

Knowledge in Action

Issue 02



Making the most of knowledge activists

In organisations where knowledge management is fundamental to business success, ‘knowledge activists’ play an important part in underpinning that success.

Recent research highlights nine key characteristics, skills and behaviour traits of effective knowledge activists, showing how best to recruit and develop such people. By exploiting these insights, organisations can further leverage the contribution that knowledge management makes to the business.

“In an increasingly knowledge-based economy, knowledge management isn’t an option: organisations have to do it.”

Cathy Blake, R&D and knowledge manager,
PRP Architects



In any business where knowledge management plays a part in improving effectiveness, you’ll find people playing the role of ‘knowledge activists’.

Simply put, they’re people who see the value of knowledge management to the organisation, and who support the implementation of knowledge management initiatives. As such, they play a vital role: encouraging knowledge management activities, participating in projects to create and share new knowledge, and connecting seekers of knowledge with sources of knowledge.

Yet here’s the surprising thing: many knowledge activists have no formal training in, or responsibility for, knowledge management, and might not even be aware that they *are* knowledge activists – leaving them in the dark when it comes to understanding how they can improve their effectiveness in the role. So it’s important that line managers recognise them – and support them.

Recent research carried out by Henley Management College’s Knowledge Management Forum powerfully plugs this gap – highlighting the characteristics, skills and behaviour traits of effective knowledge activists, and looking at how businesses and line management can best recruit and develop knowledge activists.

The starting point was prior research suggesting that knowledge activists could be described in terms of how they scored against nine key characteristics or skills. The researchers’ mission: to interview real-life knowledge activists and knowledge managers to answer two critical questions.

First, was theory borne out in practice – in other words, did real-life managers in real-life organisations recognise effective knowledge activists from the picture these nine skills or characteristics painted? And second, what could real-life knowledge activists and managers add to this by way of real-life experience – especially when it came to, say, recruitment and development? The nine characteristics of effective knowledge activists follow.

Relationship Development

Real-life managers strongly confirmed a picture of effective knowledge activists as strong networkers, capable of quickly creating mutual trust and building strong relationships. “Relationship building is a key behaviour,” said managers. “For knowledge activists, it’s vitally important to build up contacts and make connections,” added others.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

This collaborative research project was co-ordinated by Dr Judy Payne of Henley Management College, working with a small working group of members of the Henley Knowledge Management Forum, including Debbie Lawley, formerly with Orange, and Keith Farquharson of EDF Energy. The group carried out 14 in-depth interviews within three organisations, probing the work and role of knowledge activists in practice. Supported by other knowledge management practitioners from organisations such as QinetiQ, Thames Water, the Highways Agency and GlaxoSmithKline, the findings form an important contribution to the understanding of knowledge management in today’s business workplace.

Checklist for leveraging knowledge

Recruiting knowledge activists

- ✓ Look for evidence of key characteristics and skills.
- ✓ Look inside the organisation.
- ✓ Look for people who are natural networkers.
- ✓ Don't expect all the characteristics and skills of a knowledge manager.
- ✓ Don't take people out of their current niches in the organisation.

Developing knowledge activists

- ✓ Include the nine characteristics when assessing development needs.
- ✓ Remember it's often easier to develop technical skills than new behaviours.
- ✓ Encourage knowledge activists to actively control their own development.
- ✓ Provide access to other people in similar roles at different stages of development.

Credibility Through Experience

Again, managers strongly confirmed the picture of the effective knowledge activist as someone who was well regarded in their own area of expertise – often with a long track record of achievement. In organisations where knowledge management is a relatively new discipline, “the contribution of people with experience within the business is particularly important,” the researchers were told, “creating a combination of pragmatism and credibility at a senior level.”

Internal Belief

Also strongly confirmed was the importance of self-belief. Highly committed to knowledge sharing and collaboration, managers affirmed that effective knowledge activists should be able to convince others to participate in knowledge management initiatives by sharing their own personal knowledge. “It's important for me to have passion and confidence in what I'm doing,” researchers were told. “You need a strong drive, and the belief that you're doing the right thing.”

“Knowledge activism should be a characteristic of all good managers. Stressing the need to be active, rather than simply using the label ‘activist’ helps to achieve this.”

Chris Collison, director, Knowledgeable Ltd



Project Management

Unanimity also existed on the importance of strong project management skills. They must be able to break down a vision of what knowledge management might deliver into practical activities which can be planned and organised, researchers were told. “It's vital to think about the outcome of the exercise, and then plan to achieve those goals, keeping the deliverables firmly in mind,” agreed the managers that the research team interviewed.

“To be effective, the knowledge management culture must be adapted to the needs of the business – not vice versa.”

Lucy Miller, Learning from Experience manager,
Ministry of Defence



Cultural Alignment with Organisation

The importance of being “culturally aligned” with the rest of the organisation was also strongly affirmed. As an insider, familiar with the organisation’s values and objectives, knowledge activists stood the greatest chance of getting things done. “It’s important to exhibit tact and sensitivity towards political issues,” was the message. In multinational organisations, too, effective knowledge activists needed to be able to “assess the different national cultures, and recognise that one global solution won’t fit all situations.”

Information Brokering

Perhaps surprisingly, less strongly affirmed was the value to the effective knowledge activist of skills in information brokering. The ability to create links across the organisation and build knowledge flows was important – but not necessarily as important as other characteristics of the knowledge activist role.

Creativity

The importance of creativity, too, resonated only moderately with managers. Characteristics such as the ability to seek out new knowledge that hadn’t been used – or creatively market the value of knowledge management in particular situations – were certainly useful skills, but were still skills that were subordinate to others of the nine identified.

Action Orientation

It was the same story with the extent to which knowledge activists needed to be ‘action oriented’. As with project management skills, a predisposition towards action transformed knowledge management from a theoretical exercise to a useful business tool. Knowledge activists needed to be “completer-finishers”, researchers were told, able to “take on board an action, and deliver on it at speed – while at the same time focusing on some tangible benefit that would emerge.”

Dialogue and Communication

Finally, the importance of dialogue and communication skills also resonated strongly. It was important for knowledge activists to be able to speak in terms that knowledge receivers would understand, using – if required – a rich vocabulary, good presentation skills and appropriate body language to drive home their message. “It’s important to develop a common language to describe what knowledge management can bring to very different individuals,” summed up one manager.

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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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