Knowledge Management Practice in Organizations: The View from Inside

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Chapter 2
Knowledge Culture

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ABSTRACT

Every organization exhibits a culture made up of the beliefs and norms guiding the day to day behavior of the individuals in it. Culture may or may not be in alignment with senior management’s official pronouncements, formal operational rules, or the public image an organization’s leaders wish to project. Culture may support or undermine discipline in managing and sharing knowledge. This chapter explores how certain key characteristics are common for organizations in which knowledge management is a priority underpinned by funding and by senior management rewards for behaviors supporting the use of knowledge toward overall organizational benefit.

BACKGROUND: WHAT IS MEANT BY CULTURE?

Every organization contains, and operates according to, a culture arising from multiple characteristics ranging from individual employee personalities through team dynamics to deliberate policies on the part of management and leaders’ emphasis on desired behaviors. Organizational culture is a product of “what goes” in day to day operations - in other words, of what is considered normal, desirable, or untoward (effective cultures root out poor behaviors because of the common approbrium). Most individuals seek to be respected and admired in their workplaces and will gravitate to behaviors appearing to produce such respect and admiration; in addition they intuit what behaviors will get them ahead and thus put effort into such behaviors. Similarly, individuals learn quickly what behaviors will not produce desirable results. Culture, therefore, is an ecosystem of balances between self interest, team spirit, and tradeoffs between the ideal and the possible as individuals navigate rules, beliefs, behavior and communication styles, and their own aspirations.

Certain types of cultures are more common in specific environments. For example, small nonprofits tend to operate according to
standards different from those seen in large companies. Banks and insurance companies are inherently different from charities just as hospitals are different from software firms in terms of normal and expected behavior patterns, interpersonal communication practices, and the degree of latitude given to employees in decision making.

In its essence, corporate culture is the sum total of the answers potentially given to the question “what is it like to work here?” A strongly positive culture will get responses in the vein of “I just love working here - we have a great team, we all look out for each other, and our efforts are noticed and rewarded by managers who always seek to support our career advancement.” A negative culture would produce sentiments to reflect disappointment, apathy, and lack of loyalty. (Unfortunately, national economic crises and personal financial struggles skew what would otherwise be a natural tendency to leave pain-inducing workplaces and seek out positive ones.)

A similar measure of organizational culture is the extent to which employees stand behind - and are given the means and tools to put into practice - official mission and vision statements. It is not uncommon to find employees’ experience of reality at quite a contrast with the framed statements on the wall and the banners on the Website.

The expression “toxic workplaces” could refer to hazardous waste disposal sites, but it most often describes environments where envy, resentment, and hostility create unproductive behaviors and much stress on the part of employees. In settings where managers and leaders - possibly through simple lack of interest in or awareness of what goes on in the management layers below them - allow untoward behaviors to persist, it is not surprising to find high turnover and low productivity. Conversely, in environments where managers and leaders take an active interest in reward-

ing positive behavior, it is common to find outstanding collaboration, mutual support, team cohesion, and an unusually high degree of ‘going the extra mile’.

Organizational culture is evident in the well-known phenomenon of “the new owner” or “the new-broom manager.” Change may be a welcome correction to an untenable situation - or a catastrophic destruction of a well functioning unit. New management may sensitively diagnose the existing culture of a team, department, or organization and then move to make suitable adjustments - reallocating work assignments, introducing new tools or procedures, and in other ways demonstrating understanding of the value of employees’ knowledge and expertise. Conversely, new management may impose its own preferred practices without regard to what worked well in the past, thus demonstrating disregard for employees, invalidating their sense of pride in work, and in other ways losing staff members’ trust.

The entire profession of human resources management pays attention to what motivates employees and to strategies for deriving maximum business value from their talents. The vast volume of literature on organizational leadership bears witness to the understanding that culture is a powerful tool for performance - or a significant hindrance. Dalkir (2011) devotes a chapter (“The Role of Organizational Culture”) to discussing the symptoms of common types of cultures, to outlining the role of norms in the likelihood of successful change, and to summarizing models of culture (ranging from unordered to organized and nimble). In the chapter, she provides useful examples how the maturity of an organization’s methods for orchestrating overall activity is reflected in the sophistication of its knowledge management processes and tools.

How do corporate goals and values translate into day to day practices in knowledge
Knowledge Culture

management? This chapter focuses on aspects of organizational culture specifically associated with organizational and departmental leadership regarding knowledge and on leaders’ individual approaches to knowledge.

Official Values vs. Day to Day Knowledge Behavior

Truisms describing employees as an organization’s most significant assets illustrate the pervasive common acceptance that knowledge is a good thing and should be sought out, nurtured, and rewarded. It would be pointless for organizational leaders to risk their reputations by saying anything to counter the belief; hence the “motherhood and apple pie” element in the concept of knowledge management persists. Examining the budgets (sometimes referred to as ‘following the money’) in a workplace, however, sometimes shows a disconnect between official statements and actual priorities. The reluctance to invest proactively in preventive knowledge security (e.g. indexing and tagging of information objects for future discoverability) is an example of the business assessment (actually, gamble) taken by many that “no calamities will happen while I am at the helm.” Culture, under these circumstances, may be expressed through a shared belief system that places a lower priority on activities and behaviors protecting knowledge and therefore omits rewarding such behaviors - or indeed tolerates behaviors resulting in knowledge loss for the organization.

Davenport and Prusak (1998) look at the attitudes and interpersonal behaviors driving the effectiveness of knowledge in organizations in the “Knowledge Markets” chapter of Working Knowledge. They point out how software is unlikely to solve any knowledge problem and how informal conversations among employees in fact constitute a marketplace in which buyers and sellers trade insight, advice, experience and lessons for a range of desirables such as trust, reputation, and status. When that marketplace is operating effectively, everyone knows where to direct a question; when it is not operating well, awareness of who knows what (or who has specific previous experience) is low, and valuable knowledge goes unapplied. Davenport and Prusak emphasize that knowledge markets can be stimulated through such simple means as giving employees time to talk to each other, and that pathologies may exist so that a free and active knowledge market cannot flourish. Such pathologies include knowledge hoarding (driven by a belief that not sharing knowledge freely and being uniquely in possession of certain expertise provides for job security) and knowledge scarcity introduced through personnel reductions without regard for the lost experience and insight.

The power of culture in inhibiting knowledge acquisition and exchange is illustrated though employee commentary such as “it is assumed that we know our subject … but with so much development in the field, lack of time to monitor the relevant literature is a challenge.” Scientists in public and private sectors often share how they must invest a significant amount of time staying professionally current … at home. “The culture simply does not support workday time being devoted to reading” or “the only way to appear to be working is to be staring at a screen or to be sending emails at regular intervals.”

Example: A research reading room held volumes of relevant reports and much other material directly applicable to the work of analysts. A table was provided for convenience in examining the materials … but no one ever sat down because the table was visible from the hallway. Those needing to go through the volumes did not wish to be seen reading by their superiors.
The simple fix was to relocate the table to a corner; now, analysts could work (by themselves or together) unobserved to ensure their decisions were based on proper guidance.

Similarly, culture supports or undermines discipline in managing and sharing knowledge. If the culture accepts that the majority of documents entered into a repository get classified as “general” or “miscellaneous” … is it any wonder the repository is regarded as useless? If the culture accepts recommendations made in formal documents without backup in the form of references to reputable published evidence … is it any wonder employees pressed for time settle for Internet and crowd sourced “facts”? Such conditions would be immediate indicators of a weak knowledge culture.

