Aligning People, Process and Technology in Knowledge Management

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Chapter 1: What is knowledge management?

Many readers of this report will know that knowledge management has been around as a management discipline for at least the last 20 years, although the concepts and ideas have existed for much longer than that – going back to the library sciences, the libraries at Alexandria and even cavemen and their drawings on cave walls. What this report presents, however, is the intersection of technology, people and process that enables knowledge management.

There are as many definitions of knowledge and knowledge management as there are people and organisations. This report takes a broad view of knowledge management. For the purposes of the report, knowledge management is about providing the knowledge and information for people to do their jobs efficiently and effectively.

Knowledge management activities
Knowledge management activities include such things as executing a Communities of Practice programme, performing a records management initiative, implementing and maintaining portals, implementing an enterprise search technology, executing automated workflows, blogging, instant messaging, enabling collaboration – the list goes on and on. The term knowledge management often leads to confusion, resulting in knowledge management activities being individually identified rather than grouped as part of a knowledge management programme to eliminate confusion and help ensure buy-in and support from the organisation.

Tacit vs explicit knowledge
Broadly, there are two types of knowledge that people need to do their jobs efficiently and effectively: tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. Knowledge management addresses both tacit and explicit knowledge, providing processes and activities to facilitate both knowledge types.

Tacit knowledge is knowledge that resides in people’s heads, whereas explicit knowledge has been written down in documents, databases or other places for people to reference and share. Tacit knowledge is more difficult to share as connections with people need to be made and those connections are not as accessible or transparent as referring to a document, a slide deck or a database for information.

Because of the challenges presented by tacit knowledge, many knowledge management initiatives have focused on accessing it. The benefits to the organisation are perceived as greater, although explicit knowledge is no less valuable. Often, once knowledge is documented, people have a tendency to classify it as information rather than knowledge and somehow it becomes less important: it is dismissed as documentation and its value is diminished in many people’s eyes.

Having knowledge documented is important as it leads to standardisation of processes and activities, improves
decision making, reduces time lags in making connections to people, makes activities repeatable and generally improves the effectiveness and efficiency of the organisation. These are not activities that should be dismissed or taken lightly.

Knowledge, in whatever form it comes, is critical to the success of the organisation. Regardless of whether focus is on Communities of Practice or a document management system, there are technologies that support and enable these activities.

Managing knowledge, IT vs business
There are people who will argue that knowledge cannot be managed because knowledge is some esoteric, fleeting concept that defies management. There are blog posts and articles and more than one SlideShare presentation dedicated to this topic. However, even if it were true that knowledge is a fleeting concept that cannot be defined or managed, there are still processes and activities that facilitate its creation and storage and cause it to be shared across people and organisations.

Technology is one of the reasons why knowledge management has become much more widely discussed in the last 20 years. It started with the creation of repositories, web pages and applications that ‘did knowledge management’, and in many instances the implementation of these technologies failed. The initiatives failed because they considered technology for technology’s sake and did not take into account the user side of the equation. Knowledge management technologies are different from other technologies that were in use at the time, for example, financial, budget and planning systems. Users of these systems had to use them; they had to record the transactions for the organisation in the accounting system so they tolerated the poor design and lack of usability. However, early knowledge management systems were not mandatory – people had ways of doing their jobs that did not involve the knowledge management systems – so they kept doing their jobs the way they had always done them. To a large extent, in many organisations, this is still true.

What IT, then and now, often fails to consider is the user and how to make it easier for them to do their jobs. In many organisations the IT department will find the latest and greatest technology and implement it without involving users or understanding the business problem that the technology is meant to solve. IT may not even recognise that the business problem that needs to be solved is something different than the technology they are implementing. This mismatch between business and IT only serves to further exacerbate the lack of alignment between business and IT.

The business, on the other hand, will go out and find applications and either implement the technology themselves, creating a kind of shadow IT in the business unit, or purchase the services ‘in the cloud’ which still creates a kind of duplication in IT services and introduces security and privacy issues that do not exist when the organisation’s information is hosted inside the firewall.

This alignment between business and IT will be discussed in Chapter 5.