Knowledge Management (KM)

THE BASICS

What is KM?

Knowledge (experience-based know-how) is a key resource in any organisation. The more you know, the better you perform. Knowledge Management is about systematically and routinely making use of the knowledge in the organisation, and applying it to key activities; tapping into 'What you collectively know' to help deliver your goals, objectives and mission. It aims towards never making the same mistake twice, and making every decision in the light of the full knowledge base of the organisation.

The management of knowledge needs to be part of your standard practices, just like the management of other key resources such as money, people or reputation.

Can you manage knowledge?

Some people argue knowledge can't be managed - that it is a personal human attribute, which is too elusive to manage. Certainly knowledge can't be controlled, but capturing and sharing knowledge can be encouraged and facilitated, and the environment within which knowledge flourishes can certainly be managed.

Managing knowledge involves creating the:
- **Right Conditions**; you need a culture of trust, openness, sharing and learning.

- **Right Means**; you need to have a systematic approach, tools, and processes for exchanging knowledge, and the,

·   • **Right Actions**, where people instinctively seek, share, and apply experience, best practice, know-how and new ideas.

What does Knowledge Management make possible?

The value of Knowledge Management is delivered in three areas:
·   • **Better and faster decisions**; by tapping into the experience of the organisation, you can avoid pitfalls, reapply proven solutions, and make the right decision first time.

- **Greater empowerment**; by enabling people to access and use the knowledge of their peers, you empower them to take accountability for their own performance.

- **Faster learning**; cutting the personal and organisational learning curve in everything new that you do.

Knowledge management will increase effectiveness in the short term, and at the same time provide an inventory of experience and expertise for the future, allowing a flexible, fast-paced approach to your key activities.

CONNECTING AND COLLECTING

There are two main approaches to managing knowledge: **Connecting** and **Collecting.** These are complementary, and it's worth doing both in parallel.

Connecting

Connecting means putting people in touch with people, and building networks within your organisation and with other organisations, so that people can share knowledge with each other.

These networks are often called "**Communities of Practice**". Email is an excellent medium by which people who are faced with a problem or issue can raise this with the community, and receive answers. Communities can also meet face to face to discuss common problems, and exchange knowledge about possible solutions.

A **Peer Assist** is another mechanism for knowledge exchange through connection. These are structured, facilitated meetings or workshops where people are invited from other departments and units, or other organisations, to provide their experience, insights and knowledge to a team who have requested help.

Collecting

Collecting means routinely capturing new knowledge created during your operations and activities, and storing it for future re-use. Knowledge collection helps build a valuable knowledge base covering the key activities of the organisation, and can have long-term payback, but requires resources. Someone has to be assigned to facilitate the knowledge collection meetings, and write up and circulate the results.

An **After Action Review (AAR)** is a means of collecting knowledge during an activity. It is a short focused meeting, for the team, by the team, lasting half an hour or less. A team needs to hold AARs on a fairly regular basis to keep up with the pace of changing conditions. This sort of routine team learning allows you to make course corrections in your project, based on what you learn.

A **Retrospect** is another knowledge collection event which takes place at the end of a project, involving as many of the project team members as possible. It is a quick and effective way of capturing the knowledge before the team disbands or moves on to another project. It is a structured and facilitated meeting, which lasts from a couple of hours to a couple of days.

The learning generated through above mechanisms, ie **Knowledge Assets**, is accumulated into a 'knowledge bank' which can be centrally managed through a variety of tools, from a simple filing system to more sophisticated mechanisms.

