
I heard it through the grapevine: making knowledge management work by learning to share knowledge, skills and experience

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Abstract

This article explores the challenge of getting people to willingly share knowledge skills and experience, so that their organisations may gain leverage in their collective intelligence. It does so by addressing links between knowledge management and organisational learning to increase the speed and targeting of intelligence across organisations. There is a significant role for training and learning specialists in eroding the practical and political barriers to making knowledge management a reality. A case study, expressed in the form of a mini-scenario, is used to illustrate how learning is a crucial ingredient that assists people to work smarter. Key principles for breaking down barriers to implementing knowledge management are developed for adaptation to particular organisations.

1. Introduction

Few people would doubt the statement that it is desirable for organisations to maximise the shared intelligence of its people. Yet, the practical implementation of “knowledge management” is often problematic.

A fundamental weakness in many knowledge management implementation processes is a failure to take account of the powerful internal forces within organisations, i.e. culture, leadership style and values, structures and systems, skills and resources. These forces are both logical and irrational in nature, as they are connected with practical and political barriers to change.

This article builds on my previous article (Vol. 30 No. 5 – “The creativity advantage – is your organisation the leader of the pack?”). We revisit a systemic framework for thinking about organisational strategy, so that knowledge management may be placed inside the strategy rather than being “grafted” on to the periphery of the organisation. It also makes a range of suggestions for minimising barriers to sharing knowledge, skills and experience based on practical examples from leading organisations.

2. Revisiting the systems model of strategy

Any knowledge management strategy must fit inside and integrate with the “container” of the organisation’s strategy. For synergy to arise there needs to be a sympathetic alignment of three main ingredients for success:

- *Culture, leadership style and values.* The “way we do things here”, the leadership role and style and the espoused and realised values that the organization lives and breathes.
- *Structure and systems.* Both formal and informal organisational structures. Systems include rewards, recognition and career systems.
- *Skills and resources.* The attraction, development and retention of talent, supported by information, finance and an appropriate climate.

A metaphor for this is that of the three-legged stool (Figure 1).

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Figure 1 A system view of strategy



Any changes in one part of the system must be matched by changes in the other part of the system if balance is to be maintained. Thus, if the organisation is to successfully integrate knowledge management as one of its “hard” or “soft systems”, this will need to be balanced by the other elements if it is to succeed.

3. An integrated model of knowledge transfer

As part of my own continuing research programme I have discovered organisations that use a variety of strategies to erode barriers to knowledge transfer. However, no single “recipe” emerges. Before going on to explain some specific cases, we shall examine the range of possibilities, for each sub-system. These are summarised in Figure 2.

We shall now go on to explore examples of some of these strategies in action.

4. Making knowledge management work – the influence of culture, leadership style and values

Knowledge management will suffer if: knowledge = power.

The fundamental dynamic we need to address here may be summed up by the following equation. A shift from: knowledge = power, towards: knowledge sharing and usage = much increased power, both formal and informal

One challenge in managing knowledge is the reality that knowledge is power in many organisations. Many individuals in organisations choose to keep knowledge to themselves (analogy = knowledge stored in a “battery”). Other organisations choose to distribute it

through a network (analogy = knowledge distributed through a “national grid”).

In the battery analogy, as batteries lose their power if they are not used, so it is that out-of-date knowledge loses value. Indeed, much knowledge in business depreciates more rapidly than a battery, since it often has zero value if it is not timely. This difference can be represented graphically (Figure 3).

The distribution of formal power is intimately connected with leadership. Informal power is “hidden” in the culture and is surfaced through the values of the organisation. For knowledge management to succeed there must be an alignment of these power sources in favour of sharing knowledge, skills and experience. Some examples of practices that work are given here.

4.1 Leaders as knowledge champions

Glaxo Wellcome Research and Development place special emphasis on the use of “thought leaders” as knowledge carriers within the organisation. Crucially, their role involves ensuring that knowledge is leveraged into profitable innovations, which is important in a busy environment where knowledge can easily be “lost”.

Ideal candidates to act as thought leaders are people who have some relevant understanding of the area involved, but, who crucially have access to wide networks and who possess excellent advocacy skills.

4.2 Valuing conflict

Psion is a good example of an organisation that understands the vital contribution of conflict in generating new knowledge and ultimately new products. Although research and development and marketing depend on each other for new product innovations, there are frequent misunderstandings and conflicts. These are valued since it is understood that conflict leads to improved ideas and results in terms of innovation.

4.3 Networking funds

Richer Sounds are mentioned as an organisation where a small financial incentive is offered to employees to go to the pub for networking purposes. Since the pub is part of the “shadow system” of the organisation, this also addresses the point about loosening up structures if knowledge, skills and experience are to flow easily.

