

A Brief Information and Knowledge Management Checklist

Excerpt from posts by Ulla de Stricker in the KM blog at www.destricker.com - revised April 2011

Best Practices? No. Awareness? Yes.

Dave Pollard in a blog post at <http://blogs.salon.com/0002007/2008/08/05.html#a2212> offered a thought-provoking inventory of "12 tools that will soon go the way of fax and CDs". He had this to say about item 3 on the list, Best Practices:

It's natural that people want to hear what the leading companies and individuals in any area of business endeavour are doing, but the sad truth is that most "best practices" are so devoid of context, of the knowledge and history that explains why they are so effective, that they essentially become unactionable.

Indeed each organization - and each department or entity within it, whether by way of geography or function - is a unique mix of purpose, history, resources, individual approaches, and many similar factors. It is impossible to generalize how an entity ought to go about information and knowledge management (IKM) - and there is never an easy answer to "so, what organizations in our sector are doing well with IKM?". However, it *is* possible to gauge the level of **awareness** among managers and team members about the suitability of current practices and potential future practices.

Over the years, I have used many questions to shed light on the approach each organization takes to IKM. In the 8 sets below, I illustrate the nature of such questions in hopes readers may find them helpful in provoking thought about how knowledge workers go about IKM. No "correct" answers are implied; the intention is strictly to encourage conscious assessment of actions habitually taken (or not).

1. Ownership and Policy (aka Culture)

It has been said that "culture eats strategy for lunch every day". It is indeed my observation that regardless of official policy, the behaviors and activities that are rewarded and tolerated determine how well IKM succeeds.

- a. Is there a Chief Knowledge Officer or similar position with central responsibility for and authority over IKM policies and practices - or is the responsibility (and associated funding) decentralized to local levels?
- b. Are there documented procedures for finding and storing information - or do individuals devise their own personal procedures to suit their own work?
- c. Are new employees trained in the appropriate in-house or external resources, search methods, and tools, such as document management systems - or is there a mentoring function whereby new employees are teamed up with seasoned ones to learn the "information ropes"? Is it assumed new hires are already well versed due to previous experience - or are new hires typically recent graduates?
- d. Is an overall assessment of IKM practices undertaken from time to time - or are such practices considered in evaluations of departmental or individual performance?
- e. Do position descriptions explicitly mention expectations as to research, communication, intercollegial collaboration, and similar activities - or is it implicit that knowledge workers are assumed to perform professionally in that regard?
- f. Is there an unspoken acceptance of "getting by" behaviors - due to lack of time to "do it right" or other circumstances?

2. Corporate Memory: How easy is it to find out what we know?

How accurately do the statements below describe the organizational entities in which we work? The statements illustrate typical circumstances in typical workplaces; no value judgment is implied. My purpose is to invite examination of the practices we follow, with the goal of identifying information and knowledge related opportunities.

- a. Employees manage the information objects (e.g., documents, presentations, bookmarks, emails) they need in personal files according to organizing principles they find intuitive.
- b. A central repository or document management system houses the department's files and is routinely used by everyone.
- c. The entity is small enough and/or the external contacts are so well defined that everyone knows "who should be asked" when there are questions.
- d. A directory or similar tool tracks who is in charge of what subjects or projects so it is straightforward for a new team member to identify the best person to approach.
- e. There are formal mechanisms for sharing information (e.g. staff meetings, tools such as wikis) or informal channels (e.g. coffee or smoking area conversations) through which information flows naturally.
- f. When an employee retires or leaves, a procedure is followed to ensure information handover to any successor.
- g. Additional mechanisms for protecting corporate memory include [insert what the organization may have].

3. Current Awareness

"Current awareness" refers to the ability of knowledge workers to be aware of appropriate topical and industry events, publications, legislation, news, debate, and so on, in order to incorporate them into their work and respond in a timely manner. If they do it themselves, how well - and by what means - do knowledge workers ensure they stay abreast of relevant developments in their field without being inundated by and wasting time on irrelevant or duplicated information? If it is done for them, how successful is the program?

