

Knowledge in Action

Issue 01

Building effective knowledge-sharing behaviours

An organisation's ability to unlock its people's knowledge – and then share that knowledge – is increasingly fundamental to business success. Just as fundamentally, it's also very difficult.

Recent research provides fresh and practical insights into effective knowledge sharing. The bottom line: armed with this understanding, managers can improve the way in which knowledge is shared within their business.

Knowledge
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From collaborative product development through to factory floor process improvement, the ability to share knowledge effectively – with supply chain partners and customers, or among employees – is of critical importance. Increasingly, it is businesses' ability to draw on the information and expertise held by individuals and teams that spells the difference between success and failure – with failure, in some cases, impacting on corporate survival itself.

But even as growing numbers of line managers within those businesses come to understand this, they face an awkward dilemma. Knowing that knowledge sharing is important is one thing – and knowing how best to actually share that knowledge quite another.

“Building high-quality relationships is critical, because it's through relationships that knowledge flows, and value is created.”

Debbie Lawley, director, Willow Transformations (formerly at Orange)



Research carried out by Henley Management College's Knowledge Management Forum sheds powerful new light on the issue. Effective knowledge sharing is built on three fundamental planks: Building Relationships, Building a Knowledge Base, and Building Knowledge Value. The logic is straightforward: first, better relationships contribute towards greater sharing; second, the more in-depth and detailed a body of knowledge is, the more likely it is to be of value; and third, that value will be enhanced by more effectively organising its capture, storage and sharing.

These three planks are underpinned by seven knowledge-sharing 'competencies' – personal behavioural characteristics that impact on how well (or not) they are carried out. Understanding these competencies is vital to improving the way that knowledge sharing takes place within organisations.

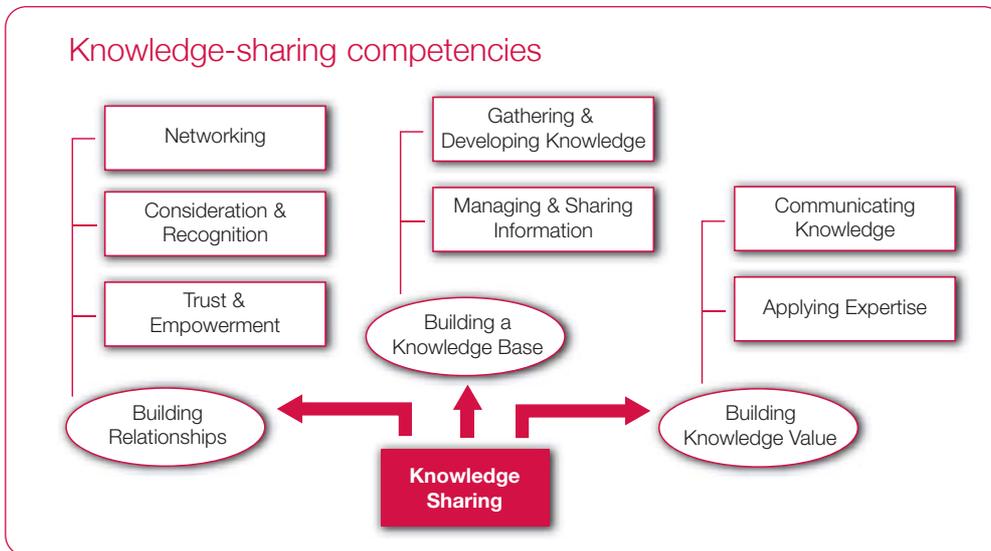
Building Relationships

Networking revolves around understanding who has specific skills and knowledge, and then knowing how best to contact them. Look at many organisations, though, and it's unfortunately too easy to spot behaviours that actually impede effective networking: 're-inventing the wheel' by not involving the right people, for instance, and a 'not invented here' mentality that curtails the use of knowledge from outside.