Figure 2 An integrated model of knowledge transfer

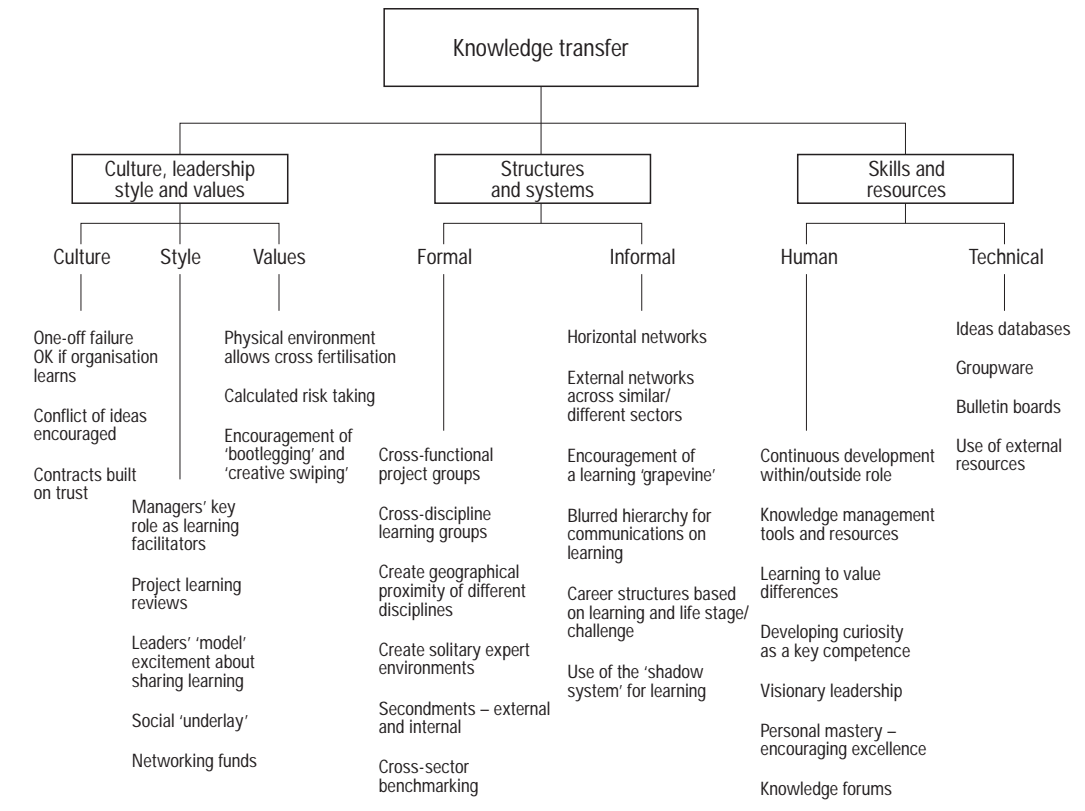
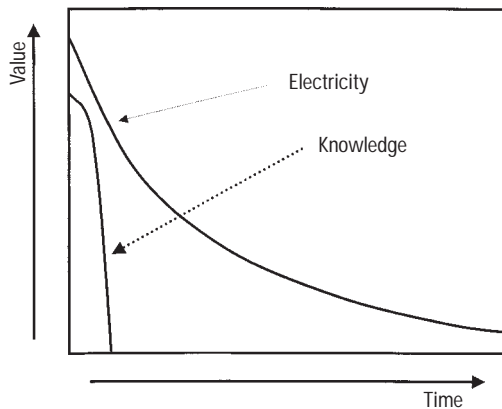


Figure 3 Comparative depreciation curves – knowledge versus electricity stored in a battery



5. Making knowledge management work – the influence of structures and systems

As Marvin Gaye might have put it, much of the corporation's intellectual capital is shared through the "grapevine". This means that it is largely inaccessible to people who do not participate in the informal structures.

Although many people consider the organisation's grapevine as an unhelpful gossip machine, it is the place where knowledge, skill and experience are transferred easily and efficiently. Any organisation that is serious

about knowledge management should be finding ways of facilitating the "underground" network without formalising it. Some examples of practices that work are given here.

5.1 Going underground

One example of a company that recognises the power of the alternative view is a wine merchant chain that has a "shadow cabinet". This is composed of future directors of the company and is encouraged to formulate "the alternative view" on specific issues of future importance to the company.

5.2 Knowledge, skills and experience-based structures

Several organisations now have knowledge, skills and experience-based structures to enable resources to flow through the organisation better. These structures are a way of formalising and leveraging shared intelligence about:

- Who knows what?
- Who can do what?
- Who has done what?

Making such structures work requires three components to work effectively:

Clarity of individual contribution

This is not a curriculum vitae, but a short statement of their personal contribution in the form of key knowledge, skills and experience that they can offer, as seen from the viewpoint of their major stakeholders. This includes other information that would be of use for networking purposes.

Appropriate communication channels

There have to be a number of convenient communication channels that people are prepared to use. If ICTs are used as the structural vehicle, they should provide significant advantages in terms of speed, precision of targeting, etc., compared with informal networking solutions.

“Looseness” in the structure

The organisation must be sufficiently loose to allow people to be able to resource other experts for periods of time. It is no good having a brilliant information system that lets you know who is good at what if you cannot access them. This can present a serious limitation in an age where slack resources are not a popular idea in corporations. One of the practical strategies currently available to address this point is 3M's 15 per cent “boot-legging” rule, which gives individuals encouragement to spend time on speculative activity.