- a. Employees are keenly aware of the need to stay abreast of developments and put effort into maintaining a personal lineup of sources or news feeds to monitor.
- b. The culture supports individual free subscriptions to a variety of web-based newsletters, blogs, and the like, and the time to review the incoming notifications is regarded as a necessary part of staying informed.
- c. The information centre or a similar entity offers a customized service to establish, manage, and periodically review a set of current awareness sources - including ones that aren't free.
- d. The information centre, the communications group, or a similar entity monitors the media and posts a daily intranet collection of items of general interest to everyone ("what you need to hear about today").
- e. Employees sometimes comment how they are not certain they "get it all" and feel uncomfortable when they are caught unaware of a relevant development.
- f. Employees indicate their current awareness mechanism is irregular, deriving in some cases from ad hoc conversations with colleagues. In other words, there is no regular feed of relevant new information prepared by information professionals; becoming aware of what's going on in the field depends on casual contact rather than on focused effort.
- g. Some employees say that although they do not subscribe to many sources, they still feel they catch the important items.
- h. Employees prefer email notifications but find it time-consuming to go through their ever-growing list of notifications and end up never opening and deleting many of them.

4. Email and Message Management

We can't function without email (or something like it - I use the term loosely to include text messages and social media postings) but we sometimes dread looking at the inbox. Email certainly is an efficient communication vehicle, but we have discovered it gobbles up hours in the day. We know better, but many of us admit to using our email folders as a personal information management tool (ouch). So how should we and the organizations we serve deal rationally with email and messages? Here are several potential statements typical employees could make; their implications are food for thought for IKM personnel and all knowledge workers alike:

- a. Because so much of the deliberation leading to a decision is traceable only through informal exchanges, it is effectively lost to the organization. In other words, it will be difficult in future to recall "what were we thinking and why?"
- b. My sent-mail folder works as a safety net: When I can't find a document on the shared drive, I can usually remember approximately when I sent it to a colleague and find it that way, assuming the message in question is not so old that it has been archived by IT.
- c. Ideally, messages ought to be grouped by topic, but I haven't had the opportunity to set up a logical folder system for myself. As a result, I spend a lot of time searching through past messages or posts.
- d. There is a departmental folder structure everyone adheres to for certain types of mail. Of course, we also each set up personal folders to reflect our individual jobs. We have access to an expert who advises individual employees on managing email.
- e. To keep the inbox manageable, I place all non-urgent informational messages in a "reading" folder, only I never seem to get to it!
- f. I have noticed several articles on email etiquette with good advice on practices and pitfalls in email management. If we all remembered just a few of the tips - for example, "ensure the subject line clearly states the topic and the desired action" - we might do each other a great favor.
- g. Our collective approach to email would be a good topic for our lunch-and-learn series. So many of us are expressing frustration and looking for techniques to "master the monster".

5. Electronic Records

How are we doing when it comes to managing the physical and virtual embodiments of our organizations' activities, to meet legal and compliance requirements as well as to preserve access to corporate memory? Who is in charge? With increasing awareness of the risks associated with inadequate records programs, the professional domain of e-records management is deservedly receiving attention.

Wikipedia describes records management as "the practice of identifying, classifying, archiving, preserving, and destroying records." (I hope "preserving" includes the concept of ensuring access to materials for future generations, even though the material may be "too old" for the law to mandate their retention - but that's another subject.) Here are some questions all organizations would want to answer with a resounding yes:

- a. Is there a formal policy for managing e-records? Is it updated as technology advances to create new challenges? Is records management a key topic in new-hire training?
- b. Are employees generally aware of the fundamental records management and retention requirements applicable to the organization?
- c. Do employees understand what constitutes a record among the many types of information objects they typically handle - and the rules governing the handling? Are employees' workspaces free of files that are also held centrally? Do employees know what types of information objects should not be retained?
- d. Is a Certified Records Manager (CRM) in charge of the records policy and program even if the organization does not employ a full time CRM?
- e. Are the requirements and future options for records management assessed periodically to remain in line with the organization's evolution?