But providing opportunities for informal contact with other people to foster mutually beneficial relationships can help overcome this – as can formal efforts to 'log' just who possesses what knowledge, as well as who participates in relevant forums and professional bodies.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

This collaborative research project was spearheaded by a working group of leading academics and practitioners from Henley Management College's Knowledge Management Forum and co-ordinated by Henley's Dr Christine van Winkelen. Supported by Professor Dave Bartram of SHL – a leading authority on the science of personality measurement in the workplace – and Professor Malcolm Higgs and Dr Anna Truch of Henley, the group also comprised knowledge management practitioners from businesses such as QinetiQ, Thames Water, Unisys and Orange. Based on a detailed statistical analysis of a survey with over 200 responses, this landmark research developed insights, understanding and practical guidance on how businesses can unlock the power of knowledge sharing.



Consideration and Recognition behaviours that contribute to effective knowledge sharing include listening attentively to the contributions of others, ‘recognising’ these contributions, and reacting to others with consideration and tolerance. People strong in this competency don’t force their opinions on other people, don’t make assumptions about what others are thinking, and don’t ignore input from others.

Managers need to encourage others to carefully listen to what a colleague has said before responding and make sure that they understand the point being made. To check their understanding of what was said, managers ask questions or ‘reflect back’ the key points of the message. Above all, confront the issues – not the person.

Trust and Empowerment revolve around providing others with the knowledge and tools to complete a task successfully, considering knowledge as a resource to be used for the ‘common good’, and openly sharing knowledge that others may find useful or relevant. Typically, people who are good at this don’t use information as power, don’t prevent others from making significant contributions, and don’t keep key pieces of information to themselves.

Managers should actively seek feedback about their behaviour with regard to knowledge sharing, improve the level of genuine and honest feedback that they provide to others, and find ways to coach others.

“In building a knowledge base, less is often more: I see a lot of effort wasted in archiving information – often of poor quality – that will never be used.”

Robert Taylor, business excellence director, Unisys



Building a Knowledge Base

Gathering and Developing Knowledge behaviours include a continued investment in personal and professional development, actively seeking out ideas and information from other people, and aiming to keep one’s knowledge up to date. Common behaviours to avoid include failing to take advantage of knowledge and skills across the organisation, ignoring coaching or feedback opportunities, and disregarding one’s own development needs.

How to improve? Managers should try to encourage colleagues to express ideas to them openly, and take every opportunity to share insights and experiences with others.

“It’s important to recognise that knowledge matters: until you do that, you haven’t left the starting block. Some organisations recognise this – but many don’t.”

Peter Hemmings, principal consultant, KN Associates
(formerly at Thames Water)



Managing and Sharing Information behaviours include creating and supporting systems and procedures that individuals can use to file, catalogue and share knowledge; encouraging others to use knowledge-sharing systems; and encouraging communication and collaboration. Less helpful is waiting to be asked for information rather than offering it to others, taking a back seat in discussions, and adopting a ‘silo mentality’ within teams and departments.

People keen to develop this competency should strive to ensure that they have access to – and are able to use – the systems available for sharing knowledge in the organisation; should volunteer knowledge, views and opinions before being asked; and should participate actively in communities relating to their work practices.

Building Knowledge Value

Communicating Knowledge effectively requires explaining and expressing ideas and concepts in a clear and coherent manner – both in writing and through presentations – and adapting the presentation style to the needs of the audience. In turn, failing to adapt the approach to the audience, and not providing opportunities for people to check that they have understood the message, works to impede knowledge communication.

How to improve? Take the time to research the needs and points of view of those attending presentations or reading documents. Be clear about the purpose of the communication – and ask others to give a summary of what has been said in order to check how well it has been communicated.

Applying Experience revolves around ensuring that knowledge and previous experience is applied effectively: understanding the technical aspects of the job in hand, and making the most of the available technologies to ensure that work is completed effectively and efficiently. Incompatible behaviours include ‘re-inventing the wheel’ by failing to look at the work that others have already carried out, and withholding information known to be useful to others.

Managers need to seek out training and development opportunities to fill identified knowledge ‘gaps’, and embrace opportunities for involvement in technically challenging projects where skills and knowledge can be updated. Meetings and discussions with like-minded managers in other organisations are useful, as is participation in bodies such as professional associations.

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Henley Knowledge Management Forum

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Dr Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849 or Dr Judy Payne +44 (0)118 947 4652.

For more information visit www.henleymc.ac.uk/kmforum
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