If the culture openly discusses the value of and options for knowledge building and management, articulates best practices, and rewards those excelling in such best practices … we expect employees to continue to provide feedback to the managers of information tools so as to support improvement. If the culture poses strict standards for what is accepted as fact … we expect decision making to have the benefit of qualified research.

Instruments for Supporting Knowledge in Corporate Culture

Organizational knowledge culture can be illustrated through a series of potential statements a CEO, departmental managers, subject matter experts, and administrative staff could all endorse. To what extent are the following statements true in any given organization with respect to internal communications and acquisition of external information? Each statement represents a guiding principle organizational leaders may use to organize priorities and to assess how habitual processes could benefit from a fresh look.

Periodically, an Information/Knowledge Audit is performed to ensure every business team, department, or operational unit is optimally “connected to relevant others.”

As it cannot be expected that business teams maintain surveillance over unrelated departments (say, the translation units in organizations addressing client communities in several countries), senior management ar-
ranges for knowledge management experts to audit the organization every few years in order to detect gaps, improve existing processes, and uncover new opportunities (see the Planning for Knowledge Management chapter).

Example: Employees in a call center experience - uncomfortably because they are caught short answering questions - that new products are on store shelves in test markets weeks before the date of the official new-product training session geared to the official rollout. A knowledge audit uncovers that the packaging operations unit in charge of what is printed on boxes/bags/bottles is the first entity to have consumer-facing product information. It is simple to propose implementing a formal process whereby the product development department sending final copy of product information to the packaging department in addition sends it to the call center for inclusion in the product knowledge files.

Example: A publishing company contracts a professional editor to perfect the information on the company Website. The editor subsequently notices that errors already corrected for the Website still appear in printed promotional materials. It turns out the Website and the print materials belong under separate managers who are not formally required to coordinate their work. It is simple to suggest an editorial process to ensure that all text related to the company’s offerings be edited before it is released for use by the relevant managers. In addition, it is logical to propose that the Website and the printed materials receive a final quality control by the editor before expensive printing is undertaken. In other words, it is suggested that knowledge management and quality principles must take priority over the organization chart. (Note: in situations like these, a challenge may be connected to the pride of an individual who feels his or her expertise has been questioned. Considerable finesse is required on the part of the senior manager whose message would focus on (1) the need for the company to be protected from the indignity of errors in promotional materials and on (2) the fact that niceties of grammar and punctuation are not part of the requirements in the graphic artists’ job descriptions.)

Periodically, an Information/Knowledge Audit or similar review is performed to ensure every business team, department, or operational unit is using “optimal work flow processes.”

Far from being an exercise in ‘chasing the latest toy’, the work flow and tools oriented review looks at the continued appropriateness of the flows and tools used day to day by employees. Perhaps a process step is no longer necessary due to the evolution of customers’ capabilities? Perhaps a cheaper, faster, more productive tool now exists? For senior management, such a review gives assurance that employees are indeed using appropriate processes and instruments to do their jobs.

The knowledge audit examining work flow processes has a lot in common with the familiar business requirements analysis. It examines what gets done from the point of view of what the organization needs to accomplish and deliver, and it examines what tools employees have at their disposal to execute those accomplishments and deliverables.

The march of technology provides ample illustration of the benefits to be had from periodic reviews of “what we do and why we do it.” As a simple example, the dramatic decrease of fax usage (in favor of scanned image files exchanged via email or messaging)
has in some environments caused considerable work flow changes. Mail order retailers still sending out print catalogs containing fax numbers and/or reply envelopes as a supplement to their online sales activities are faced with considering (1) the likelihood that today’s and tomorrow’s customers will actually fax an order now that personal computing fax software is much less common and (2) the cost of transcribing the order and customer details into the company’s order processing system. (Perhaps it is desirable not to publish a fax number, thus shifting previous fax order traffic to the phones and thus benefiting from the opportunity for order agents to “upsell” the caller?) The situation is less straightforward for public sector organizations obligated to cater to all manner of outdated communication methods (as in the familiar “if you are using a rotary phone, please stay on the line”), but it is still desirable to examine the options available.

Example: To modernize and make less labor intensive the work flow of fetching and replacing materials in a large collection of archival materials regularly consulted by researchers and members of the public, a bar code based tracking system was added to the item catalog. Of course, the process of affixing bar code labels and registering each label as “belonging” to a given record in the catalog would be painstaking and lengthy no matter what approach was decided on: Start in one corner, working shelf by shelf until all items were labeled - or devise some other sequencing mechanism such as prioritizing popular types of items based on the archivists’ awareness of frequent requests? A review of the options quickly revealed (thanks to a recognition of the Pareto principle that a relatively small number of items account for a relatively large percentage of loan activity) that a much simpler process would yield immediate benefits: The bar code labeling would take place at the point of retrieving an item for lending. In such a work flow, “active” items would be first to receive their bar codes - and be much faster to process the next time they were called out of the collection - while inactive items would be left alone until such time as they were in fact requested (or dealt with systematically once a certain percentage of the collection had been labeled). The approach of starting in one corner, moving from shelf to shelf, would have been logical but would have delayed for a very long time the attainment of faster loan processing and returns tracking for the active items.

Periodically, an Information/Knowledge Audit is performed to ensure every business team, department, or operational unit is using “relevant customer input.”

Customer service is a rich source of examples of opportunities for inspecting work processes with a view to knowledge (or just basic data) sharing. Any reader who has been asked to state his or her phone number verbally to an agent after having already entered it on the keypad will agree the organization missed opportunities to avoid client frustration by a simple capture-and-forward of available data. In fact, customer service operations represent gold mines of opportunity for organizational leaders to derive strategic insight. The value of expensive market research may well be eclipsed by the value of the ready insight available from proper reporting of client interactions.
**Example:** When a commuter line passenger approaches the transit system ticket counter to complain that the transit card appears to deduct incorrect amounts, the ticket employee hands out a card with a phone number to call. It would immediately appear there are sufficient client complaints to warrant a special card, and that the ticket counter employee is not empowered to grant a refund. That would be a giveaway for the transit company’s customer satisfaction specialists. Knowing about the problem is gold - and the details of the passenger calls could inform new decisions regarding the card settings for commuter options (e.g. default trip every day versus occasional trips between other transit stations). But is the transit company taking advantage of the opportunity to fully understand what passengers are experiencing? Are there tools to let business planners see the evidence accumulating from passenger calls? If the customer service call center is focused only on customer satisfaction scores assigned to the calls themselves, systems planners may never find out that while it is perfectly logical from a systems perspective to have an “override” function allowing occasional deviations from a transit card’s default setting … few passengers understand the override function! Thus, the systems planners may never have the opportunity to consider whether the considerable cost of dealing with default-setting-and-override related customer calls is justifiable in the context of losing infinitesimal revenue from the odd passenger who may on occasion travel a distance different from the usual trip: Surely, if it is recognized that the fee per passenger is less closely related to the number of stations traveled than to the cost of operating facilities overall, there must be an option for a simple balance in setting fees in settings where entry and exit barriers do not automatically charge passengers for the distance traveled.

