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*“Simply, improvement...”*



# Knowledge Management in the Project Lifecycle

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*“We no longer talk about cost and time over-runs. Project performance is now predictable.”*

## Learning from experience

I recently facilitated a workshop on KM in the Project Management Lifecycle with a private sector client at a public sector conference on Knowledge Management. My client works in the capital projects (construction) business of a major UK company and it was fascinating to hear his description of their evolution of KM over the past 20 years.

I'd like to share some of the learning points here. It was equally interesting to hear the questions asked by the public sector delegates and to understand how applicable the learning was in their people and service-oriented business.

## Learning vs. Knowledge

We asked the workshop delegates about the difference between Learning and Knowledge. People suggested “learning” was backward-looking and that it was perfectly possible for people to have learnt something, but not to apply that learning. By contrast, “Knowledge” is about the application of information to make a positive impact. It implies some interpretation, in a context, in order to build new solutions and prevent recurrences of previous problems.

- ▶ **learning** (information) is about where you have come from;  
**knowledge** is about what will help you get to where you want to go to;  
**judgement** is the filter that separates knowledge from learning  
(L+J=K)
- ▶ knowledge management is much more about influencing successful outcomes than it is about technology that helps collect and retrieve information

## KM in a project environment

The particular project environment my client described was one where some 300 projects are completed each year with a spend of up to £1000 million p.a.. It is complex, with multiple customers and multiple (including regulatory) stakeholders. Every project is a one-off.

Early approaches to knowledge management focussed on documenting the project processes and produced very detailed process maps with supporting information which project managers and teams were expected to follow.

Over the years though, the focus of the organisation has changed:

- from construction
- to delivery
- to project
- to solution

The current focus on solutions means that, in some cases, a construction/facilities solution may not be the best way to meet their clients' needs. They need to think creatively about how to achieve their clients' objectives in a way that adds value, is cost effective and environmentally sound.

Some of their clients have fast-changing marketing campaigns which means project processes have to be agile as well. Extensively documented and "rigid" project processes cannot meet these needs. A key learning point has also been that capturing knowledge about previous projects may not be very useful if the demands of the future are significantly different.

So, there has been a move away from capturing information about previous projects, documenting processes and making all this available via the corporate intranet. Today, knowledge management puts the emphasis on intelligent individuals, working within clear frameworks.

Project processes tend to be frameworks more than production procedures, where frameworks imply intelligent interpretation, rather than disciplined deployment

There is an equal emphasis on leadership and management. Without the right leadership behaviours and management intervention, predictability of delivery and predictability of performance in use is intrinsically very low.

Project management has now been broken down into key areas, each of which has a Subject Matter Expert (SME). These SMEs are people who are actively involved in day-to-day project work and who can provide guidance on the best approaches for current and future projects. Getting answers is now relatively easy – you just need to know which person to speak with. No more searching the intranet, no more hoping you can find the right procedures and templates.

They now believe they understand the difference between “small k” and “big k”:

- “small k” = the librarian approach to managing knowledge
- “big k” = asking the question “how do I influence successful outcomes?”

## The benefits

Cost over-runs and delays are no longer part of the language – project performance is far more predictable. There have also been significant improvements in safety and environmental performance.

Because project performance is now stable and predictable, the organisation is beginning to set stretch targets, which really challenge performance and demand greater innovation in developing solutions.

## Where would we start today?

Hindsight is a wonderful thing, but the following points were made as a summary of points to bear in mind in developing an approach to knowledge management in a project environment:

- ▶ Start with an holistic operating model
  - ▶ My client uses their own Organisational Effectiveness Model (they do not “chase awards” as they believe it can drive the wrong behaviour)
  - ▶ Industry versions exist and are equally applicable: EFQM, ISO 9001 QM, etc.
- ▶ Processes before organisation
  - ▶ PRINCE2, PMBoK, OGC Gateways, etc. are all well-established process models for project management
- ▶ Underpin with leadership behaviours
  - ▶ Develop a Leadership model (describe how leaders should act), build capability
- ▶ Make the response appropriate for the maturity of the organisation
  - ▶ Project Management Maturity Model, Investors in People model, EFQM, etc.
  - ▶ Use frameworks that allow scalability ... avoid ‘one-size-fits-all’

## Where does the future lie?

The key decision is to get the balance right between “personal” vs. “codified” knowledge.

If the current knowledge is more tacit, i.e. based on personal know-how, and the organisation’s focus is on developing innovative solutions, then adopt a “personalisation” strategy where the emphasis is on developing people networks needed for innovation.

If the current knowledge is more explicit, i.e. based on codified data and information, and the organisation’s focus is on developing standard solutions, then adopt a “codification” strategy where the emphasis is on providing structured and consistent information to develop high quality, standard solutions.

- People to people	- People to document
- Tacit knowledge	- Explicit knowledge
- Innovative solutions	- Standard solutions

## Our track record

Our consultants have been helping organisations in the private and public sectors to manage and improve their performance for nearly two decades. We have supported European Quality Award winners and have clients in both the public and private sectors whom we have helped with their approaches to knowledge management.

We are not wedded to a particular methodology. We help clients identify their improvement goals and then develop an approach to achieve these; invariably ensuring their people develop the skills to make further improvements themselves.

Please contact us for more information about how we can help you to apply knowledge management and improve your performance.

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