

# Masterclass

## Identifying objectives

Identifying the top-three objectives of a knowledge management programme is a crucial prerequisite.

By Stan Garfield



The objectives of any organisation are normally abundantly clear – to make money or to fulfill a particular purpose. Likewise so many organisational activities.

But knowledge management (KM), by its very nature, is different. It is multi-faceted and, in many respects, conceptual so that practitioners need to have a clear picture of the results they wish to achieve first before embarking on a fully fledged programme.

The first thing to do is to determine what results you would like to achieve. Is there a particular challenge you would like to overcome or an improvement you hope to make? If not, ask people in your organisation what is currently causing them the most pain in doing their jobs. Look for opportunities to help alleviate these pain points through learning, sharing, re-use, collaboration or innovation.

If you can't find any challenges to overcome or improvements to make – and no one is experiencing any knowledge-related pain – then don't start a KM programme. You will be trying to push a solution in search of a problem and there will be no reason

for anyone to adopt it. At the other extreme, if you find lots of challenges and opportunities for improvement, you will need to narrow down the list. Pick three challenges or opportunities for which KM will likely provide the greatest benefit to the organisation. These top-three objectives represent the starting point for your programme and the core of your communications. Use them to choose, start, review, adjust and stop individual projects to ensure that they help achieve the desired benefits.

### Goals of knowledge management

All organisations can benefit from their people learning, sharing, re-using, collaborating and innovating. Based on an organisation's mission and objectives, specific goals for a KM programme should be defined. Here are 15 goals from which to select in defining your top-three objectives.

#### *Enabling better and faster decision-making*

By delivering relevant information at the time of need through structure, search, subscription, syndication and support, a KM environment can provide the basis for making good decisions. Collaboration brings the

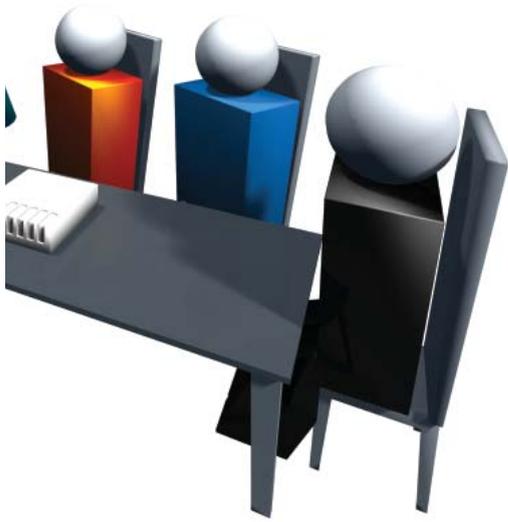
power of large numbers, diverse opinions and varied experience to bear when decisions need to be made. The re-use of knowledge in repositories enables decisions to be based on actual experience, large sample sizes and practical lessons learnt.

#### *Making it easy to find relevant information and resources*

When faced with a need to respond to a customer, solve a problem, analyse trends, assess markets, benchmark against peers, understand competition, create new offerings, plan strategy and to think critically, you typically look for information and resources to support these activities. If it is easy and fast to find what you need when you need it, you can perform all of these tasks efficiently.

#### *Re-using ideas, documents and expertise*

Once you have developed an effective process, you must ensure that others use the process each time a similar requirement arises. If someone has written a document or created a presentation that addresses a recurring need, it should be used in all future similar situations. When members of



your organisation have figured out how to solve a common problem, know how to deliver a recurring service or have invented a new product, you want that same solution, service or product to be replicated as much as possible. Just as the recycling of materials is good for the environment, re-use is good for organisations because it minimises rework, prevents problems, saves times and accelerates progress.

#### *Avoiding redundant effort*

No one likes to spend time doing something over again. But they do so all the time for a variety of reasons. Avoiding duplication of effort saves time and money, keeps employee morale up and streamlines work. By not spending time reinventing the wheel, you can have more time to invent something new.

#### *Avoiding making the same mistakes twice*

As George Santayana once said, “Those who ignore history are doomed to repeat it”. If we don’t learn from our mistakes, we will make them over and over again. KM enables us to share lessons learnt, not only about successes, but also about failures. In order to do so, we must have a culture of trust, openness and

reward for willingness to talk about what we have done wrong. The potential benefits are enormous. If US space agency NASA learns why a space shuttle exploded, it can prevent recurrences and save lives. If the US Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) learns what went wrong in responding to Hurricane Katrina, which devastated the city of New Orleans, it can reduce the losses caused by future natural disasters. If engineers learn why highways and buildings collapsed during a previous earthquake, they can design new ones to better withstand future earthquakes. If you learn that your last bid was underestimated by 50 per cent, you can make the next one more accurate and thus earn a healthy profit instead of incurring a large loss.

