

Gaining Buy-in for KM

EDITED BY LAURA SLATER



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Executive summary

NO KNOWLEDGE management (KM) initiative can succeed without buy-in. However innovative, time-saving, or potentially profitable a KM project or team may be, it will always be essential to achieve buy-in for it within an organisation. The type of buy-in needed falls into two categories: commitment from the top (senior management must buy-in to the extent that the KM strategy becomes part of overall *business strategy*); and the engagement of employees (the people within the organisation must embrace the project on an individual level so that it becomes a self-sustaining, integral part of the *business culture*). Both are needed for KM programmes to be truly embraced and to flourish within an organisation, but opinions do differ as to which is most important.

On the face of it, the benefits of KM are easy to sell as executives already place considerable value on – and are looking for ways to leverage – the knowledge and expertise of their employees. According to an IBM study of 1,700 CEOs in 64 countries:¹

- 71 per cent of respondents saw human capital as their most valuable commodity; and
- 75 per cent said that that collaboration of employees is critical to organisational survival in a rapidly changing marketplace.

However, while most senior managers accept that knowledge management is a good idea, many misunderstand what it really means for their company in operational

terms. For example, one survey of knowledge managers and executives found that less than half of companies had a definition of what ‘knowledge’ meant to them in an operational sense (and even fewer had communicated that definition to staff).²

If KM is misunderstood, as it frequently is, as essentially the prerogative of the IT department, how can it have anything other than a technical solution – one that requires heavy investment, upgrades, and constant management? A KM initiative that relies of tools, rather than people, can never be self-sustaining.

Moreover, when knowledge leaders talk about what KM can do for a team, or the business (improved profitability, greater efficiency, quicker response times) they often fail to emphasise what this means for individual employees (therefore failing to address the all-important question of ‘what’s in it for me?’ that will encourage true buy-in from staff). Where knowledge management is seen as an add-on, rather than an integral part of the overall business strategy – and where true buy-in and commitment to a culture of sharing, collaboration, and reuse of knowledge does not exist – KM initiatives are doomed to fail.

In a changing business environment, a KM strategy cannot remain static. It must continue to evolve and add value to the business or it will quickly become irrelevant. Bringing together the expertise and advice of experts in knowledge management, this report begins by examining the essential trends impacting the uptake and

implementation of KM. The first article examines how to ensure KM initiatives are sustainable and adaptable to the changing state of business by directly linking them to core business values and overall business strategy.

Business strategy, of course, is forged in the boardroom, and this is also where buy-in for KM must first be obtained. Several of the expert contributors to this report stress the importance of obtaining high-level support for KM so that the requisite time and resources are assigned for a comprehensive, organisation-wide programme. They discuss how an organisation can craft a successful implementation plan to generate leadership engagement, and outline practical techniques for gaining high-level support, such as creating a 'springboard story' that will demonstrate to senior management the *measurable* benefits of KM. One article in particular outlines the business case for knowledge management and enterprise content management (ECM) systems and includes case studies of success stories, lessons learned, and problems encountered by organisations that have implemented a KM or ECM strategy.

The vital importance of leadership in driving a KM initiative is also highlighted in this report. It is necessary to have someone dedicated to the task whose seniority makes it clear to all employees that the company places significant value on KM activities. One article looks, in-depth, at the role of the chief knowledge officer (CKO) and outlines the specific skill set this individual requires, and the support they need to succeed.

Achieving 'buy-in from the top', in combination with strong knowledge leadership, will help in securing the second type of buy-in: the buy-in and support needed from all employees. True buy-in across an organisation – top down and bottom up – will allow the development of a KM

culture that is adaptable and self-sustaining. Accordingly, several of the expert contributors to this report discuss various techniques for generating employee buy-in, from the power of psychological ownership to 'pain' and 'gain' (or push and pull) incentives.

Finally, two in-depth case studies examine KM success stories in very different sectors. One study looks at how a Fortune 500 payroll and customer service agency used KM to solve specific challenges faced by customer service teams, resulting in measurable success in terms of time and money saved, increased productivity, and improved accuracy. It clearly shows how the initiative succeeded in changing the mindset of the organisation as a whole and in sustaining commitment to the strategy. The final case study focuses on how KM processes have been used to improve operations across the Canadian government and demonstrates how even the most successful KM programme can falter and fade without sustained buy-in from the top.

Research has shown that the return on investment from KM can be considerable, but also that KM initiatives deliver greater value the longer they are in operation – and they can take at least two years before they begin to show 'significant' returns.³ Without a solid understanding of how KM strategy ties directly to the overall business strategy of the organisation, and what it means for employees on an individual level, KM initiatives will not generate the kind of organisation-wide commitment that delivers measurable results. By building a supported KM culture where all levels of the organisation are committed to KM, knowledge management professionals will be able to build a sustainable programme that will grow, will weather changes in the business environment, and will help to transform the bottom line.

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