



Case study

Knowledge Management is critically important for all of us but nowhere more so than in the education sector

A challenge.

In 2004/5 we were involved in a radical change of direction at Becta (British Educational Communications and Technology Association). My role was to advise them on rationalising knowledge to fit their new direction and project managing the move.

In their previous existence they had provided publishing services for organisations across the education sector, but had at that time borne little responsibility for much of the content and data passing through their hands. Suddenly they were faced with taking complete responsibility for managing all of this content. More importantly, they were responsible for the availability of knowledge at time and place, its quality and its relevance.

Meeting the requirements of legislation suddenly seemed a small concern compared to understanding the scope of delivering knowledge for the entire education spectrum in the UK.

Knowledge architecture

Very quickly I realised that this task could easily defeat us unless we defined a very solid methodology based on sound principals. It was also our view, based on our experiences with technology that our approach needed to be simple. After consulting with different disciplines from educationalists to technologists, we had found no ready made answers, but we did have very clear

parameters, from which we were able to define our methodology.

First, we reviewed the corporate five year plan, because we realised that this plan was going to be the driver for every activity and thus the source of knowledge consumption. Next we carried out process review of the core business and took into account plans for new processes. Next we mapped the relationships with external sources of knowledge, making allowances for these exchanges and visiting for the first time some interesting rights issues.

Lean

The problem with attempting knowledge audit at mature organisations is much like trying to understand entirely an adult brain. Not every piece of knowledge is accurate, or even legal, let alone important or even relevant. To read it all and attempt to make decisions about it is as futile as to try to audit the brain of a schoolboy. In order to overcome these challenges, we borrowed from other disciplines to create Lean Knowledge Audit™, a process which identifies the knowledge needed to support core processes and it

makes sure that knowledge is available and adequate. In addition to this core knowledge, we had to address the entire range of data, information and content. This “haystack” as we sometimes described it, represented the real character and flavour of the organisation and gave it the flexibility and the reserves to adapt to new challenges, so we were determined not to lose it, but to flag up its status and make it manageable.

Ontology

By working with knowledgeable people and strategists within the organisation, we were able to define an ontology, which captured the key concepts, while at the same time making allowances for the many vocabularies used to store or retrieve information and to define and store within the system the relationships and assumptions which were commonly understood within the organisation as well as the people who had expertise in these areas, thus creating a fluid, resource with a strong development strategy and an important part to play in everyday business.

Enterprise architecture

The final step was to define a technical architecture capable of supporting this system.

Knowledge management is not new; it is simply a new umbrella for a range of disciplines, which strong organisations have always done at some level. Having a knowledge management strategy or better still, having someone in charge of it can deliver dramatic improvement right across your organisation. Good reasons to put a knowledge management strategy in place include:

- making available increased knowledge content in the development and provision of services
- achieving shorter new product development cycles
- facilitating and managing organizational innovation
- leveraging the expertise of people across the organisation
- benefiting from 'network effects' as the number of productive connections between employees in the organisation increases and the quality of information shared increases
- managing the proliferation of data and information in complex business environments and allowing employees to rapidly access useful and relevant knowledge resources and best practice guidelines
- facilitating organizational learning
- managing intellectual capital and intellectual assets in the workforce (such as the expertise and know-how possessed by key individuals) as individuals retire and new workers are hired
- focusing the entire organisation to understand their core competencies and values and their unique strengths
- reducing the risk of publishing inaccurate or misleading content
- Meeting legal requirements such as FOI,SOX,MIFID

Knowledge management can be supported by a host of systems, most importantly the ones you already have, but it is vital to be clear from the outset that Knowledge management is not a technology problem with a technology solution. Many initiatives fail every year from managing relationships with customers to managing documents or content because a technology vendor has sold a system to which the organisation could never have expected to adopt. More critically, in our view, adopting your organisation's culture and processes to a rigid system has potential to permanently damage the organisation. Every knowledge management initiative in our view should be built around people and designed to support and improve the organisations strengths.