The World Bank Profile: Best Practices in Knowledge Management

Description: Knowledge management is a systematic process of connecting people to each other and to the information they need to effectively act. Knowledge management initiatives are intended to enhance performance through the identification, capture, validation, and transfer of knowledge. APQC has been identifying, studying, and sharing knowledge management best practices for almost a decade. In that time, APQC has benchmarked hundreds of organization, and the World Bank has been one of the most compelling success stories. The World Bank's decision to embrace knowledge management in the mid 1990s was rooted in turning internal knowledge into commercial success, achieving operational excellence, and forming more intimate ties with external customers.

Since that time, it has been a best-practice example for managing a successful knowledge management initiative. The World Bank has developed new ideas and tangible results through its focus and allocation of resources. It is an excellent model of consistently effective principals APQC has found among leading learning organizations.

For instance, that most people want to share what they know and avoid others' mistakes. But employees are impeded by a lack of time, a cumbersome process, and questionable sources. Some of these barriers are alleviated by technology, but applications are not the solution. Technology applications do not, in themselves, create a need or demand to change behavior or share knowledge. It is critical to select and implement technology as part of a larger, systematic knowledge management change initiative. Another key principal is that senior executive support alleviates the barriers to sharing knowledge by encouraging appropriate behavior and embracing new approaches. Employee support follows if knowledge management principles and tools are applied to important business issues. Fostering a knowledge-sharing culture is the result of a successful knowledge management strategy. It is not a prerequisite.

Most importantly, knowledge must be embedded in employees' work flow so that it can be captured, shared, and reused during daily responsibilities. By providing value to those who participate, employees experience greater professional development. Of course, rewards and recognition are important, but they will not take the place of knowledge-sharing systems that work and provide value.

In addition to these basic tenets, APQC has found that knowledge management occurs in five developmental stages. Getting started down the right path is often difficult, and staying on course can be even more so as roadblocks emerge. APQC's Road Map to Knowledge Management Results: Stages of ImplementationTM illustrates how organizations can position themselves and determine what tasks and activities are appropriate at an enterprise level (Figure 1, page 8). Every stage of KM implementation involves unique issues, tactics, tools, characteristics, requirements, and action steps. Few organizations have reached Stage 5, but the World Bank has.

STAGE 1: GET STARTED

The fire to manage knowledge starts with the spark of inspiration. There has to be a new source of energy or interest to cause knowledge management to appear in the option set for the organization. Someone must become inspired with the vision of what it would be like if the organization could effectively support human knowledge capture, transfer, and use.

Energized by his or her vision, this champion (also characterized as an advocate or evangelist) begins to search for opportunities to share the vision with others and to find opportunities to demonstrate the value of KM to the organization. For early adopters of knowledge management like the World Bank, this stage was perhaps the most difficult. Now that more is known about knowledge management, this stage proceeds more quickly. The central task for the champion at this stage is to create a vision that inspires others to join in the exploration of how managing knowledge might contribute value to the enterprise and its people.

Key activities for Stage 1 are to:

1. define knowledge management in terms to which people can relate,
2. identify others to join the cause,
3. look for windows of opportunity,
4. capitalize on intranet systems, and
5. enlist the IT department to provide tools and a balanced view of knowledge management.

A critical lesson is that benchmarking and success stories create a compelling picture of what is possible. Also, a single advocate must quickly find cohorts, preferably ones with clout in the organization. The third critical lesson is to know your own corporate culture/history to avoid pitfalls and baggage that might be associated with knowledge management. If the champion has been successful, he or she has created a compelling rationale or vision, engaged others in the cause, and has enough interested participants to form an exploratory group. An executive with some resources has been enlisted. Local grassroots efforts are noticed and seen as evidence the organization should proceed. This stage ends with a decision to explore knowledge management in a more deliberate way.

APQC's Road Map to Knowledge Management Results:

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STAGE 2: EXPLORE AND EXPERIMENT

Stage 2 is the turning point from individual interest or local efforts in knowledge management to an organizational experiment. It is characterized by the decision to explore “how knowledge management might work here” and an evolution from individual passion to organizational action. The champions have successfully connected to a need and a senior executive sponsor at this point. The central task at this stage is to formulate the first iteration of the knowledge management strategy, how it fits with the business, pilots to test the concept, and the initial steps for moving forward. A small group is usually ordained to undertake this on behalf of the organization.

Key activities for Stage 2 are to:
1. form a cross-functional knowledge management task force,
2. select pilots or identify current local efforts, and
3. find resources to support the pilots.

A critical lesson is that the pilot issue is important to the business, and success will lead to demonstrable results. Also, the pilot group must be willing to share or debrief what it has learned. If the pilots have been clearly identified and/or selected and have secured ownership and buy-in, the involved parties are ready to begin conducting the pilots. Stage 2 ends with the kickoff of a pilot.

