

Project Management v Knowledge Management
by John Atkinson IPMA-B, Managing Director Wexford Project Management Services Ltd.



Managers of companies decide every day to plan and execute a project. They form project teams, work to deliver a specific output and then the team disbands. Is this process good or bad for organisational knowledge? The temporary nature of a project team operation appears to be in conflict with the requirement of successful knowledge management (KM). Effective KM develops practices of building capabilities within organisations through knowledge sharing procedures, establishing collaborative teams, building formal and informal networks, establishing expert sources and databases and sharing best practices are the goal.

How can temporary project teams deliver this long term type of organisation culture in the work place? This paper highlights some results from a survey examining integration of knowledge and project management, especially as it applies to implementation of knowledge initiatives.

For a Project manager to deploy a knowledge management change in an organization, he will need to be heavily conscious of the factors that will make it a success. Emphasis on leadership styles to deal with the codification issues and the sharing issues will require a PM to demonstrate a number of leadership skills. The ongoing success of KM is based on changing the organisational culture to generate an atmosphere and infrastructure that facilitates and supports knowledge sharing.

It appears that emotional rather than financial rewards are most appropriate to encourage this or at least if financial rewards are a factor they are ones that will be received in the future. Knowledge is a strategic initiative and needs to be rolled out as a programme with a number of small wins to achieve ongoing success.

The scope and purpose of KM work is difficult to describe. The scope and the outcome of the project are difficult to measure. It will be difficult to get sponsors and team members to become committed to KM projects. This will be especially true if most senior managers feel knowledge is already shared in the company. But you will get the opportunity. Everyday we meet projects that are involved in cultural change and the words knowledge, learning organisation, knowledge workers and knowledge management keep cropping up.

I will offer you a simple sum to try to demonstrate the importance of all this? What does it mean if knowledge is shared or not?

If companies have less than 50% of their employees sharing knowledge and they have a staff turnover ratio of 10% per annum, it is mathematically possible that they will not have any shared corporate knowledge in 5 years. If this is true then the really critical 'leading edge' knowledge may leave the company even faster.

This of course can be balanced by the new knowledge entering the organization through the replacement staff. The skill for managers is capturing and disseminating the knowledge of the new entrants throughout the organisation. The other skill is to make sure the corporate

knowledge in the heads of those leaving is captured while they are in the organization rather than trying to capture it as they leave.

So as a PM what tools and techniques are here for you? You have to implement a change of behaviour of the company employees- oh and by the way there is no money in it for them and if they share their knowledge they will be allowing the newest recruit to better perform the task at hand. Just another typical change project!

From a risk point of view, really effective knowledge sharing of all information means that any employee can walk out with company databases, private information and customer and product information on a device attached to their key ring. Clearly a serious risk and one that requires knowledge management. In this sense it is to protect strategic knowledge that gives a corporation its key competitive advantage.

It is hard to imagine a successful knowledge sharing environment given that the basis of pay rates in the west being is frequently based on the number of years of experience and knowledge accumulated- be it formal or experiential. Yet in fast moving areas, the information and knowledge they had yesterday can be out of date within a few short years. Rather than constantly retraining there is an opportunity for employees to become closer to the customer for the service or the product provided by the company.

This then is the **“What’s in it for me”** that the PM must sell to get buy in. If the knowledge is available then it is easier to impress and add value for the customer- to get the next order, better price etc.

PM’s have known this for years as we have a process called ‘lessons learned’ to be completed at the end of the project. How often is this completed? Most project managers of my knowledge and acquaintance usually find they are off on another job/project; the files are just left, the web site maybe closed down and the files binned. Knowledge management projects offer considerable challenges to project managers. However the corporate vision of an ever innovating and rapidly changing organisation cannot come to pass with knowledge sharing. Descartes said ‘I think therefore I am’. Organisations cannot think- people can. Once they have a thought it needs to be shared otherwise no one knows the thought exists and if it has any value. As project manager you will be asked to develop projects to implement the sharing of thoughts. Have fun.