#### *Taking advantage of existing expertise and experience*

Teams benefit from the individual skills and knowledge of each member. The more complementary the expertise of the team members, the greater the power of the team. In large organisations, there will always be people with widely-varying capabilities and backgrounds – all should be able to benefit from this. However, as the number of people increases, it becomes more difficult for each individual to know about everyone else and their skills and abilities. So even though there are people with knowledge who could help other people, they don’t know about each other. The late Lew Platt, former chief executive of Hewlett-Packard (HP), is widely quoted as saying, “If only HP knew what HP knows, we would be three-times more productive”. Knowing what others know can be very helpful at a time of need, since you learn from their experience and can apply it to your current requirements.

#### *Communicating important information widely and quickly*

Almost everyone today is an information worker, either completely or partially. We all need information to do our jobs effectively, but we also suffer from information overload from an increasing variety of sources. How can we get information that is targeted, useful and timely without drowning in a sea of e-mail, having to visit hundreds of websites, or reading through tonnes of printed material? Knowledge management helps address this problem through personalised portals, targeted subscriptions, RSS [really simple syndication] feeds, tagging and specialised search engines.

#### *Promoting standard, repeatable processes and procedures*

If standard processes and procedures have been defined, they should always be followed. This enables employees to learn how things are done, leads to more predictable and higher-quality results, and enables large organisations to be consistent in how work is performed. By providing a process for creating, storing, communicating and using standard processes and procedures, employees will be able to use them routinely.

#### *Providing methods, tools, templates, techniques and examples*

Methods, tools, templates, techniques and examples are the building blocks supporting repeatable processes and procedures. Using these consistently streamlines work, improves quality and ensures compatibility across the organisation.

#### *Making scarce expertise widely available*

If there is a ‘resource’ in great demand due to having a skill which is in short

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supply, KM can help make that resource available to the entire organisation. Ways of doing so include community discussion forums, training events, ask the expert systems, recorded presentations, white papers, podcasts and blogs.

*Showing customers how knowledge is used for their benefit*

In competitive situations, it is important to be able to differentiate yourself from other firms. Demonstrating to potential and current customers that you have widespread expertise and have ways of bringing it to bear for their benefit can help convince them to start or continue doing business with you. Conversely, failure to do so could leave you vulnerable to competitors who can demonstrate their KM capabilities and benefits.

*Accelerating delivery to customers*

Speed of execution is another important differentiator among competitors. All other things being equal, the company that can deliver sooner will win. Knowledge sharing, re-use and innovation can significantly reduce time to deliver a proposal, product or service to a customer. And that translates into increased win rates, extra business and new customers.

*Enabling the organisation to leverage its size*

As an organisation grows, the increasing size is only a benefit if it can use the knowledge of all of its employees. Through the use of tools such as communities, expertise locators and repositories, the full power of a large enterprise can be exploited.

*Making the organisation's best problem-solving experiences re-usable*

Consistently applying proven practices, also known as best practices or good practices, can significantly improve the results of any firm. For example, if a manufacturing plant in one part of the world has figured out how to prevent the need for product rework and all other plants around the world adopt

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**Ask people in your organisation what is currently causing them the most pain in doing their jobs. Look for opportunities to help alleviate these pain points through learning, sharing, re-use, collaboration, or innovation.**

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this practice, savings will flow directly to the bottom line. By establishing a process for defining, communicating and replicating proven practices, an enterprise can take advantage of what it learns about solving problems.

*Stimulating innovation and growth*

Most businesses need to increase their revenues, but it becomes increasingly difficult as industries mature and competition intensifies. Creating new knowledge through effective knowledge sharing, collaboration and information delivery can stimulate innovation. If you achieve this and the other 14 goals enabled by KM, you should be able to achieve growth.

*Obtaining user input*

KM programmes cannot be developed and implemented in a vacuum. In order to determine what needs to address, it is important to obtain user input. Conduct surveys to identify current challenges and needs, identify opportunities and request suggestions. Use an 'opportunities survey' to identify current challenges and needs and request suggestions for addressing them. Use this survey to determine business needs which KM can help support.

Finding out what your users are struggling with, what they would like to see provided and what they think should be done will help ensure that the top-three objectives are based on real needs<sup>1</sup>.