The Knowledge Management Model
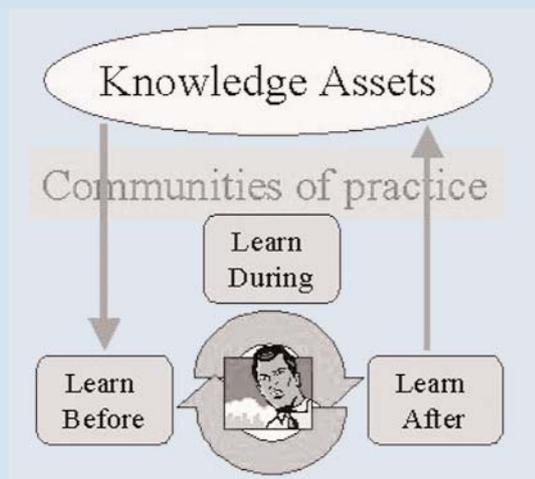
The model above describes how knowledge can be managed within the concept of cycles of operational activity, such as project cycles or cycles of planning and review.

• A **knowledge Asset** is validated knowledge, captured and stored for re-use. Knowledge assets often contain the context behind the activity, recommendations for how to do the activity in future, a list of the people with relevant experience, stories from the past, and valuable reusable documents.

• **Learning Before** - knowledge is accessed at the start of a project or a piece of work, to ensure that you start the work with a full knowledge base. You can Learn Before through accessing Knowledge Assets, interviewing experts, or holding a Peer Assist (see opposite).

• **Learning During** - new knowledge is identified and collected during implementation, while work is in progress, so that operational plans can be changed immediately as new knowledge becomes available. The After Action Review is a good process for Learning During (see opposite).

• **Learning After** - upon completion of a task, or at the end of a project cycle, the knowledge is collected from all those who took part, and collated for future use. A Retrospect is a suitable process for Learning After (see opposite).

• **Communities of Practice** (CoPs) are networks dedicated to sharing knowledge among practitioners, in order to help them practice better. These practitioners can be professionals within an organisation, or in several organisations, or they can be amateurs who form a community that is not work-related at all. The members of the community share a common sense of purpose, and desire to share work-related knowledge and experience. They operate though trust & loyalty, as well as co-dependency. They already realise the value of sharing knowledge with their peers.

• **Accountable knowledge roles** are represented by the face within the business activity cycle at the bottom of the picture above. Individuals need to be identified who can take responsbility for making sure that knowledge management processes are applied, and that knowledge is captured, collated, validated, stored and re-used.

ISSUES AND CHALLENGES

The cultural challenge

Western culture does not treat knowledge-sharing as a default activity. Since our school days, we are brought up with the assumption that we need to solve everything ourselves, that re-using others' solutions is "cheating", and that asking for help is an admission of failure. The transition to a knowledge-sharing culture in an organisation is a journey that will take a long time - probably two years or more - and which will need management support, and the allocation of time and resources for driving the change.

What are the main cultural barriers to Knowledge Management? How can they be addressed?

Barriers	Solutions
Knowledge is power	Help people realise that sharing knowledge increases collective power, and that accessing the knowledge of others makes you more effective.
Building empires	Focus on building communities which cut across organisational divisions.
Individual work bias	Promote and reward work in teams and communities, and show how this gives better results.
Not invented here	Redefine "here", so "here" could mean "this community" or "this organisation", not just "this team".
Local Focus	Promote a community focus and a corporate focus rather than just a local focus.
Fear of not knowing	Help people realise that it is better to look widely for solutions than to rely on your own personal store of knowledge.
Penalising errors	Help people learn that mistakes are OK so long as you learn from them and share that learning, and so long as you are not repeating someone else's mistakes.
No time to share	Capturing and sharing knowledge needs to be seen as part of the job, not an add-on.

Technology

You don't need new technology to start sharing your knowledge. You can begin knowledge sharing using meetings, conversations, paper and pen, filing cabinets etc. But if you want to exchange knowledge at a distance, and with other offices and other organisations, then technology will be very useful. Think carefully about who needs to be involved in the knowledge sharing, and what level of technology they can access. There is no point in setting up an Intranet-based system if half your site offices cannot access it.

What technologies can help you manage your knowledge?

