

IMPROVEMENT SKILLS CONSULTING LTD.

“Simply, improvement...”



Knowledge Management:
Applied Common Sense?

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“There is no such thing as Knowledge Management, only knowledgeable people.” [Peter Drucker]

Knowledge Management Nonsense

Professor T D Wilson of Sheffield University published a paper called “The nonsense of knowledge management” in 2002, which I read with interest. In it he examined critically the origins and basis of 'knowledge management', its components and its development as a field of consultancy practice.

He explored the differences between knowledge and information through literature surveys and reviews of various consultancies' websites. His conclusion was that 'knowledge management' is an umbrella term for a variety of organizational activities, none of which are concerned with the management of knowledge! Those activities that were not concerned with the management of information were concerned with the management of work practices, in the expectation that changes in such areas as communication practice would enable information sharing.

The big problem with the approaches proposed by all the big consultancies he researched was that they were actually talking about information and data management, probably with the aim of selling IT solutions. And so, the first learning point is the need for a set of definitions:

- Data are raw facts (e.g. numbers, values, statements) – not much use on their own
- Information is data that have been processed to be useful, or to add some meaning – a map is a collection of data (symbols, facts) that have been combined to provide information about places
- Knowledge is the application of data and information – using a map to plot a scenic route between two places that avoids main roads and built-up areas

Another important definition, when considering knowledge management is the difference between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is often defined as being the knowledge that exists in the heads of people in an organisation. As such, it is difficult to “get hold of” and can “walk out the door” when a member of staff leaves. It’s probably true to say that most organisations don’t know what their people really know.

The explicit knowledge approach assumes that the useful knowledge of individuals in an organization can be articulated and made explicit. As such, it can be written down, codified, structured and shared with others. This is the stuff that can be put into databases and information systems.

Getting hold of tacit knowledge, by contrast, is difficult and is very much a people issue.

Some researchers believe that, of all the knowledge in an organisation, less than 20% is explicit. Therefore, going down the IT route to enable knowledge management is not likely to have a major business benefit. Systems might hold 80% of the data/information, but people hold 80% of the knowledge. The added value and organisational benefit comes from people applying their knowledge to improve performance and to innovate.

KM Frameworks

Having worked on a number of KM projects and run numerous workshops on the subject over the past nine years we’ve seen everything from KM being a theoretical exercise, through to real, practical actions taken to improve performance.

What we’ve also learned is that the successful organisations typically can describe their approach to KM with some sort of Framework. One example, based on extensive experience in Europe is the EFQM Knowledge Management Model. It also makes use of a self-assessment mechanism to help define an organisation’s KM capability level, with identifiable strengths and areas for improvement.

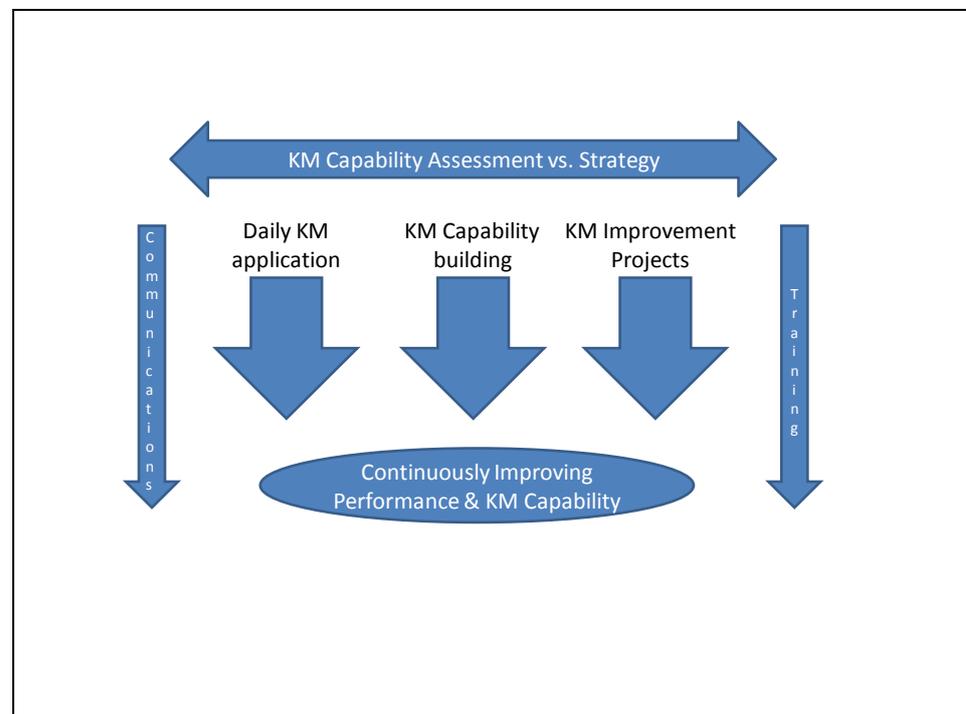
Any useful framework describes how an organisation thinks about knowledge and knowledge management as it relates to its business. It can include basic definitions and principles (such as the differences between data, information and knowledge), as well as KM foundations (such as the existence of knowledge assets and processes and the culture/environment/technology required). You might also find:

