaged as job aids or tools, rather than on curriculum.³³ This will necessarily cause a decrease in face-to-face meetings, but not necessarily a decrease in people with people interaction. The danger is in using E-mail and Lotus Notes as substitutes for face-to-face idea exchange. “Tacit knowledge evolves from people’s interactions and requires skill and practice,” says Monsanto’s Bipin Junnekar, director of knowledge management. “The secret is in the interaction: people with people, people with information.”³⁴

Also, since people hold knowledge in their heads, people and skills are merged. The focus was on individuals and memory. With knowledge management, the focus will shift away from heavy reliance on single individuals to carry organizational knowledge, and from memory to reference. The caveat will be how to capture meaningful knowledge from chance conversations and water-cooler discussions.

Knowledge is communicated through language. An organization may need to develop a set of words, phrases and definitions that would facilitate the transfer of knowledge, and enable individuals to more clearly talk about their experiences and ideas.

The number one communication issue, however, is getting people to act differently. Most people are not accustomed to openly sharing ideas and knowledge, and most organizations do not have a culture of support for continuous learning. Effective implementation of knowledge management will result in changing the mindset, the way people “automatically” think and act. For most organizations, it's a culture change.

VI. BARRIERS TO IMPLEMENTING

“The most important way to advance knowledge is to remove the barriers to sharing it.”³⁵

Failures, or less-than-entirely-successful attempts to implement knowledge management have been scrutinized. The following list has been compiled primarily by Jim Marshall and Allison Rossett of San Diego State University as part of their research, as well as derived from literature in the emerging field of knowledge management. Barriers to successful implementation include:

- Flawed incentives to participate
- Lack of trust among users and management
- Diverse cultures; lack of common language
- Failure to allocate time to implement
- Failure to create a forum to share ideas
- Hesitation to admit need for help in implementing and sustaining
- Lack of commitment from all parties

Other obstacles include confusing information with knowledge, thereby inundating the organization with too much information but not enough useable knowledge. For instance, a phone number is information; a phone book is a knowledge asset. A description of a committee is information; how the committee’s work applies to the organization is knowledge.

Finally, people within the organization who are solely dedicated to the process of implementing knowledge management is a must. Thomas Stewart states that “knowledge management needs knowledge managers. Unless it’s managed, it’ll become as chaotic as a school yard at recess.”³⁶

VII. SELF-TEST FOR ORGANIZATIONS

“Like people, companies use such a tiny proportion of their collective brainpower that any improvement has the potential to deliver disproportionate gains.”³⁷

The following constitutes a self-test for organizations to evaluate where they stand on knowledge management issues. These warning signs were, for the most part, written by David H. Smith, head of knowledge development for Unilever, and Thomas Stewart, author.³⁸ Some were gleaned from other readings and experience.

Eleven symptoms of bad brainpower management:

1. The organization repeats mistakes.
2. Work gets duplicated.
3. The organization is in a constant mode of re-training the basics.
4. Customer (or member or volunteer) relations are strained.
5. Rising stars in the organization experience burnout and leave.
6. Good ideas don't get disseminated to other divisions, chapters, or offices.
7. The organization is dependent on key individuals.
8. E-mails often begin with the words, “Does anyone know about . . . ?”
9. Voice messaging frequently begins with the words, “I'm looking for . . . ?”
10. Training and developing successors is lacking or spotty.
11. Information, commentary, and expertise are not being passed around freely and openly by electronic means.

Thomas Stewart says that “like Lyme disease, knowledge management problems have symptoms that sometimes mimic other problems.” Each of these symptoms indicate that people in the organization are not finding knowledge, moving it around, keeping it refreshed and up to date, sharing it, or using it.³⁹ If the organization exhibits even a few of these, incorporating effective knowledge management practices may have an extraordinarily positive effect.

VIII. CONCLUSION

“The inevitable metaphor is the iceberg. Above the surface are the financial and physical resources. . . Beneath, unseen, is something vastly larger, but whose contours no one knows.”⁴⁰

Recognizing that the intangible of collective brainpower can be viewed and treated as an asset within an organization is a concept that has given birth to a new business management strategy, knowledge management. In theory, knowledge management tries to move people from information to expertise: Information → Knowledge → Expertise. Successfully implementing knowledge management practices will require organizations to re-examine their current communication patterns, tools, and expectations.

Most companies and organizations are learning as they go when attempting to capture, sort, disseminate, and share their knowledge. The concepts of knowledge management are the guiding light, but there is no one right solution for everyone.

VIII. SUPPORT MATERIALS

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¹ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 219

² Thomas A. Stewart began writing for Fortune magazine about the concepts of knowledge management as early as 1990.

³ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 67

⁴ Agor

⁵ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. ix

⁶ Oren

⁷ Agor

⁸ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 111

⁹ Galagan

¹⁰ Allee

¹¹ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, pp. 110-112

¹² Oren

¹³ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 94

¹⁴ Allee

¹⁵ Colvin quoting Arie de Gues, Shell Oil Company

¹⁶ Steckel, p. 5

¹⁷ Steckel, pp. 15-21

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- ¹⁸ Agor
- ¹⁹ Agor
- ²⁰ Stewart, *Fortune*
- ²¹ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 110
- ²² Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 114
- ²³ Galagan
- ²⁴ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 116
- ²⁵ Allee
- ²⁶ Agor
- ²⁷ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 115
- ²⁸ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 70
- ²⁹ Allee
- ³⁰ Harari
- ³¹ Galagan
- ³² Galagan
- ³³ Rossett
- ³⁴ Galagan
- ³⁵ Harari
- ³⁶ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 125
- ³⁷ *Management Today*
- ³⁸ Stewart, *Fortune*
- ³⁹ Stewart, *Fortune*
- ⁴⁰ Stewart, *Intellectual Capital*, p. 88