A large organization may go through each of these stages at various times. For example, one knowledge management initiative may be ready to move into Stage 3, whereas initiatives in other areas are just being defined and therefore may still be in Stage 1 or Stage 2.
STAGE 3: ORGANIZE PILOTS AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT INITIATIVES

This stage signals the formal implementation of knowledge management initiatives. The goal of Stage 3 is to provide evidence of knowledge management's business value by conducting pilots and capturing lessons learned. For the knowledge management practitioners responsible for the implementation of pilots, the following are the key activities for Stage 3:

1. fund the pilots,
2. develop methodologies that can be replicated and scaled up, and
3. capture lessons learned.

A critical lesson is that it is important pilot efforts produce results, but it is equally important that the organization learn how to implement knowledge management better. The stories of the pilots need to include the lessons learned as well as the business results. Also, the facilitators and participants in these pilots and grassroots efforts will become the core team for future expansion. They need to have formed their own community and developed their own methods for sharing lessons and methods, as well as providing moral support. After the pilots, the decision can go one of three ways:

1. expand and support the knowledge management efforts, in which case a strategy to proceed and budget are required;
2. improve the existing efforts, which usually leads to pushing the responsibility for maintenance of the pilots back to the business units; and
3. do nothing, which means the employees will often revert to prior behavior as people who knew how to make knowledge management work leave the unit.

Advancing to Stage 4 seems to be characterized by the following:
- The results of the pilots are compelling and raising interest and awareness in other units.
- Grassroots efforts are popping up, and with them significant duplication of effort and learning about knowledge management implementation approaches is occurring. Multiple groups are wrestling with the same issues, and the central knowledge management group is aware of this.
- Management realizes the organization is missing the potential to leverage the lessons being learned from implementation knowledge management efforts.

STAGE 4: EXPAND AND SUPPORT

When an organization reaches Stage 4, knowledge management has proved valuable enough to be officially expanded to become part of the organization's funded activities. Demand for knowledge management support by other parts of the organization tends to be high, which provides additional evidence of its value. Pilot results are an added benefit. High visibility and the authority to expand are a mixed blessing; the added visibility of costs and resources devoted to knowledge management will require more formal business evaluation and ROI justification. The good news is that unless unforeseen factors derail the efforts, the efforts are on the way to being considered a strategic and necessary competency.

Key activities in Stage 4 are to:
1. develop an expansion strategy,
2. communicate and market the strategy, and
3. manage growth and control chaos.

A critical lesson is that a central, cross-functional group has to create an expansion strategy and identify required resources. Resources to successfully support widespread knowledge management initiatives are not automatically available and have to be conscripted or developed from other units. Also, communicating the knowledge management strategy and its rationale to the organization requires the same kind of vigorous marketing as any other large-scale initiative.

Finally, rapid expansion will inevitably entail some confusion and missteps, which can be alleviated somewhat by an active, central cross-functional group. In order to move to Stage 5, several best-practice organizations conduct internal assessments of how their knowledge management efforts were working. By examining successes and gaps in the strategy, they developed recommendations and tools to begin closing those gaps. The World Bank, for instance, engaged an outside team of knowledge management practitioners to assess strengths and weaknesses in its strategy and deployment.

STAGE 5: INSTITUTIONALIZE KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

In some ways, Stage 5 is the continuation of Stage 4 to its logical conclusion of full, enterprise-wide deployment. However, Stage 5 differs from Stage 4 in three fundamental ways:
1. it does not happen unless knowledge management is embedded in the business model,
2. the organization structure must be realigned, and
3. evidence of knowledge management competency becomes part of the formal performance evaluation.
Sharing and using knowledge become part of the organization’s mode of operations, as well as an expected management competency. Only a few organizations have reached this stage, including the World Bank.

Now, the World Bank gains knowledge through external learning and internal research and evaluation. It shares this knowledge with clients and staff and applies it through products and services and by understanding its successes and failures. Some of the challenges it now faces as a consequence of its rapid growth include mainstreaming best practices, ensuring accountability, integrating knowledge management and learning, scaling up efforts to share knowledge externally, and managing innovation (creativity or control). The development paradigm is shifting to create multiple flows of knowledge, empower people through access to knowledge, develop communities of learners, and build strong knowledge partnerships.

The World Bank believes that business survival requires sharing knowledge. Sharing knowledge will increase speed (faster cycle times), improve the quality of service, increase innovation (testing new approaches), and reduce costs (eliminate unnecessary processes). Lending alone cannot reduce poverty. Knowledge sharing brings new actors to the stage and provides global access to development know-how, which could change the poverty equation.
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