6. Making the Business Case for New - or Existing - Money

Many colleagues over the years have shared comments to the overall effect of "there is general agreement that it is desirable to do well in the area of information and knowledge management ... but there is reluctance to commit significant funds". Such a sentiment is not surprising given how difficult it is to prove a concrete return on investment when expenditures are made for information content, services, or activity.

The excerpted list shown below is taken from my book *Business Cases for Info Pros: Here's Why, Here's How* (numbered as in the other checklists here):

Some investments, such as replacing aging or failing technical infrastructure, justify themselves because the negative consequences of not investing are obvious. Whenever something new is contemplated that is not in the category of "must do, or else...", business case documents are called for. The following examples reflect common organizational scenarios familiar to information professionals:

- a. *Due to a significant number of employees taking early retirement, there is a shortage of corporate memory. Business teams have found themselves repeating earlier work because lessons learned from previous efforts were not identified in a timely manner. We need a strategy and a tool or system for capturing key information objects produced in the course of the organization's work.*
- b. *Due to the fact that the organization's business teams are spread over multiple locations, teams sometimes arrive at similar project ideas independently and miss out on potential synergy. We need a reliable mechanism for ensuring each team knows what the others are planning without adding to the information overload everyone is already experiencing.*
- c. *As we have increased our reliance on email and rapid electronic exchange of document drafts, proliferation of files and version control has become a major problem. Thousands of files crowd shared drives, and there are loud complaints that "we can't find the documents we need, and if we do find a document, we can't be sure it is the final official version." Everyone's time is wasted as individuals send out blanket "does anyone have a copy of" requests. We need a policy and a convenient repository where official copies of non-trivial documents are safeguarded and searchable.*
- d. *The intranet was simple and easy to navigate when it was first rolled out years ago. By now, it is widely regarded as a frustrating experience because its original structure has been compromised through ad hoc development. We need a complete redesign with a view to sustainability of structure.*
- e. *The customer service agents are without a "bible" of official information they can give to customers with confidence. As a result, each customer interaction takes much longer than it ought to, and the agents are saying they aren't certain they are giving out the best information. We need a central database of "correct and definitive answers" for the agents to consult when they deal with customers, along with a mechanism for updating it when new information becomes available or when agents discover new, useful insights.*
- f. *As the organization's business emphasis has shifted and new end user-oriented tools become available on the internet, a new assessment is needed as to what information should be purchased and licensed. We need to audit current practices and knowledge workers' actual needs so that we may plan and fund an appropriate information support strategy.*

But ... are full blown business cases even necessary when the request is "only" for an additional position or part-time assistance, or for NOT reducing the budget for information-related activity? Most certainly. Giving decision makers insight into the reasons for and benefits of investment is a business requirement, and the process of preparing a business case offers an opportunity to think in business terms about every activity currently being funded. For example, could existing budgets be shifted from current efforts to new efforts?

7. The Intranet: How well does it support employees?

Intranets could be regarded as indicators of the priority and attention given to IKM - although some might characterize them as "shoemaker's children's shoes".

Here are some typical comments heard when employees talk about the intranet as it reflect the organization's overall approach:

- a. The diligence and quality devoted to the public website is reflected in the intranet. It is a well-designed tool that saves me lots of effort and time. My colleagues and I are motivated to supply suggestions and content to the intranet team.
- b. I was amazed once I finally discovered what was hidden in the intranet within some of the menu options. I wonder if others had the same experience of being confused by what was on the screen. Now I have bookmarked the useful parts so I can get to them easily.
- c. With rapid growth in the company, the intranet hasn't quite kept pace. It seems the unit responsible for it is preoccupied with other priorities. Frequently, I don't find what I need and end up asking colleagues for help.
- d. The search function on the intranet does not work.
- e. So many documents are still sitting on shared drives - it's inconvenient to look in multiple places.

