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EXCLUSIVE CHECKLIST REPORT

A Human-Centric Knowledge Management Strategy for the Digital Workforce

Knowledge Management Evolves

By Marydee Ojala, Conference Program Director, Information Today, Inc.

Knowledge management (KM) is a relatively recent discipline. Although knowledge has been around for as long as people have been around, the notion of managing it in a controlled and disciplined way began to appear only in the late 1980s, early 1990s. For example, the *KMWorld* magazine started in 1991 and the conference of the same name started in the mid-1990s. The phrase "knowledge management" gained popularity, becoming fully established, with more articles, publications, conferences, and university courses devoted to it, in just a few years, certainly by 2000. It went from "bleeding edge" to being in the mainstream for enterprises worldwide. The KM we know today has evolved somewhat from the original incarnation, largely due to advances in technology, but it retains its original tenet that systematically making knowledge accessible and shareable is highly beneficial to organizations.

KM was first adopted and promoted by management consulting firms such as McKinsey and Ernst & Young (now EY). They saw that internet technologies, particularly applied internally as intranets, held huge promise for creating, locating, organizing, distilling, distributing, and using information to improve employees' knowledge. Greater understanding of already known information leads people to make better decisions, solve problems faster and with better outcomes, learn lessons from past actions, and reduce redundancy by not repeating research activities and projects. Numerous anecdotes about companies spending large amounts of money for market research studies only to discover it already had studies in house on exactly the same topic provide good rationales for traditional KM.

Initial attempts at KM centered on regarding information as an asset. Information assets covered an array of types, including not only documents but also databases, policies, procedures, employee resumes, and externally-generated data. Today the definition of types of information assets has expanded to video, audio, emails, and other forms of internal communication. Knowledge, as an asset, lurks in many corners of the organization, something that becomes much clearer as KM evolves.

CONNECTING PEOPLE

Beyond collecting a wide range of types of information, a second prong of KM is connecting people. Collecting content simply for the sake of collecting it does not advance information assets to the status of knowledge assets. Indeed, collected items tend to decay over time, becoming stale and irrelevant as new information supplants them. A recounting of the adventures of the bank employee charged with seeing how she could maneuver in the San Francisco Bay Area with just a bank credit card in the early 1960s, when all-purpose credit cards were a brand-new and innovative concept, has historical value—her attempts to use the card to pay the Bay Bridge toll were unsuccessful and the toll taker eventually just waved her through—but contain no useful information for today's cashless world. It's an interesting case study of how what we now view as commonplace was once cutting edge.

KM proponents early on identified knowledge as being either tacit or explicit. It's the explicit knowledge that is written down and stored somewhere within the organization. It's codified and formal. Explicit knowledge could be contained in manuals, policies, procedures, market reports, memos, product designs, architectural drawings, engineering diagrams, journal articles, and the like. Before digitization took hold, storage of explicit knowledge was file cabinets or cardboard archival storage boxes. Finding the correct file cabinet or box often proved very difficult, even impossible. As more documentation hidden away in file cabinets is digitized, those information assets gain value by becoming more accessible. Knowledge silos do, of course, still exist, but not to the extent of the pre-digital era.

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Tacit, or implicit, knowledge is the opposite of explicit knowledge. It's not formal, not written down, and often experiential. It tends to live in people's heads rather than being codified. Consider your car's GPS system. That is explicit knowledge. It has a knowledge base of streets that helps guide you from one place to another in the most efficient fashion. Tacit knowledge is knowing that, although the GPS says turn right on Street A and then take another right on Street B, there's a shortcut through a little-used parking lot that is even more efficient.

Knowledge isn't necessarily the sole purview of management. Front-line workers know things from a practical perspective that managers may not be aware of. Here's an example. A major appliance in your house stops working. Which repair person would you prefer—one who calls up a 900-page manual on their iPad or one who tells you they've seen this before and a loose wiring connection is frequently to blame. Take off the side panel, jiggle that loose connection, and bingo, the appliance is back to working. That loose wiring connection isn't mentioned in the 900-page manual. Either the company omitted it from the manual, thinking it wasn't very important, didn't even know about it, or consciously suppressed that knowledge, not wanting to admit it was at fault.