 A KM process model defining the key steps such as Identify, Capture, Organise, Share, Apply (a typical KM process cycle that leads to learning and improvement)

- Examples of technology enablers that might be used to provide some support for KM (e.g. Intranets, Discussion Boards, Expert Systems, Document Management Systems)
- Examples of people enablers that might be used to embed the KM processes into working practices (e.g. Communities of Practice, Mentoring, Coaching, Post-project Reviews)
- Lists of tools and techniques that can be used by people, or within systems (e.g. FAQ lists, Yellow Pages of subject matter experts, Case Studies, Process Maps)
- Definitions of KM roles, such as Chief Knowledge Officer, Librarians, Knowledge Owners

Making KM work

The trick (if there is one) is not in applying “Knowledge Management”, but in creating an environment in which knowledge is created, shared and applied to deliver performance improvements. The model below summarises the practical things that we’ve seen organisations do in order to get benefits out of an approach to KM. You don’t have to do them all, but the more comprehensive the approach, the more sustainable the benefits are likely to be.



- KM Capability Assessment vs. Strategy – this is about identifying, during the business planning cycle, where KM might add value and improve organisational performance. You might want to do a Capability Assessment using the EFQM Model and you'll also need to identify real performance gaps where a KM approach could help. This tells you where to focus effort and starts with the senior team.
- Daily KM application – here, you need to get the KM process cycle working in daily activities; perhaps in team meetings, end of project reviews, or in 1-1 performance management discussions; and ensure people get recognition for knowledge-sharing. These are the “1000 little things” that build a learning organisation.
- KM Capability building – the aim here is to build “infrastructure”, either IT or People systems, to provide KM capability for the future. These are usually projects that improve capability, rather than performance.
- KM Improvement Projects – choose some projects where an embedded KM dimension will add value; e.g. include specific KM processes in existing project lifecycle methodologies and use them for improvement and implementation projects. These projects improve performance.

There are two supporting sets of activities; Communications and Training. It's important to help people understand why knowledge-sharing is important and how it could benefit them. And, some people will need to be given new skills to enable them to apply the KM processes.

Finally, the desired outcome is continuously improving performance, plus continuously improving knowledge management capability. Which takes you back to point one: Capability Assessment vs. Strategy – can you measure what your KM approaches and activities have contributed?

So, if you can do it right, knowledge management should really just be applied common sense. But, as is also sometimes said, common sense isn't all that common and it's all too easy to be lured into the knowledge management nonsense trap.

Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage and improve performance for nearly two decades. Implicit in that is the need to share our knowledge and to help clients build their own capability to drive sustainable performance improvement.

We are not wedded to a particular methodology or framework. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these. Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to manage and improve performance.

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References:

Wilson, T.D. (2002) "The nonsense of 'knowledge management'" Information Research, 8(1), paper no. 144

[Available at <http://InformationR.net/ir/8-1/paper144.html>]

EFQM Knowledge Management Framework 2005

[Available at <http://www.efqm.org>]