**Challenges**

After you conduct an opportunities survey, compile and review the results. Here are some examples of challenges you may find:

*Bad decisions:* Poor decisions are made, it takes too long to make decisions or it is impossible to make decisions. The impact is lost business, missed opportunities and reduced profits;

*Poor search capability:* It is hard to find relevant information and resources when needed. As a result, people waste time searching and cannot take advantage of information that exists but can't be located;

*Reinventing the wheel:* Employees have to start from scratch each time they start a new project. This leads to wasted effort, increased costs, delays and suboptimal results;

*Repetitive mistakes:* The same mistakes are repeated over and over. This causes cost overruns, losses and unhappy customers;

*Don't know what we know:* It's difficult to find out if anyone in the organisation knows something, has done something or has solved a similar problem before. Any potential advantages from re-using previous experience are squandered;

*Ignorance:* Information is communicated slowly, to a limited subset of the organisation, or not at all. The result is that people are unaware of what has been done before, what is happening elsewhere and where the organisation is heading. This is not good for morale, customer satisfaction and business results;

*Inadequate standards:* There is a shortage of standard processes, procedures, methods, tools, templates, techniques

and examples. This results in inconsistency, sloppy work and poor quality products and services;

*Expertise shortages:* Experts are hard to find, in great demand and unavailable when needed. The effect is that scarce expertise is missed rather than leveraged and knowledge that could have been applied to solve a problem or exploit an opportunity is not;

*Poor reference capability:* Your organisation is unable to respond to customers who ask for proof that you know how to help them and that you have done similar work before. This causes bids to be lost that could have been won;

*Long cycle times:* It takes too long to invent, design, manufacture, sell and deliver products and services to your customers. The impact is missed markets, delayed revenues and customers lost to competitors.

### Opportunities

Use the results of the opportunities survey, the goals of your organisation and your knowledge of what other organisations are doing to help compile a list of opportunities. Here are some which you may identify.

*Speed and agility:* Enable rapid decision-making. This optimises resources, increases the win rate and positively affects the state of the business;

*Findability:* Make it easy to find relevant information and resources. This takes advantage of available intelligence at the time of need;

*Effectiveness:* Take advantage of existing expertise and experience. If you know what you know, you can apply it appropriately;

*Learning:* Communicate important information widely and quickly. An informed workforce can act in accordance with company strategy and direction;

*Repeatability:* Provide standard processes, procedures, methods, tools, templates, techniques and examples. The result is consistent products and services of high quality;

*Opportunism:* Make scarce expertise widely available. Applying key knowledge from one part of the organisation when it is needed by another can make the difference in winning a deal, satisfying a customer or resolving a crisis;

*Efficiency:* Accelerate delivery to customers. The sooner the customer receives what they ordered, the sooner you will receive the revenue. And the more likely they are to order again;

*Leverage:* Enable the organisation to take advantage of its size. Being larger than your competition is not an advantage unless you take steps to exploit this fact. It can be a disadvantage if it results in delays, suboptimal resource assignments, or inconsistent treatment. The benefits of large size include increased responsiveness, greater range of expertise and better back-up capabilities;

*Reliability:* Make the organisation's best problem-solving experiences re-usable. The fact that someone has already solved a problem allows the same approach to be used the next time it arises. This speeds up resolution, reduces negative impacts and keeps customers satisfied;

*Innovation:* Stimulate growth through invention, process improvement, cycle time reduction and creative new ways of doing things. Benefits include market leadership, revenue growth and improved brand equity.

### Examples

From challenges and opportunities such as these, choose the three which are most compelling to your organisation to create your top-three objectives and relate them to desired business results. Here are three sets of examples.

#### *Non-profit organisation*

- Lower costs by preventing people from reinventing the wheel all the time;
- Eliminate deficits caused by repeating the same mistakes;
- Increase contributions by innovating and creating new capabilities.

#### *Manufacturing company*

- Increase orders by introducing better collaboration between sales, services and back-office functions;
- Increase revenue by stimulating a flow of ideas for new products and services;
- Increase profits by sharing and re-using lessons learnt.

#### *Consulting firm*

- Increase win rate by improving the proposal development process;
- Lower sales and delivery costs by re-using proven practices;
- Increase engagement quality by collaborating with customers and partners.

### Summary

A KM programme must respond to the fundamental needs of an organisation. If it helps address these challenges and opportunities, it will succeed. If it is not tightly coupled to core business objectives, it will fail. ■

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### References

- 1 For more information about conducting surveys, please see chapter seven of the Ark Group report, *Implementing a Successful KM Programme*.