CONTENT BECOMES KNOWLEDGE

Content is the precursor of knowledge. Content creation happens throughout organizations and occurs in many different formats, many more in fact than a few decades ago. To turn that content into knowledge requires content management skills that closely resemble the basics of KM—the capability and the technology to capture, store, and make content accessible. To do this well requires planning and

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recognizing that KM goes beyond content management. It extends to establishing an organizational culture and a compensation scheme that encourages and incentivizes knowledge capture and sharing.

The impetus to digitize knowledge assets was spurred on by the pandemic. Having information in digital form enhances its sharability—and knowledge sharing is a concept that transcends knowledge management. As KM evolves, it becomes ever more evident that digitizing is not the ultimate solution. You can't digitize your organization to success. There's the apocryphal story of the harried employee who got so caught up in digitizing everything in a file cabinet that the takeout menu for the local restaurant ended up in digital form. Put simply, digitization is not enough.

Today's workplace is collaborative. It rewards knowledge sharing. Since knowledge resides with people, an important component of modern KM involves creating paths to tap into that expertise. Multinationals were always concerned about locating experts who might be in different countries. Moving to a hybrid work environment, as necessitated by the pandemic, where people are working from many different locations, quickly escalated organizations' priorities regarding identifying expertise locations. Surfacing personal expertise went from "nice to have" to "need to have" overnight.

Sources that supply data to locate expertise include employee resumes, employee self-identification of areas of expertise (typically employees are requested to fill out a form online), and algorithmic analysis of electronic communications from and to the employee. The latter approach is typically based on email traffic but can include other social networking communications, both internal and external. Organizations with a human-centric strategy in place are better equipped to encourage collaboration among employees.

The designation of Subject Matter Expert (SMEs) is a direct response to the growing understanding of the role tacit information plays in KM and the importance of individuals' expertise. Having designated SMEs is certainly a step in the right direction, but companies run the risk of overloading those people with numerous requests for information and opinions. It helps to implement a system to capture their expertise—think of it as a "brain dump"— into a database or FAQ to relieve the pressure on a company's SMEs. Instead of constantly pestering an expert, particularly if the question has been asked multiple times, employees can search the database of the FAQ for a quick and authoritative answer.

IMPACT OF TECHNOLOGY ON KM

AI-based technologies breathed new life into the KM discipline. They didn't change the underlying precepts of KM, but they did change how knowledge managers go about their mission. Search technologies improved peoples' ability to locate needed information. Dashboards incorporating advanced search techniques capitalized on machine learning and personalization to determine the best answer to an individual's query. Storage moved to the cloud, which has enormous advantages, not only in the amount of information that can be stored but also in how it can be searched, mined, and made more valuable.

Artificial intelligence (AI) and related technologies such as machine learning and natural language processing have also made information assets more valuable by enabling discovery of new knowledge in older content. Patterns that might escape the human eye can be noticed by computers and extracted to provide insights beneficial to current business practices and procedures. But relying on these technologies without human oversight is dangerous. A person can look at the connections made by a computer and see if it went wrong and what other opportunities exist. Human intuition and reasoning have not yet been totally replicated by AI.

LOOKING AHEAD

Increasingly, KM is seen as encompassing the complete corpus of information and knowledge likely to be useful to an organization. This could include knowledge external to the organization—knowledge that comes from vendors, suppliers, and customers, as well as knowledge originating in the scientific and scholarly community, the traditional domain of the library world. KM extends into areas where knowledge resides in human brains rather than formal documents.

In our current challenging global environment, knowledge sharing is even more critical for successful and sustainable organizations. The new reality of hybrid workplaces and spaces calls for resilience, agility, and flexibility in managing information and transforming it to knowledge. Innovation is ongoing and demands strategies that encourage its development. KM today has evolved to where it combines the human and technological features of collaboration and knowledge augmentation. Knowledge is recognized as having strategic and operational value. The ability not only to access information but also to re-purpose it and learn from it is central to modern KM.

A vital piece of KM is its concentration on tacit knowledge, the knowledge in people's heads that results from their experiences and expertise. Human-centered KM is taking center stage as the discipline evolves. Technology has created enormous opportunities for organizations to profit from the knowledge they already possess. But without putting people at the heart of the KM initiative, organizations miss out on capitalizing on the entirety of available knowledge.