Knowledge derived from customer input can inform policy … if it is captured, interpreted, and applied. A knowledge assessment performed by the transit company would identify opportunities for it to appear responsive to commuters and in addition convey findings to the regional planning entity. If urban planners find out that public transit - for whatever reason - lacks the appeal they hoped for, they can use that input as they address road congestion and all its undesirable results.

*Every job function is “designed” at the outset to include the knowledge management element explicitly.*

When any new position or function is devised, consultations are held with the teams and individuals who will interact with the new incumbent(s). The purpose is to determine what ‘knowledge outputs’ existing functions require from - and can offer to - the newly conceived function. In that manner, knowledge management is enshrined as an integral part of any employee’s responsibilities. In addition, the organization avoids unwittingly creating duplications and gains the opportunity to streamline functions as a result of new capability. For example, the creation of a function responsible for social media activity and client engagement may relieve the marketing department of tasks it was previously undertaking and support the marketing department in tweaking the functions it continues to undertake.

A special benefit of explicitly including the knowledge management component in job descriptions is that it assists in gauging certain aspects of the complexity of every job
and therefore adds a useful dimension in terms of assessing the job’s level of responsibility and hence compensation. If it is clear from the job description that an executive assistant is in charge of presentations delivered to stakeholders or to key clients in pitching a major project, HR will know his or her role carries consequences quite different from those flowing from functions such as managing an executive’s calendar and travel arrangements. If a job entails responsibilities for collecting and disseminating vital information and for exercising considerable judgment in so doing, HR will have useful pointers in terms of determining the salary.

Moreover, a job description with a special segment entitled “knowledge management component” is more likely to offer good guidance as to educational and experience related prerequisites for the position. The component will probably contain words similar to interpret, assess, formulate, and determine - all related to judgment based on knowledge and experience.

Finally, and perhaps most significantly, the job description with a knowledge specific component must set out the activities required for the incumbent to interpret, assess, formulate, and determine (etc). It must state, for example, that the incumbent must stay abreast of new developments by monitoring the relevant professional literature, by attending relevant professional events, by participating in relevant social media fora, and so on. In this manner, the activity of gaining new knowledge and maintaining channels for communicating with relevant colleagues is enshrined within the job function as opposed to being an activity to be carried out during spare time or on the fly (each scenario introducing risk for the organization).

As mandated by senior management, every job description contains specific expectations regarding knowledge capture, retention, and sharing. The means and tools for the specific behaviors are provided and clearly featured in the job description.

In some organizational cultures, employees comment that everyone believes in the inherent goodness and value of knowledge management, but that the function is vaguely or too broadly defined, difficult to understand and apply, and in any case tends to become a ‘nice to do’ when crises and fires to be put out trump the best intentions. Such comments are a symptom that knowledge management, while conceptually embraced, has not been effectively inserted into each employee’s function.

When the culture recognizes clarity of expectation as a driver of behavior and therefore provides such clarity, employees instinctively appreciate knowing exactly what is expected of them. When behaviors associated with knowledge are explicitly included along with domain specific requirements, the organization has the opportunity to integrate the two. A sales manager’s obligation to provide a quarterly report on the sales team’s order writing performance and its discoveries about the marketplace as a result of conversations with current and potential customers is more likely to make him or her specify the market intelligence activity in job descriptions for sales associates than would be the case if the obligation were simply expressed as provide a quarterly report on the sales team’s order writing performance.

The following hypothetical examples illustrate language integrating knowledge management into job descriptions:

- When discoveries are made or solutions are found for problems, it is expected they will be proactively shared with others who may benefit from
them. Formal tools for identifying such relevant colleagues include […] . It is further expected that a concise verbal summary will be provided at the monthly full-department project update meetings (accompanied by references to the availability of further detail).

• All information objects created in the course of work are the property of the employer and therefore must be stored in the [document management] system in such a manner as to facilitate other employees’ discovery of it (assistance in the process of tagging a document is available from the Information Centre). It is not acceptable to designate a document as “draft” in order to avoid the duty to store it.

• Business intelligence, market data, competitor insights, or indicators of client sentiment gained during attendance at conferences and trade shows are to be summarized in a trip report no later than 10 business days after the event. A report template is available at […] .

• Requests for information or assistance from colleagues are to be attended to promptly and comprehensively as they are an integral part of business operations.

*Cultures recognizing the risks inherent in decision making will build in allowances for the time it takes knowledge workers to perform research, assimilate the findings, communicate with colleagues, analyze options, and arrive at conclusions and recommendations in light of available financial and human resources. It is understood that a one-page business case may be the culmination of several person weeks or months of digging through literature and corporate memory and then constructing scenarios.*

Cultures respecting knowledge workers’ need to stay abreast of developments in the field will allocate time for them to monitor the professional literature and attend at-desk Webinars and local professional meetups.

Cultures understanding the value of interpersonal exchange will fund knowledge workers’ attendance at relevant conferences in order to update skills and learn what is going on in the industry or domain (naturally, with the requirement that key learnings be shared back at the office with those who could not attend).

Cultures aware of their experts’ value will grant an agreed time frame for thought and analysis, with reasonable deadlines.

*It is expected that statements made in communications and documents are backed up by credible evidence - and the means of finding such evidence are provided.*

Cultures aware of the risk of decision making based on hastily and cheaply assembled data ensure it is always asked: Where did you discover or collect the data you are reporting?

Similarly, in an effort to prevent self-reinforcing beliefs and assumptions, fact checking is done for any information that could potentially have changed since it was acquired.
Recognizing that some business decisions did in fact turn out to be spectacularly successful based on a hunch, business managers have at their disposal - when they acquire it - market data, trends analysis, and many other such inputs from credible and authoritative sources. Any proposal should be based on such evidence.

Information professionals with information science and research credentials are in charge of assessing sources of information so that there is a vetted set of approved sources for employees to use with confidence. The information professionals in addition monitor for new sources of information and data in the rapidly developing publishing industry. It is not left to individual knowledge workers to stumble on a new company offering relevant data, a new conference with relevant sessions and speakers, or a new journal with relevant content.

Employees are encouraged to seek out colleagues who have the insight needed for a decision or project, and it is not regarded as an intrusion when one employee asks another for help to find information or identify who has specific expertise. In fact, those who excel at sharing information and experience are publicly rewarded.

Senior managers understand how much has been invested in making it possible for employees to build expertise during the course of their work. They actively promote the dissemination and leverage of such expertise and urge everyone to consider the strong possibility that someone else in the organization already possesses valuable insight and experience. It is expected that colleagues are consulted (“could you point me to a relevant department?”) before time and money are spent researching a matter or topic from scratch.

To support the leverage of hard-earned knowledge, senior management supports tools such as expertise directories and mandates up-to-date and complete profiles in them. To counteract any reluctance to disclose expertise, senior managers make sure to factor effective information and knowledge sharing into decisions regarding promotions and compensation.

Reluctance to share insight could arise from a concern about job security (as noted below) or from a simple distaste for being interrupted or inconvenienced. That is why culture savvy managers look for signs whether experienced and insightful people are avoiding being consulted and then attempt to understand the motivation. Is the person in question simply overloaded, having no time to share - or is there a deeper reluctance to engage in conversation, possibly because of a conviction that ‘the project is not a good idea in my view’?

In strong knowledge cultures, senior managers take the time to find out how their knowledge workers interact and how that interaction - or the lack thereof - affects the organization’s business results. They may well find out that the knowledge workers are keen to share their insights but are stymied in figuring out how to do so effectively. (The chapter on knowledge audits describes a process by which senior managers can discover such circumstances so that they may consider how to address them.)