5.3 Upside-down reward systems

Rover Group operate an ideas transfer network that works on the “national grid” model mentioned previously, from which people are to creatively “swipe” ideas so that they can be successfully transferred from location to location. If an individual can demonstrate that they have “stolen” an idea, a reward flows to the “thief” and the “owner”.

5.4 Removing knowledge “constipation”

James March and Herbert Simon foresaw the problems associated with information overload in their seminal book, *Organisations*. In this they proposed that people in organisations would make rational choices if all the relevant information were available to them, but they tended to accept a “good enough” solution especially when under pressure.

Part of good knowledge management therefore involves cleaning up the information environment, removing “junk” and out-of-date information. Some companies are experimenting with ICT devices such as “sweepers” to make space for more important information.

6. Making knowledge management work – the influence of skills and resources

There is a need for people to become astute and selective about their knowledge requirements. The following example shows a company who are experimenting with a range of knowledge management tools and resources which will address both short- and longer-term knowledge, skills and experience needs of a sales team. It is presented as a scenario, written from a sales representative's viewpoint, and illustrates a situation where knowledge transfer has been leveraged through specific skills development and a number of resources:

Stuck on the motorway again. Time to check in with a few reps that share my geographical network for different products. I call Mike and discover that Mr Jones has had a “rash” of visits from our biggest competitor. We agree that the worst thing we could do would be to bombard Jones with our people tomorrow. Mike knows the receptionist well and will find out the best time for me to visit to give us the edge.

I'm told that the traffic jam is going to last for 20 minutes, so I decide to call our “What's new, what's hot and what's not” interactive voice mail system. We all drop in “hot news” in the form of “micro stories” about customers, technology and products. The great thing about the system is that we were trained to tell “stories” that are no longer than one minute apiece. Each story contains a “nugget” of useful information that I can adapt to my own selling strategies. I've also been trained in the art of “creative swiping”, that is adapting stories to suit different selling situations. This means that I can quickly convert the “story” into a successful strategy for the future.

I also comment on a story from a colleague about dealing with a particular receptionist. The more contributions that I make that others use, the better my bonus gets. I can choose from a range of rewards according to what switches me on personally.

As the traffic gets moving again, I put my tape on. This contains a range of information that helps me do my job better, supplemented by music and humour to “oil the wheels of learning”. This quarter, I've been sent a masterclass interview with one of our top sales reps, discussing how to overcome selling nightmares. This is followed by a “serious” discussion with a famous alternative comedian, where he explains how he dealt with objections on the road to success. The finishing piece is a “spoof” on the selling process, entitled “The seven strategies of highly defective salespeople”, where one of our company's great leaders gives us an insight into success through the medium of “failure”. The

bit I liked the best was strategy No. 7 – “Sharpen the razorblades”. This points out that a “knife” will do sometimes! I often over-engineer my presentations!!

In terms of learning, the example covers levels 1 and 2 of the following model:

- (1) Adaptive learning – the “what” of learning, e.g. knowledge that help us do today’s work.
- (2) Generative learning – the “how” of learning, e.g. skills that help us do tomorrow’s work.
- (3) Transformative learning – the “why” of learning, e.g. values that help us create a sustainable future.

To achieve these levels of learning within this situation, a number of learning strategies were required:

- “storytelling” (learning how to tell powerful stories that spread knowledge, skills and experience);
- “creative swiping” skills (to improve learning effectiveness by adapting learning to other situations);
- time management (to release space so that learning had a “slot” in the day);
- accelerated learning workshop (to improve learning efficiency).

Other elements outside the remit of skills and resources were also deployed at the same time, e.g. cleaning-up communications (reduce noise in the system) and a top-down leadership strategy to stress the importance of learning.

7. Some key principles for breaking down barriers to implementing knowledge management

Clearly, it is important to act in all three systems simultaneously if knowledge management is to be successfully implemented in a given organisation.

In conclusion, the following principles may be drawn from the various examples in this article:

- It is vital to address the “irrational” system when implementing a knowledge management strategy.
- Devise reward and recognition systems that address the sharing and successful utilisation of knowledge, skills and experience.
- Train and develop people in the art of “creative swiping”, that is the adaptation of knowledge, skills and experience to suit different contexts.
- Knowledge champions can be very helpful as catalysts. These can be specially created roles as used in companies such as ICL or be made a key role of all leaders.
- ICT-based knowledge management systems must offer significant valued advantages over informal networks for them to gain acceptance in the majority of organisations.
- The built environment is just as important for the transfer of knowledge, skills and experience. As we move to more virtual organisational forms, this aspect of organisational life will have to be increasingly managed.
- One way to improve knowledge management is to address the problem of information overload. A variety of “clean-up” methods are possible.
- There is usually a need to develop skills to handle knowledge effectively. It is vital that knowledge is delivered through the individual’s preferred learning “channel”.

These principles do not constitute a “recipe”, rather that they are a “cookbook”, from which you should create a recipe that fits and integrates with the particular circumstances of your organisation.

Further reading

- Cook, P. (1998), *Best Practice Creativity*, Gower, Aldershot.
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