KM will continue to evolve as technology advances. The human element of managing knowledge, understanding its strategic implications, and connecting the dots between implicit and explicit knowledge is absolutely essential to the successful implementation of KM and, ultimately, to the success of the organization itself. ■

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A Human-Centric Knowledge Management Strategy for the Digital Workforce

By **Marc Vontobel,** Founder & CEO, Starmind

Today, we have an abundance of knowledge assets in digital form. Customer transactions records, sales estimates, and production quotes all digitized can be quickly extracted from systems. However, don't expect an explosion in corporate wisdom as a result of all this digitization. Readily available information may lack context or relevance to appropriate business expectations. Plus, information gets outdated very quickly, data is scattered across different tools, and with the recent shift to the hybrid working model, knowledge is more siloed than ever before.

That's because we're not just talking about the digital assets and systems themselves—we're talking about the people who work with and share this knowledge. The experiences and expectations of today's digital workforce is very different than previous generations of workforces. Rather than working within a reporting hierarchy and being expected to remain within their lanes, digital workers require access to information from across their enterprises and have the power to make decisions autonomously. With the rise of hybrid and remote work, employees have become more isolated, which limits knowledge sharing and collaboration between experts. Without sharing experiences with colleagues, employees risk redoing what has already been done and impacting innovation cycle time and speed-to-market.

In a Starmind commissioned survey by Forrester, 35% of employees say most of the information in their organizations is undocumented and held by individuals—requiring one-on-one interactions to access. They rate "personal connections and interactions as most effective in helping them resolve problems quickly."[1] In recent times, however, the move to hybrid work has made it harder for employees to build networks, especially if knowledge sharing is limited to small sets of people.

This calls for a new human-centric knowledge management strategy, encouraging collaboration and opening access to knowledge and resources across enterprises at a very human level. It is especially vital with the onset of remote work, which makes collaboration and knowledge-sharing even more challenging. The majority of knowledge in an organization is inaccessible, with only 20% of an organization's knowledge documented. The remaining information is trapped within employees' minds, and the only way to retrieve this information is to find the right people and ask them. With the increasing volume of data created daily, the tacit knowledge gap is only rising.

A human-centric knowledge strategy has significant implications for the performance of the business itself. By holding on to traditional, highly structured and siloed knowledge management practices, businesses face a number of risks:

✓ **Lost time, effort, and productivity spent searching for the solution to a business problem:** The Starmind 2021 Productivity Drain Research Report finds 37% of employees spend more than two hours a day searching for answers. One in 20 spend half their working day looking for information.[2] There's a tangible financial cost to these lost hours. For example, in an organization with 4,000 workers, a loss of two hours a day in time adds up to a minimum of 740,500 lost hours a year. If all these workers earned, at a minimum, a low wage of just $20 an hour, that's already nearly $15 million annually lost to businesses through looking for information.

✓ **Decisions based on guesswork, not data:** The impact of inaccessible information affects the quality of decisions. Instead of being data-driven, decisions are very frequently made using assumptions and best-guesses. The vast majority of employees (84%) in the Productivity Drain study report say they make decisions based on assumptions at least four times a week because they can't find answers that exist within the organization. This is especially true of C-level execs, the study also shows—73% say they make five or more decisions based on assumptions every week due to lack of factual data. The consequences of executives and employees being forced to make uninformed decisions might be financially devastating—and could have been avoided altogether.

✓ **Overwhelmed employees:** Obsolete and siloed knowledge management systems have a direct impact on employee satisfaction and engagement, which can mean high turnover. The Forrester survey shows 69% of employees think it would be valuable if they could contribute their knowledge to the growth of their organizations.[3] When information is not available, employees ask their colleagues for answers. This can be overwhelming when subject matter experts get asked repetitive questions, which impacts their productivity and takes them away from completing their existing workloads.

✓ **Limited innovation and slower time to market:** With virtual or remote work, there are few impromptu "watercooler" conversations capable of breaking through established work networks. With many enterprises continuing to adopt hybrid working models, cross-team collaboration is even more limited than before. Innovation is closely linked to cross-functional collaboration.