The process for approving new projects (with or without funding) requires documentation of efforts to discover whether (1) similar projects have been carried out in the past or are currently going on elsewhere in the organizations and/or (2) there is published information to inform the proposal.
To further leverage intellectual property and internal wisdom, senior managers have made it a requirement that budget requests document the results of efforts to find out whether relevant other projects have been performed along with evidence gleaned from published sources. The benefit is not only associated with discovery of relevant existing knowledge or sources thereof (“no, we do not have experience with such an initiative, but I know X organization last year launched a project you may want to find out about”); in addition, the process of querying alerts other departments of planned or proposed projects and thus keeps them abreast of current activity.

The requirement is not intended to quash creativity; rather it is aimed at helping new initiatives start at a more advanced stage than would be the case if creativity were allowed to proceed without reference to existing knowledge and experience.

Naturally, the concern about prudence in regarding precedent should not stand in the way of innovation. In cases where it cannot be documented, for example, that a similar project in the past generated results to support a proposal, other evidence may be marshaled to make the case for a new venture. If a restaurant chain’s menu managers cannot document that a particular series of menu items has been successful elsewhere, they can in their business cases for ‘healthy choices’ nevertheless credibly point to published evidence of demographic trends, lifestyle changes, and society’s overall awareness of the importance of good quality nutrition.

Managers are expected to arrange for opportunities for lessons learned to be shared widely through such means as brief presentations or bulletins on current initiatives and conclusions drawn from recently completed projects. Event venues and organizational tools are provided.

In every department and team, it is a requirement that the leader pays attention to the activities of team members with a view to extracting knowledge and insight. He or she is mandated to structure work tasks in such a manner as to secure time for team exchanges in person and for creation of brief notes for wider distribution (e.g. on a “solutions” page on the intranet).

It is well understood that indiscriminate broadcasting of useless chatter is not desirable, but some casual conversation is indeed helpful. Conversations over coffee and concise postings of market insights on the intranet, though informal, may go a long way toward surfacing details and insights to the relevant discussions.

Managers, therefore, look for ways to encourage “useful buzz.” They may establish specific positions focused on creating and maintaining it (see the Building Smarter Organizations chapter). They may actively participate in the exchange (see the Conversations chapter) and thus make it clear that constructive and knowledgeable input is noticed ‘upstairs’. They may make a point of stressing in official messages how a post by an employee in an (enterprise social media based) innovation forum enabled the solution to a long standing problem. They may award a “contributor of the year” trophy to an employee at the annual company or branch meeting. Whatever their chosen means, managers ensure it is seen and rewarded when employees go out of their way to offer their knowledge, ideas, cautions, and fact based support in the social media fora.

Hallway conversations and extended cafeteria or smoking group chats are encouraged because they spread knowledge around: Discoveries are to be shared.
Managers understand that informal chats are rich opportunities for serendipitous work related discoveries ("oh, you too found X tool to be unsatisfactory - what did you choose instead and how has it worked?"). That is why they reward reporting of such discoveries as they apply to the business at hand for the department and organization. It would be untoward for managers to project a "big brother" attitude, but they can still foster and reward personal interaction supportive of the organization’s goals.

The phenomenon of the “outdoor smoking lounge” illustrates the power of interpersonal contact. Outside the building, smokers congregate and talk without reference to or regard for organizational hierarchy. Perceptions, opinions, and observations are shared in such a way as to facilitate their further dissemination.

In no way is there any whiff of spying or monitoring. The focus is on unearthing precious nuggets of knowledge not necessarily regarded as significant by their holders. ("Really? My story about the Y project made you reconsider your approach to project Z? What was the key reason? Tell me more!")

Managers therefore accommodate opportunities for informal discovery through informal interaction - not by allowing indefinite lunch and break times, but by highlighting how the informal collegial interaction has generated desirable results. They may in fact create a special reward at the annual meeting for “most valuable comment made during a break” (assuming, of course, that they learn of such comments; a vacation reward ought to expedite reporting).

The Conversations chapter provides specific examples how conversations can be encouraged using tools designed to foster exchange beyond the in-person hallway chat. Casual events are staged for the express purpose of exposing employees to colleagues they would not otherwise meet.

Contrived as they may seem, departmental or organizational monthly pizza afternoons serve a purpose when they are (1) mandated and (2) staged to ensure employees do not sit with their day to day teams. Such events foster conversations between people who may never otherwise seek each other out. A relaxed atmosphere contributes to the forging of rapport and trust between employees - rapport and trust later helpful in the exchange of information and knowledge.

Managed social events could be viewed as an effort to emulate the smoker groups congregating outside office buildings. Regardless of the specific occasions arranged by managers, the key objective is to facilitate interaction across organizational units so as to make more likely the future sharing of information and knowledge that could prove priceless.

It is recognized that some individuals are less eager to engage socially with coworkers than others are; they will therefore seek to avoid what they consider a non-essential function. In such cases, considerable skill is called for on the part of their supervisors. The payoffs from interaction must be quite explicit and must be demonstrated quite prominently. One strategy could involve two-minute statements from employees on a rotating basis to kick off the social events. No matter how uncomfortable it may feel for individuals to discuss their work for two minutes, other employees are likely to realize “oh, I ought to make contact - my team is working on a project in which the information we just heard could be helpful.”

Senior management goes to great lengths to reward and recognize publicly the “knowledge stars” who have performed outstandingly
to enhance the organization’s performance through behaviors to support the use of knowledge.

Because knowledge is seen as a true asset and a competitive edge, executives deliberately wish to encourage an understanding that finding and sharing knowledge is not an add-on activity but rather a fundamental element in the organization’s operations. They follow through and complete the cycle initiated at onboarding by staging award ceremonies to recognize employees who have demonstrated grasp of the knowledge culture in practice. Desirable awards on a par with the best sales performance incentives (for example, tropical vacations or trips to cities offering spectacular museums) are given for knowledge achievements. At the award ceremony, it is explicitly described how such achievements materially affect the outcome of projects and of day to day work: “Digging deeper” and then communicating new information to the right people; generating savings by discovering previous experience in the organization; proactively seeking out colleagues potentially in need of intelligence harvested at a conference; and similar efforts are powerful and therefore get concrete recognition.

To ensure discovery of “good knowledge sharing deeds” that may not be self-reported by modest individuals, employees are specifically asked during performance reviews to name colleagues who have excelled in sharing knowledge. Other means of discovering knowledge stars include monitoring traffic in internal discussion forums, examining postings of documents or presentations in repositories, and consulting with the managers of discussion fora. The fundamental question to ask is “Who here is really good at sharing knowledge to the benefit of the organization?”

There are robust tools for capturing information objects generated internally, and they are managed by information professionals with information science credentials. No one is asked to be an amateur custodian of corporate memory in addition to performing official duties.

Corporate memory is a high priority for senior management. Therefore, it is mandated that the organization keeps up with technology to deploy appropriate tools to capture and protect the “evidence of activity and thinking” (all substantive objects such as research papers, presentation decks, and project reports plus such correspondence as is deemed to contain valuable information). In particular, the corporate document management system is managed professionally by qualified individuals who enhance information objects with appropriate tags, manage a taxonomy to ensure consistency of descriptions, and educate new hires in optimal ways to make objects findable by others. In this manner, senior management ensures the organization avoids the common trap of an unusable repository employees develop ways to dodge. Knowledge workers have high confidence they will find helpful material when they search the corporate memory tool - and should they suspect something more is hidden within documents, the information professionals are usually able to uncover it.

