MANAGING KNOWLEDGE
THE LEGEND OF THE COFFEE POT

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The effective management of knowledge is widely recognized to play an important role within consulting organizations. It enables projects to be delivered with improved efficiency and also has an important impact on quality and delivery capability. Consulting firms market themselves placing great emphasis on their corporate experience and knowledge capital. Clients may have high expectations regarding the way that this knowledge will be leveraged during an assignment, raising questions such as:

"We selected your company due to your experience in this domain. How are you utilizing lessons learned from other cases to benefit this project and our organization?"

A fundamental question is how we as consultants bring our collective knowledge assets to bear. The tools and processes implemented within organizations vary significantly depending upon an organization's size, geographic distribution and the types of knowledge to be managed, but even with these things in place the tendency for people to re-invent the wheel on a daily basis remains. Creative minds follow their passion to invent before taking the time to check what has been invented before, and time is wasted searching for answers to questions that already exist.

Experience has shown that the key to success is to create a knowledge sharing culture where employees understand the importance of both contributing to and leveraging knowledge assets as a natural part of their daily work. During my junior years as a consultant a senior colleague described the importance of this with a very simple story.

'When this company started', she said, *'we were 50 employees located in one office spread over two floors of a building. If you were working on a project and needed information or an answer to a question you would consult one central resource – the coffee pot. If you went to the coffee room* and chatted with colleagues you would quite easily find either someone who could answer your question, or someone who knew someone who would be able to help. The coffee pot was often something of a savior. But now with more than 5 000 employees spread across five continents the coffee pot has long since exhausted its limitations. That is why we document different types of knowledge objects in databases for easy retrieval, connect specialists globally through networks and communities, and bring people together in face to face events such as conferences. Knowledge management has never been more important to the competitive nature of our business'.*

So how does one get a knowledge management initiative off the ground within a department or organization? The following suggestions are based upon learnings from a variety of knowledge management initiatives:

Launching a Repository

Keep any repository, intranet site or database to be used for the sharing of knowledge simple to begin with and as user-friendly as possible. Employ a logical structure that is intuitive as people will not have the patience to spend time looking for information. Make the repository an interesting place to visit by including information that is regularly updated. If the repository is static, people will lose interest very quickly.

Define the Content to be Managed with the Business in Mind

The design of any knowledge management system begins with the questions: What types of knowledge are most important to manage? What will add the most value to the business? You won't be able to knowledge-manage everything, so give some thought to priorities and classify the types of items that you need to include. A sales organization, for example, may choose to prioritize the re-use of well-written proposal sections in order to increase their hit-rate; a software company may wish to re-cycle code in order to reduce costs; project managers may wish to share lessons learned in order to reduce risk in future projects, or a marketing agency may want employees to share new ideas between global sites to fuel the process of innovation.

Decide How Quality will be Managed

Think about how you will maintain the integrity of the repository and the quality of the items stored within it. A number of approaches can be put in place. At the very least compile a set of clear submission guidelines for each type of item in your repository. If you have the manpower available, set up a review scheme involving either the centralized review and approval of new contributions (usually performed by the manager responsible for the repository) or by setting up a peer review scheme. You may wish to identify and highlight a set of 'top contributions' that have been established to be of great value and have been very well documented. Organizations often refer to these as best practices. Quality is what will draw respect to the repository

Policies and Incentives

In a world filled with busy people incentives and policies may be needed before knowledge management will really take off. The optimal approach will be dependent upon the profiles of the people who will be participating in the knowledge management community and to some degree organizational culture. An incentive suggests that people who either create or re-use knowledge assets will be rewarded in some way. This may be as simple as the acknowledgement of new contributions in a monthly newsletter, or as elaborate as giving credit for knowledge management-related activities towards annual employee performance criteria. Policies, on the other hand, are usually integrated into a business process and applied in situations where the management of knowledge is considered business-critical.

A project manager, for example, may not be permitted to conclude and archive a project until he or she has documented key lessons learned in a project database. Beware of creating mandates for contributions. Organizations that have stipulated that community members must submit a fixed number of contributions each quarter have often ended up with rushed submissions of poor quality presented close to the deadline, adding little value to the business and compromising the integrity of the repository as a whole.

Don't Forget about Tacit Knowledge

Whilst there is a lot of talk about information repositories and documented knowledge a lot of important knowledge is never documented. The knowledge that is walking around in people's heads is of instrumental value to an organization and a good knowledge management approach seeks to harness this. Think about how you can bring people together to share their knowledge in discussions (whether face to face or virtual), in presentations, conferences and other interactive events. Encourage your experts to spend 30 minutes sharing knowledge at a lunch seminar as a valuable contribution to your knowledge management ecosystem.

AUTHOR BIOGRAPHY

Samir Parikh is a principal business consultant, practice manager, and consultancy CEO with over 25 years of industry experience. In 2000, Samir founded *SPConsulting* a global management consulting firm specializing in organizational strategy and change management.

With a track record of projects conducted in more than 50 countries the firm works closely with companies that are transforming into consulting-based organizations, delivering solutions and professional services in highly competitive environments.

FURTHER READING

Samir is the author of *The Consultant's Handbook*, published by John Wiley & Sons. This book provides a comprehensive guide for the practical implementation of consulting skills by professionals working in consulting and professional-services-related disciplines.

The book contains additional guidelines, examples and use-cases to support readers in implementation of consulting techniques, as well as practical tips and lessons-learned from real consulting engagements.