✓ **Failure to capture, retain, and reuse knowledge**: Only 20% of knowledge is documented or captured in today's knowledge management systems. As a result, when employees leave or retire, their knowledge goes with them. Knowledge is lost, leaving knowledge gaps. To make matters worse, organizations do not even have a good idea of where their knowledge gaps are, or who the next best person to ask is when a go-to subject matter expert leaves.

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Employees need to be able to find knowledge, whether that is the right information or person, quickly. A direct line can be drawn between ensuring a superior employee experience and achieving excellence in customer experience, both essential to corporate growth. A survey of 4,100 executives released by Salesforce, for example, shows that "breaking silos between employee experience and customer experience can lead to a massive opportunity for revenue growth of up to 50% or more."[4] Great employee experience is made possible through responsive and easy-to-use technology that not only boosts personal productivity but also enables rapid and unfettered access to the information at the moment it is needed.

A combination of human engagement and intelligent systems will move information and knowledge across today's highly diverse and distributed workplace. Employee knowledge is one of the most valuable yet underutilized assets to an organization, and access to organizational knowledge in real-time gives companies a competitive edge. We need to look across barriers and boundaries to imagine and design new ways to look at problems and opportunities. These capabilities are available now, in the form of AI-enhanced knowledge management platforms that leverage untapped knowledge throughout an organization.

Organizations implementing a modern knowledge management platform can reduce time spent searching for information by 75% as reported by IDC. Organization-wide, a gain of more than 100,000 productive hours is possible.[5]

Here is a checklist of what organizations can accomplish with a human-centric knowledge management strategy:

✓ **Retain collective knowledge:** Employees and managers unnecessarily spend time answering questions repeatedly. Through a human-centric knowledge management approach, users will be able to capture knowledge and avoid knowledge loss, even if an expert employee leaves the organization. Essential information is no longer confined to an individual. With access to an organization's collective knowledge, they can refer back to the information, get up-to-speed faster, and have access to a central knowledge source that contains questions previously asked by others with respective answers.

✓ **Identify centers of expertise:** Departments spend a significant amount of time connecting people with projects. If organizations could identify subject matter experts within the organization in real time, less time would be spent finding the best fit for the task and more energy can be focused on delivering products to market, solving problems, and driving innovation.

✓ **Accelerate the onboarding process:** A modern strategy gives leaders insights on questions asked, to effectively identify the areas an organization needs to refresh, reskill, and retrain employees on, or add to the current onboarding curriculum.

During the onboarding phase, new hires are exposed to a high volume of new information. Repetition is key to retaining knowledge. As a result, employees and supervisors spend inordinate amounts of time answering the same questions repeatedly. With access to an organization's collective knowledge, new employees can refer back to the information, get up-to-speed faster with a central knowledge source that contains questions previously asked by other new hires with their respective answers.

✓ **Reduce support tickets:** When knowledge workers cannot find the information they need quickly, they rely on their ticketing enterprise service desk to get the answers they need. With access to the knowledge of frequently asked questions, organizations can reduce the number of support tickets created, reduce cost, and solve problems faster like Swiss Re has accomplished with implementing Starmind. ∎

With a Human-Centric Knowledge Management Environment, Organizations Can Leverage Their Knowledge for Competitive Advantage

1 "The Modern Workplace Demands A New Approach To Knowledge Management," Forrester, March 2020. https://www.starmind.ai/forrester-new-approach-knowledge-management

2 "Productivity Drain and the Urgency of Eliminating the Endless Search for Answers," Starmind, 2021. https://www.starmind.ai/resources/starmind-productivity-drain-research-report-2021

3 "The Modern Workplace Demands A New Approach To Knowledge Management," Forrester, March 2020. https://www.starmind.ai/forrester-new-approach-knowledge-management

4 "The Experience Advantage: Transforming Customer and Employee Experience for the Future of Work," Salesforce, 2022. https://www.salesforce.com/resources/articles/future-of-work-experience/

5 "Speed to Answers and Time Saved Create Significant Business Impact for Starmind Customers," IDC, August 2021.https://www.starmind.ai/download-the-idc-business-value-wp