Here are some typical comments made by information professionals:

- f. Our active role in the ongoing development and enhancement of the intranet ensures that what we learn from employees about how they experience the intranet is translated into improvements.
- g. One of our high-value activities is populating the daily news portion of the intranet with key developments employees need to know about, in logical clusters so individuals can zero in on items relevant for them.
- h. Even though our licensed content is featured on the intranet, we are finding that orientation and "guided tours" are critical in helping employees become aware of the nature of the content. We do a lot of outreach and offer personal support to ensure the organization gets value out of its investment in content.
- i. IT policy precludes a button for the information centre on the top page of the intranet. It's not uncommon to hear an employee say he or she never knew about the information centre piece and the associated access to licensed content.

8. A Library or Information Centre

A note on terminology: Discussions have gone on for as long as we can remember about the best way to name an organizational unit providing information services. The concern that "library" would connote dusty books drove a trend toward variants of "knowledge centre" with the occasional anecdotes that employees did not understand the meaning of the new name and mistook it to refer to, say, an employee training centre ("oh you mean the library - why didn't you say so?"). The discussion's longevity underscores the never ending need to raise awareness among employees about the services offered by a library / information centre.

In choosing an approach to information support for knowledge workers, executives may regard a library or information centre as one element in such support; other options exist. Here are some considerations I have touched on in past articles and presentations:

If there is no library / information centre:

- a. How are knowledge workers getting the information they need, most of the time?
- b. What are the productivity implications of current independent practices? For example, could the information gathering task be carried out by others while employees focus on interpretation? (It is possible the subject matter at hand is so specialized that only domain experts are able to research what sources are out there and mine them.)
- c. Are there any employees who came from organizations where they could consult with information experts? What are their thoughts?

If there is a library / information centre:

- d. Do knowledge workers understand the full range of services offered? To what degree and for what reasons do they make use of them?
- e. How do department managers ensure their team members take advantage of the research and information management expertise in the library?
- f. Has an assessment been done to ensure alignment between employee needs and library services and to review library activity emphasis in light of the evolving operational and business environment?

Summary:

In the above, I have touched briefly on common components in the overall landscape of information and knowledge management within organizations, and I do hope I have achieved my goal of providing food for thought and discussion. I'll round out with a few observations I have found to be true relative to IKM work no matter the type, size, and sector of the organization:

- The various ingredients of IKM - tools, systems, practices - share a feature with calcium intake: Just as consumption alone does not yield bone density (the intake must be properly absorbed through measures such as weight-bearing exercise), so it is that no matter what we purchase and how much we spend on infrastructure, information gadgets, and content, their presence alone is not a predictor of successful outcomes. Measures need to be taken to incorporate them properly in daily behavior for the overall benefit of the enterprise organism. In other words, the organizational culture has to be accommodating for IKM initiatives to work well.
- Change is sometimes painful, but stick it out through the initial hurdles, and what was once difficult becomes the norm. Just as the runners say, "I'm out here in the rain before dawn because I really, really want to race in the marathon" so all those leading change in IKM practices need to keep the prize before their eyes: We made the business case, we're going to stick with it through the challenging early days until we get to where the new is normal (unless, of course, unexpected extrinsic factors suddenly dictate otherwise).
- Maintaining enthusiasm over time for "doing the right things right" through carefully devised strategies and practices is a daunting challenge because day-to-day reality has a habit of intervening in the best laid plans. Frequent and regular checkups are necessary to be sure we are still "with the program" adopted a year ago. Here, too, a health analogy applies, well expressed in the adage "what we do between Christmas and New Year's Day does not matter; what we do between New Year's Day and Christmas does!"