Example: A corporate librarian proactively boxes and indexes departed product specialists’ office files and product samples. When a large custom order comes in and the manufacturing manager’s verdict is we cannot develop the product to meet specifications in the required time frame, the librarian retrieves via her “departed personnel” catalog a box containing relevant documentation and physical
samples enabling the company to work with the customer. In the absence of the librarian’s not-in-the-job-description initiative, the company would have missed out on a truly significant business opportunity.

By deliberately committing to professional grade corporate memory - as opposed to throwing a so-called silver bullet search engine at countless shared drives and intranets after the fact - senior management demonstrates understanding of the value of capturing knowledge and making it available throughout the organization. In the above example, an enterprise search system could not have saved the day because the librarian’s index, being personally motivated and kept within the library catalog, was not part of the organization’s discoverable files as defined by the search engine’s implementation parameters.

It always behooves management to be vigilant in discovering and mining the organization’s informal information repositories.

Necessary information content - databases and subscriptions relevant in the field - is sourced from the outside and funded adequately. That content is managed by credentialed information professionals who curate it to make it conveniently findable by knowledge workers at their desktops or with mobile devices in hand. The information professionals in addition work closely with business teams to orchestrate automatic alerts to new information of relevance to a team or individual.

Just as corporate memory is a priority, access to authoritative published information is regarded as essential. It is understood that quality performance and competitiveness depends on optimal use of the “best information out there.” The cost of licenses to the relevant databases and subscriptions is viewed as a wise investment; knowledge workers are not left to fend for themselves on the Internet. Regular lunch-and-learn sessions are held to ensure everyone knows about and knows how to use the licensed databases.

Every subject discipline and industry relies on authoritative and reputable publications and aggregations thereof. (Examples of authoritative for-fee databases include Bloomberg, Economist Intelligence Unit, the Jane’s suite of defense and military information content, and aggregations of scientific publications offered by Elsevier.) University graduates arrive at their first jobs with memories of the access they had, through the academic library, to the world’s published knowledge. If they are lucky, their employers provide similar access managed by credentialed information professionals.

Such information professionals have graduate degrees in information science and are expert in identifying and licensing (through sometimes arduous negotiations with vendors) relevant authoritative content and in arraying it on the organization’s intranet or a custom portal or dashboard. They are intimately familiar with the specific options offered by each vendor and with the specific syntax required in order to balance recall (finding everything of possible relevance, plus potentially much additional and less relevant material) and precision (identifying the most relevant items). They are trained in the methods of tracing information through means other than keyword searches. (For example, the writers who cite a particular author or a specific work may be discussing relevant information even though the original key words are not prominent in their writings; discovery through such citation clusters is analogous to the familiar “readers who purchased this book also purchased …” feature on bookseller sites.) These information professionals can find material many knowledge workers would not find.
In addition to securing access to appropriate content and mining it expertly, the information professionals meet regularly with business teams to keep up to date on projects under way. With that insight, the information professionals are in a position to set up alerts so that new information pertinent to the project is automatically delivered to the team members, to forward notifications of relevant events, conferences, and media coverage, and to support the team in many other ways.

Senior managers believe in applying the right skills to every function. Therefore, they fund information professionals who work throughout the organization to provide information support and competitive and business intelligence, ensure adherence to copyright laws, assist in digitization projects, develop taxonomies, and so on.

Also known as “embedded librarians,” these information professionals are a vital insurance for the organization that it operates on the most secure foundation of intelligence possible and that professional skills are applied efficiently to information related tasks. For example, the information professionals are the ones who perform daily monitoring for new market data, relevant news, research reports, social media sentiment, and all other such items with potential relevance. The practice eliminates the need for multiple team members to do so for themselves and enhances the likelihood of comprehensive and immediate coverage. It cuts down on time wasting email flurries of “did you see this article?” and counteracts a converse natural hesitation on the part of team members to clutter their colleagues’ inboxes (“surely my team mates already saw the article - I do not want to insult them by suggesting they did not”).

Because voracious consumption of information is a daily reality, inadvertent breaches of copyright law are easily committed. The information professionals advise everyone on illegal practices (for example, sending a copy of a purchased article to a large number of individuals, using an image taken from the Internet without the owner’s permission, or using someone else’s account to search a for-fee resource). While they are sometimes regarded as sticklers, the librarians performing the advisory function in fact protect the organization against expensive lawsuits from publishers and rights holders.

The information professionals are uniquely qualified to guide efforts related to assembling repositories and applying metadata to databases for optimal searchability. As they understand and can apply the power of indexing and classification to overcome the weaknesses of keyword searching, they are instrumental in the successful and user friendly design of corporate information holdings. They approach the task of organizing any kind of information tool with the professional knowledge needed to maximise the likelihood a knowledge worker will find it helpful and productive. As an example, they deploy an arsenal of skills and tools related to taxonomies and vocabularies to create linkages and additional retrieval handles (if a document or data set is labeled with the name of a city or region in Italy, the words “Italy” and “Italian” - or other means of identifying the geographic entity - are automatically added as a means of finding). They are the ones to suggest to search system designers the creation of topical facets such as “age group” so as to enable searchers to zero in on information related to families with small children or having to do with seniors or teenagers. They accommodate for variations in the ways searchers express their queries (for example, by linking together American and British variants in terminology, adding or spelling out acronyms, and exploding jargon or codes into the plain language
based on their knowledge of how typical knowledge workers look for information, they review and enhance system menu options, the screen arrangements of search options, the criteria for display, and so on.

All in all, senior managers ensure that professionals with information credentials are part of business process design, adding their unique expertise to that of the organization’s subject experts.

**Example:** A recruiting company wished to address the challenge of identifying, from a relatively primitive document tracking system, the best candidates to present to clients. The recruiters relied to a significant extent on personal memory and on asking colleagues “say, would you have happened upon an applicant with extensive experience in wireless telephony?”

A content management and search system was acquired and aimed at the company’s resume files and recruiter interview notes - but the anticipated ability to precisely identify the most qualified candidates did not materialize. Having been installed as-is without customizing and tuning by an information retrieval specialist, the system functioned essentially as a word search engine pulling up every document that so much as mentioned a particular word. Every search produced a vast number of undifferentiated documents, leaving the recruiters to inspect them one by one in order to sift out the “best” candidates.

By accident, a librarian found out about the situation and offered to assist. He investigated what the recruiters actually needed the system to do for them. Based on such insight, he devised a simple coding scheme by which the recruiters, when they entered new documents into the system or reviewed a document on the screen, could add “grades” to each candidate’s qualifications and “scopes” to the environments in which they had been deployed. In this way, the recruiters’ judgment became part of the resume base, and the recruiters benefited from being able to specify that experience in a given specialty ideally should have been gained in an organization or department of a certain size.

In addition, the librarian configured the search screen to have two groups of search fields: One for “must have” and one for “nice to have” and adjusted the display setting so that retrieved documents were presented in the order of closest match: A document with all of the must-haves plus two of the nice-to-haves would rank above a document with 2 out of 3 must-haves and several nice-to-haves.