Means	Use
	Email: Email is the simplest and one of the most effective technologies for sharing knowledge at a distance. Threaded discussions on in-house email systems or on the Internet are a great way for a community of practice to raise questions and exchange solutions.
	Intranet: An Intranet can act as a universally accessible corporate filing system for the knowledge of the organisation. However it needs to be seen as a filing and sharing tool, not as a set of glossy pages designed to impress! Structure the Intranet around the key activities of the organisation, and make sure that publishing material is easy and quick.
	Communication tools: There are many electronic communication tools which can help build networks within your organisation. For example the chatroom software "msn messenger" (free from Microsoft) can be very powerful in allowing people in remote sites to have online conversations.
	Collaboration tools: Video-conferencing systems are a very powerful way of bringing remote sites together, but are expensive. Microsoft Netmeeting - another free software application - is a simpler alternative.
	Video: One of the best ways to transfer knowledge is through the use of stories. This is even more powerful if the people with the knowledge are allowed to tell the stories in their own words. A picture tells a thousand words, and a moving picture tells them movingly, so consider the use of video to capture and transfer knowledge.
	Simple technology: Sometimes the simplest technologies are the best. Conference telephone calls are a great way for a community to stay in touch. Newsletters can be a good way to disseminate learnings, knowledge can be exchanged face-to-face in meetings and conferences.

GETTING STARTED

First Steps

So you can see the value of your organisational knowledge, and you can see the benefit that knowledge management would deliver, but how do you get started? Here are the first steps you should consider.

• Look on this as a change project. It will require an organisational culture change, to become a learning organisation with a knowledge sharing culture. Realise that it is a multi-year journey.

• Make sure this transition has support and commitment from the senior management of the organisation. Make sure there is a senior champion for knowledge management.

• If possible, assign the responsibility for managing the transition to a person or a small team. These should ideally be well-respected people within your organisation.

• Learn before starting! Join the Bellanet discussion group, contact BOND, attend one of the BOND workshops on the topic, read one or more of the books written on the subject.

• Adopt a simple model for KM, such as the model of Learning Before, During and After activity, developing Communities of Practice, and building Knowledge assets.

• Introduce some of the learning process and tools, and try them out on some pilot areas. Capture learning, reapply it, watch it make a difference. Talk about the difference it made. Get other people to talk about the difference it made.

• If you find a robust solution that delivers value in the pilot areas, look for a way to roll out the tools, behaviours and practices across your entire organisation.

WANT TO FIND OUT MORE?

Visit the Knowledge Management section on BOND's website at **www.bond.org.uk/lte/km.htm** for:

• More **information about KM and examples of its application**;

• KM resources available, including a **useful list of books and academic writings** on KM, as well as links to useful **organisations and resources available on the web**;

• Information about **BOND training and other events focusing on KM.**

The Guidance Notes Series aims to provide concise 'how-to' information on a variety of topics useful for the development sector. This edition also provides signposts to resources for those keen to pursue the topic further. This edition has been produced with the financial assistance of the Community Fund, UK

Top Tips

• Get a clear idea of the knowledge which is crucial to your organisational goals. What do you and your staff need to know, in order to perform your key activities?

• Make sure that operational knowledge is captured after each key activity.

• Make sure that this knowledge is accessed before the start of the next key activity.

• Make sure any important learnings are embedded in the processes and procedures of the organisation.

• Establish processes for learning during activity, to improve the way you work on a continuous basis.

• As you gain knowledge, store it somewhere so people can access it in future.

• Build networks of people across the organisation, and between organisations, so people who share common problems can exchange common solutions.

• Make sure that someone in each of the major activity areas or divisions is given accountability for making sure knowledge is managed.

• Knowledge needs to be identified as something of value. It is as valuable to you as your staff or your finances - it needs management attention. Identify someone on the management team who can act as knowledge manager or KM champion.

• If you are not already routinely managing knowledge, then appoint a small team accountable for making the transition to a KM culture.

• Introduce communication and collaboration technologies to allow more easy sharing of knowledge.

• Retain the knowledge you have - hold exit interviews as key people leave to capture what they know.

• Knowledge Management is a cultural transformation. Pay attention to culture and behaviours, don't just introduce new tools and processes and assume all will be OK!