

Chapter 6

Implementing KM Lessons from the Frontline

Rusnita Saleh

University of Indonesia, Indonesia

Niall Sinclair

Independent Researcher, Thailand

ABSTRACT

While the KM initiative highlighted in the case study in the previous section is still in its formative stages, it would be safe to say that the majority of KM implementation projects are likely to take anywhere between one to three years to even begin to have any significant impact on the organizations involved. In other words, KM is something that takes time to embed itself into the working fabric of the organization, and so anyone who thinks that KM implementation is going to be a short-term affair is fooling themselves; as well as setting a dangerous and unattainable level of expectation in any potential stakeholders. Overall, there are many barriers that stand in the way of successfully implementing KM, whether it is a lack of access to current information, a lack of clear communications, difficulty in transferring knowledge and information, difficulty in maintaining the relevance and currency of knowledge and information, lack of support from senior managers, or limited resources – both in time and personnel.

1. BACKGROUND

Every organization which attempts to implement knowledge management (KM) faces a unique challenge. There are many obstacles, both organizationally as well as individually, facing those who are tasked with embedding KM into the working fabric of any organization. However, after decades of such implementations it is apparent that certain issues remain constant, and certain outcomes appear to happen on a regular basis, if not always exactly duplicating previous outcomes. So, what are the key issues that need to be recognized, planned for, and dealt with when undertaking a KM initiative, and will describing them prove to be of use to those preparing to take on the challenge of implementing KM-based organizational change? The answer of course is yes, but a yes with a caveat: that caveat being that all business-related lessons are context-specific, and maybe more importantly, no context ever

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exactly duplicates a previous one. Why is this so important? Because, no two environments are ever the same, each organization, and indeed each individual employee within each organization, functions in a different way, with different objectives and different motivations, both personal as well as business, dictating their preferences and actions.

However, whatever the business circumstances of the organization and environment you work in, there are two key pieces of information you simply must know if you want to implement KM successfully. The first is exactly what KM actually means to the organization you are trying to implement it in, and the second is what will succeed for that organization within its own business context and environment. In other words, you need to find out what works!

Therefore, this chapter is mainly focused on helping KM practitioners to find out what usually works in KM implementations and why it works. It contains insights based on 20 years of real-world experience in implementing KM in numerous private and public organizations in a variety of countries and cultures on three different continents (Europe, North America and Asia) around the world.

2. THE REALITY CHECK

The items in this section provide an overview of some crucial organizational issues that need to be recognized and planned for in KM initiatives; and together they should provide a useful checklist of items which KM practitioners need to be aware of if they want to avoid some of the more obvious pitfalls awaiting them during KM implementation projects.

Although no two business environments are ever a complete match, all of the following issues are quite likely to be repeated in any working environment where KM implementation is going on. Why? Because they are all linked by that most over-riding of driving forces behind all organizational decision-making and commitments to change; that is, human nature itself.

So, based on this context, here in no particular order are 8 issues you need to be aware of before you start planning and implementing any KM initiatives.

a. What Is KM Exactly, And Does It Really Matter What It Is?

If someone asked you what KM is, you'd probably be able to reel off an answer pretty quickly. Now repeat that question with every individual and organization you encounter, and soon the number of answers is multiplying fast into the hundreds, thousands and tens of thousands of definitions. In fact if you Google the question 'what is knowledge management?' you'll get something like 15 million responses. So, which is the right definition? The answer is simple, they all are!

In his book 'Stealth KM: Winning Knowledge Management Strategies for the Public Sector', Niall Sinclair (2006) devotes a whole section to describing what he calls the 'definitional warfare' surrounding the term KM. 10 years later and nothing much seems to have changed and you will still find the same kind of warfare going on, and the same types of individuals promoting the same types of views about what KM is, or isn't. In fact, these types of individuals do know what KM is, at least from their own perspective, but then so does anyone else who has an interest in the topic and sees it through an entirely different lens. So, the first lesson any smart KM practitioner should learn is that KM is way too broad and way too deep to ever be constricted by a singular view of what it is, and how it should function.

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