The librarian’s time in the recruiting company was brief, but the investment of information expertise on top of the system purchase price paid off for many years.

**Factors Influencing Knowledge Related Behavior**

The principle that human behavior is strongly guided by perception of what is in one’s best interest provides useful context for looking at ways to foster a culture in which behaviors beneficial to knowledge are in fact desirable in individuals’ own view. For senior managers, the trick is to create structures and mechanisms whereby self interest and shared organizational goals coincide.

Common factors influencing knowledge related behaviors - positively and negatively - include, among others, such basics as the desire for recognition and security, generational differences in behavior styles, and plain
Knowledge Culture

Altruism. Understanding of such dynamics provides opportunities to introduce reward mechanisms to tune the desirable behaviors in colleagues and staff.

Desire for Job Security
Given that most people seek approval and respect in their social lives and at work and at the same time desire security, it is straightforward to understand why, for example, keeping specialized knowledge to oneself could be perceived as a means of protecting job security and retaining power. The situation in which colleagues come asking for advice produces approval and respect from the requestors and verification that “the organization cannot do without me.” Knowledge hoarding, however, is untoward in slowing down the dissemination of understanding, hindering problem solving, and making risk avoidance harder to achieve.

Without explicit rewards for knowledge sharing, it may not occur. Why would any person with a heavy work load go out of his or her way to share knowledge if it is not appreciated by the recipients nor known about by supervisors?

Quite apart from conscious holding knowledge close to the vest, another factor plays a role: Simple lack of awareness that others may have interest in the knowledge in question. A knowledge worker may believe - erroneously - that “what I know is so specialized, surely no one else is interested … if anyone were, he or she would have asked me already.” The problem, of course, is that “he or she” may have no means of finding out that in fact somebody in Department X does have the required details, insight, experience, or data: If we do not know it is possible to ask … we do not.

It is the responsibility of managers and leaders to eradicate such assumptions and to build a knowledge culture in which the assumptions are the inverse: “Surely, someone else must need to know what I know!”

Generational Differences
The topic of generational differences in work style is generating a great deal of interest as workplaces encompass multiple generations and supervisors and team members discover how members of each generation have their own ways of interpreting communication and attaching value to activities. What to someone over 65 is self-evident and normal may come across as rigid and authoritarian to someone under 25; the typical interpersonal style of younger generations may strike older generations as overly casual. Definitions of such work related concepts as discipline, punctuality, respect, and decorum differ across age groups, and behaviors thus do as well.

The beliefs and norms broadly characteristic of a generation will likely express themselves in the ways individuals deal with and share knowledge. Managers and team leaders will benefit from understanding how members of each generation perceive the world of work and on that foundation devising means of encouraging appropriate knowledge sharing behaviors. For example, younger knowledge workers may be more predisposed to sharing (due to their social media upbringing) than older knowledge workers are, and the latter may (due to a reluctance to intrude on others) need more overt and explicit support of sharing. Given that generations differ in terms of what they aspire to, the reward mechanisms for delivering productive knowledge behaviors may need to be tailored accordingly.

Altruism is Good - Up to a Point
In the context of the general perception that sharing knowledge is a good thing, knowledge workers commonly exhibit an open style commensurate with the marketplace of ideas in which they work: I give you information, you give me information in return (now or later). It is implicit that sharing information is positive for the organization.
One unfortunate side effect may occur, however. It takes the form of the ‘unofficial help desk’ scenario in which an individual’s outstanding skill or special knowledge has coworkers beat a path to his or her virtual desk to ask for assistance. While a strong knowledge culture believes in and supports leveraging employees’ ability to help others informally, the situation can get out of hand.

**Example:** A wireless telephony inside sales and customer support representative is so deeply familiar with the technical details of the company’s offerings and so good at digging through the system for solutions that colleagues are keenly aware where to send difficult and complex cases they could not resolve. Thus, she spends all working hours dealing with huge contracts requiring extensive custom programming or undertaking lengthy investigations to resolve problems. On the face of it, it is a typical workplace scenario - but a significant risk lurks. A flaw in the design of the case load tracking system - measuring the number, but not the scope or financial value, of cases handled by representatives - makes her case number lower than that of colleagues and thus nearly causes a termination. (Such an outcome would be highly detrimental to the company as the remaining service representatives would be unable to satisfy the key customers in a timely manner.) It takes a great deal of documentation and extra work for her to convince supervisors of the value delivered from the focus on the large contracts. Happily, in the end, she is promoted to oversee the contract support department; not everyone may be so lucky.

When in practice a single individual or team turns out to have assumed an unofficial specialized job function, it is a signal the organization would benefit from thinking through alternative options - for example, formalizing the function in an actual job as opposed to relying on collegial favors that could become unavailable at any time. Redesigning the products and services in such a way as to minimize the need for the specialized expertise would be another option. Training team members to be able to handle colleagues’ jobs at a reasonable level of skill - and of course documenting work procedures - is yet another wise precaution that pays off during illness or vacations. Rotations through different job functions not only broaden skills; they may actually help innovation as fresh eyes may perceive new opportunities where experienced eyes do not.

A strong knowledge culture sees to it that extraordinary expertise is identified and positioned appropriately in the organization. Ideally, the expertise is codified so that it is accessible wherever it is needed - but succeeding in that challenge remains an elusive goal.

**Lost Opportunities**

The challenges of time constraints were touched on in the *Context of Challenges* chapter. A related factor in knowledge cultures is associated with the degree to which the organization operates in reactive mode. Such a condition points to weaknesses in planning and to inadequacies in processes or in access to information and knowledge (among many other conditions).

Many employees rise to the occasion and deliver heroic work to deal with a sudden problem. Accolades may ensue, but does the culture make sure it is investigated how
a similar problem could be avoided in the future? (The *Learning Organization* chapter discusses the process of learning from experience in more detail.)

The hidden costs associated with non-emergency symptoms of weaknesses in the knowledge culture such as silos, wheel reinvention, and failure to disseminate lessons learned are just that - hidden. Therefore, they may not induce attention to knowledge management practices; life goes on in the customary manner. Emergencies, on the other hand, offer rich opportunities for the organization to probe: How and why did the situation arise? What is the cumulated impact in terms of extra effort, loss of revenue, damage to reputation, and so on? What would have prevented the situation or prevented it from becoming quite so dire? The answers are likely to be associated with opportunities to improve capture, protection, and access to knowledge. For example, these hypothetical statements reflect inadequacies in knowledge management:

- If Peter had been the one to see that client email, his knowledge would have enabled a quick resolution. Instead, we now have a PR problem to solve.
- If we had a better way to track previous resolutions of customer service incidents, we would not only avoid negative public commentary - we could save a lot of money because the agents would not need to spend so much time with each case.
- It is a shame we lost George’s files when he retired - the cost of rebuilding the pricing calculation tables was punitive, and we lost revenue because we miscalculated as a result of going on gut feel rather than true data.
- Had we been aware of the competitors’ major new loyalty plans earlier, we could have done a better job of developing our own. Now, our image in the marketplace is that we got caught unaware, and our plan looks like an imitation. We have got a lot of work to do now to catch up and surpass those other plans.
- We launched the project before the full scientific story was out, and we missed the ongoing updates because no one was in charge of monitoring conference papers - now we have to go back to square one.
- It is straightforward to show “readers of this item were also interested in …” suggestions by linking books by one author or articles having title words in common; it takes specific information skills to build the algorithms by which suggested items are fished from the database based on subtler connections. We are missing out by not having such sophistication.

The question for senior managers is “why do we keep having to react to untoward events?” and the answer is associated with planning for knowledge security and funding the required tools:

- If Peter had been the one to see that client email, his knowledge would have enabled a quick resolution. Instead, we now have a PR problem to solve.
  - **Needed:** A mechanism to route customer inquiries appropriately.
- If we had a better way to track previous resolutions of customer service incidents, we would not only avoid negative public commentary - we could save a lot of money because the agents would not need to spend so much time with each case.
  - **Needed:** A customer service information repository.
• It is a shame we lost George’s files when he retired - the cost of rebuilding the pricing calculation tables was punitive, and we lost revenue because we miscalculated as a result of going on gut feel rather than true data.
  ◦ **Needed:** A mechanism to harvest and store employees’ work products so others may use them later.

• Had we been aware of the competitors’ major new loyalty plans earlier, we could have done a better job of developing our own. Now, our image in the marketplace is that we got caught unaware, and our plan looks like an imitation. We have got a lot of work to do now to catch up and surpass those other plans.
  ◦ **Needed:** A means to acquire competitive intelligence.

• We launched the project before the full scientific story was out, and we missed the ongoing updates because no one was in charge of monitoring conference papers - now we have to go back to square one.
  ◦ **Needed:** A strategy for monitoring industry and scientific information in a cost effective manner.

• It is straightforward to show “readers of this item were also interested in …” suggestions by linking books by one author or articles having title words in common; it takes specific information skills to build the algorithms by which suggested items are fished from the database based on subtler connections. We are missing out by not having such sophistication.
  ◦ **Needed:** Professionals who understand how to mine user behavior data and who understand how to apply a taxonomy and indexing to the task of discovering what any given document is really “about.”

The Temptation and Trap of “Good Enough”

Directly driven by resource constraints, “good enough” is frequently an appropriate policy. Perfection may be too expensive if the return on investment is not there to justify it. However, there is a key distinction between “good enough to solve the immediate problem for right now - but we must address the matter in detail shortly” on the one hand and “good enough - let us leave it behind and focus on new challenges” on the other hand.

In the absence of calamity, the temptation to let good-enough practices be the order of the day is related to ordinary human reluctance to change from what is considered normal and acceptable, just as it is a result of the time pressures discussed previously. Adopting new ways of doing things or investigating the causes of mishaps, delays, complaints, and other untoward circumstances will not occur without compelling drivers. Such drivers can include organizational imperatives as well as personal motivators. It may be a corporate directive - possibly occasioned by competitive forces in the marketplace - to adopt new processes or institute new checkpoints in an existing process; or the change may result from or be supported by an individual’s fear of failure. Common to situations in which change is successfully implemented is the juxtaposition of two conditions - status quo and new practice - in which one is more profitable, better at reducing risk, easier in terms of work effort, or in some other way desirable for the individual.

In some cases, the good-enough judgment may be applied when employees are expert at overcoming less-than-optimal conditions. Their personal devotion to delivering the best performance in fact masks opportunities for introducing long term solutions that could yield significant savings.
Example: To the scenario mentioned above (in the segment Instruments for Supporting Knowledge in Corporate Culture) regarding coordination of product information delivery to the call center in advance of product shipment, we now add the unintended consequence that time and again, call center employees will be without ready answers when customers call with questions about new products. Though no calamity may arise, the cumulative extra time required by call center staff to scramble for answers - because no one stops to recognize the repeated effort - is definitely not "good enough" in terms of the unnecessary cost incurred for years to come.

The good-enough temptation is naturally especially prevalent where risks are perceived to be minor: "Grammatical errors on the Website? Who cares?" could exemplify the culture’s attitude. The perception of low risk from letting the error be or of lack of benefit in fixing it may indeed ultimately result in loss of prestige for the organization … but "good enough" attitudes may not allow for including consideration of customers’ impression how "if that is the level of care the company puts into its public image, imagine how little care it might put into serving me, the customer - and imagine how little emphasis it might put on the quality of its products.”

Example: To the scenario mentioned above (in the segment Instruments for Supporting Knowledge in Corporate Culture) regarding proofreading of promotional materials, we now add the unintended consequence that potential purchasers cannot submit the promotional materials to their supervisors in support of their requests for the purchase. Quality conscious professionals (or individuals with quality conscious supervisors) cannot defend an application for funds to acquire publications from a company whose promotional materials feature errors. The company’s brand and image suffer - regardless whether its offerings may otherwise be stellar - and business is lost. Sloppy writing and grammatical errors are definitely not "good enough" for maximizing sales.

Similarly, the good-enough judgment may be applied when it is assumed a particular event will not recur. “It created a significant problem when our processes proved inadequate, but we were able to get through the worst of it, so we can put it all behind us” is a reasonable conclusion if in fact the problem is unlikely to return. However, that assumption may be faulty, and the judgment may get in the way of prudent examination “how can a similar situation be prevented for the future?”

Example: To the scenario mentioned above (in the segment Instruments for Supporting Knowledge in Corporate Culture) regarding irregularities in commuter transit card functions, we now add the unanticipated potential for repetitions of huge spikes in customer complaint calls every time a new feature is introduced without proper beta testing. Failure to step back and assess what can be learned from one occurrence is definitely not "good enough" for minimizing the cost of future customer service operations.

Such scenarios illustrate why it is prudent to orchestrate regular knowledge management “health checks” even though there may be no overt crises pointing to specific problems. Business process professionals exemplify
the approach when they constantly monitor operations for opportunities to optimize systems and transactions for maximum benefit to customers and thus to the organization: The question, in short, is “what can we do better?” regardless how well current operations are perceived to be performing.

Strategy for Onboarding New Hires and Harvesting Insights from Soon-to-Be Retirees

Organizational culture determines how new employees are taught about their jobs and about the values and norms of the enterprise (or department, if the enterprise is very large). In a knowledge conscious culture - one in which senior managers deliberately use the onboarding process to inculcate an attitude of “around here, we take knowledge management seriously” - there is an opportunity to stress from the very beginning how good knowledge related behaviors will be rewarded. Understanding from day one in the job that attention to information management is part and parcel of day to day activities can only be a benefit for a new employee; for example, it clarifies the necessity to surround each and every action with questions: “Do I have all the information, data, and background I need? If not, where could I get it? Who else should hear about my plans or results?”

Similarly, a conscious culture will ensure opportunities are created - when a retirement or departure date for someone with significant experience and insight is known - to interview him or her well in advance. Recognizing that it is impossible for anyone to ‘dump’ knowledge without specific triggers in the form of problems to solve or questions posed, knowledge managers seek out nuggets of wisdom by prompting the soon-to-be-retirees with such elicitations as “looking back, what would you now change about how …?”

In between the points of onboarding and moving on, employees with knowledge intensive jobs deserve straightforward opportunities to deposit their knowledge for the benefit of current and future colleagues. The means of providing for such opportunities range from old fashioned document repositories to social media based informal exchanges and will of course reflect the specific environment in question; for example, organizations in regulated industries must meet more specific requirements than is the case in other types of organizations.

Attention to the Intelligence Available in Transactional and Activity Data

Sometimes called data mining, the activity of looking at the evidence left behind from day to day activities in order to glean discoveries or insights offers organizational leaders the opportunity to notice patterns so as to make deductions or adjustments. In other words, it could be thought of as the inverse of searching repositories for material on specific topics.

The attention now paid to what is termed “big data” - datasets formerly too huge to examine systematically - and the value of big data’s clues, pointers, and keys to new discoveries illustrates the inherent utility of “looking to see what we can see.”

An obvious example of using intelligence from activity data is electricity suppliers’ time-of-day differentiation in pricing: Simple measurements indicate problematic heavy loads on the infrastructure and grid at certain times, and in response the hydro companies use pricing discounts in an attempt to shift usage away from peak hours.

Organizations routinely log activity for a variety of purposes: A call centre may employ software to measure on-hold wait times so as to trigger specific messages to the waiting callers; consumer goods manufacturers
may measure product sales so as to fine tune shipment frequencies to various destinations; and airlines may use booking data patterns to inform the timing of special deals to be offered during periods of fewer bookings. Page view and click path tracking on Websites is a major instrument in analyzing challenges (e.g. abandoned shopping baskets) or opportunities (e.g. “customers like you also purchased ...”).

The use of social media connections for recruitment purposes is well established, and it is a good illustration of the utility of secondary observation: While the participants may have joined a social media community for unrelated reasons, the mere fact of association in a group is valuable for recruiters looking for individuals meeting certain criteria. In the context of landscape design, an old anecdote is often cited: Rather than guessing, the landscapers waited until pedestrians had demonstrated what traffic patterns they found expedient by wearing footpaths through the grounds; then, those paths were paved. (Conversely, designers of shopping malls and department stores position escalators in such a way as to force shoppers past a maximum number of storefronts or displays.)

Studying activity within an organization or among customers is a more subtle example of using observation for discovery of potentially useful patterns: Discovery of the frequency with which members of team A interact with members of team B can tell a story relevant for strategic planners - “With that much conversation, what is going on?” - or “these two teams ought to be exchanging observations; why do they not speak more frequently?” Discovery of patterns in social media use may similarly paint a picture as to what employees are tracking externally so that it can be determined if useful market intelligence is associated with the interest.

It would be reasonable to use as an indicator of knowledge culture the degree to which attention is paid to opportunities for deriving insight and intelligence out of the data left behind from business activity - ordinary or exceptional as it may be.

CONCLUSION AND FUTURE TRENDS: THE ESSENTIAL ROLE OF EXPERTISE IN KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Strategy for “Good Times”

In the foregoing, knowledge culture has been discussed from the point of view of identifying the signs of a strong and noticeable one. A different angle is the consideration “what is required to ensure a positive and profitable knowledge culture?”

Knowledge focused cultures may arise from the business directives of a CEO or from the leadership exhibited in IT departments - and they may be sustained for a time through the buy-in of employees who instinctively understand the value of knowledge management related activities. Long term durability of strong knowledge management cultures, however, requires in addition the presence of professionals who combine a business case approach with specific skills in the methods and tools underpinning success in harnessing and using knowledge.

Application of knowledge management belongs with and benefits from the guidance of experts with credentials in the discipline of information and knowledge management. Graduates of professional and academic programs are likely quite sensitive to the opportunities associated with leveraging the specific types of information in their fields; graduates of programs in information science approach an organization’s opportunities from a broader perspective and from a base of expertise in the methods for discovering
and handling information objects and activity patterns.

In the past, larger organizations routinely employed specialized librarians to ensure employees had access to the appropriate professional and scientific literature. Today, those specialized librarians - holding other titles - assist business teams in strategizing and project planning on a daily basis (the “embedded” librarians referred to above).

When organizational leaders are looking for talent to help sift and leverage the vast amount of information “out there” and the complex and intangible wisdom “in here,” they would be well advised to ensure the job postings reach faculties of information science and to advise recruiters to reach out to relevant knowledge management groups on LinkedIn.

**Temptation to Eliminate KM in “Tough Times”**

When organizations face severe financial difficulties and therefore must cut expenses, units associated with information and knowledge - because they are difficult to connect tightly to revenue - are often regarded as relatively obvious targets for reduction or elimination. That is unfortunate because the information centre or corporate library may in fact be the very key to digging out of the financial crisis.

Those tempted to reduce expenses by eliminating (the professional positions in) a knowledge centric unit ought to consider the consequences. For example, downloading the task of finding or providing access to necessary information onto already stressed business or technical professionals could have unintended results in the form of mistakes arising from “going on assumptions” and the diversion of expensive employee time to information related tasks they are not equipped to undertake. As a hypothetical illustration, a teaching hospital attempting to realize savings by eliminating information and knowledge related positions and canceling subscriptions to the world’s peer reviewed medical and scientific literature for the medical staff would soon become a contradiction in terms.

*The remainder of this book examines a range of opportunities available to leaders interested in leveraging knowledge management for maximum benefit to their organizations.*
REFERENCES


ADDITIONAL READING


KEY TERMS AND DEFINITIONS

**Big Data:** A term describing the presence and availability of very large aggregations of data - for example, temperature measurements taken in thousands of locations every minute over many years, the credit card transactions of millions of customers over the lifetimes of those customers, or the accumulated commentary and images posted to social media sites. Not to be confused with “data warehouse” meaning an actual system holding specific data for an organization, “big data” refers to the fact that it is now possible to collect and access data in amounts never before imaginable.

**Corporate Memory:** The totality of what is remembered about the organization’s past - in records, documents, statistics, and other information objects as well as in the personal memories of employees.

**Crowd Sourcing:** The practice of “asking around” (perhaps rather than consulting authoritative sources). Putting a question to a network of contacts and accepting the majority’s answer as being correct constitutes accepting or a willingness to consider that “if most people in my networks think it is so, then it is so.”

**Information Science:** The disciplines associated with manipulating and organizing representations of information through such means as symbols, filing and indexing/classification systems, and computers/software.
The term includes a wide spectrum of subject areas ranging from archival preservation to conventions used in describing printed works to such concepts as user friendliness of system interfaces.

**Knowledge Audit:** A systematic process to discover how an organization goes about the processes related to information and knowledge. The concept is described in detail in the *Planning for Knowledge Management* chapter.

**Licenses:** The legal arrangements whereby a publisher grants access rights to specified content (say, in a database) for employees in the customer organization.

**Metadata:** Descriptors, keywords, tags, or codes added to information objects in order to enhance findability and make searching flexible. For example, if in an image database, pictures of weddings, birthdays, and holiday dinners are all given the metadata “family celebration,” searchers may use that descriptor to find the largest set of images to review without having to think of all the possible terms for such images. The more specific terms are useful if in fact searchers are looking for wedding pictures and not for birthday party pictures.

**Pareto Principle:** A persistent statistical pattern in which roughly 20% of the entities in a population (be that a population of books in a book store, products in a catalog, or bank account holders) generate roughly 80% of the observed activity. It is named after Italian economist Vilfredo Pareto who in the early 1900s noticed the pattern and further documented it. Also known as the 80-20 rule, the pattern predicts that, for example, 20% of the items on grocery store shelves will generate 80% of the sales transactions; 20% of a city’s intersections will generate 80% of the intersection vehicle collisions; and so on.

**Social Media:** A term describing the tools by which networks of people choose to associate across space and time (examples include Facebook and LinkedIn). The concept is described in the chapters on communities, social media, building smarter organizations, and conversations.