

Knowledge in Action

Issue 05



Sharing knowledge on the front line

The high-pressured front-line environment isn't always conducive to the reflection and learning involved in good knowledge management – even though the knowledge made available might have a crucial impact on throughput, efficiency and quality.

Looking at typical front-line roles in a number of leading organisations, recent research highlights how best to include the front line in corporate knowledge-sharing initiatives – thus boosting business performance where it matters most: the front line.

Knowledge
Management Forum

HENLEY


“With the front line, it’s vital to make the benefits of knowledge-sharing very explicit – so that tapping into the resource becomes an intuitively obvious ‘no brainer’.”

Duncan Ogilvy, knowledge management partner,
Mills & Reeve



Knowledge is at its most valuable on the front line – the part of the organisation that interacts directly with customers, suppliers and partners. Yet perversely, the front line is the area within the organisation that may be least receptive to gathering, collating and redeploying that knowledge.

Focused on the day-to-day challenges of sales, production and the supply chain, front-line employees can protest that they are simply too busy meeting today’s delivery priorities for knowledge management – despite the potential it offers to help them meet current and future sales, production, cost and efficiency targets.

Research carried out by Henley Knowledge Management Forum provides insights into the different front-line characteristics shared by organisations, and examines how these characteristics can in turn be exploited to leverage improved knowledge management practices on the front line. The result: front-line employees who are more receptive to the value offered by knowledge management and better able to exploit its potential in their organisations.

It’s possible to see three distinct kinds of organisation, with three very different front lines. Value chains, for example, add value by transforming raw materials into products that are of use to customers. Value shops add value by carrying out a service or solving a problem. Finally, value networks build value by connecting people and businesses. In each of these three kinds of organisation, the nature of the front line differs.

Value chains

In value chains, front-line employees work at creating products that are of value to customers, distributing those products through the supply chain and carrying out after-sales support and maintenance. Manufacturing, retail, logistics – all are examples of value chain businesses.

On the front line, ‘firefighting’ is often the order of the day, and there is continued pressure to maintain efficiencies and output. Knowledge management helps by providing opportunities to share good practice and special knowledge in terms of reducing defects and increasing throughput, and providing opportunities for people to brainstorm work-related problems.

Within value chain organisations, effective knowledge management on the front line can be enhanced by the following:

- Improving the ways in which work is organised – firstly by identifying experts from within the organisation who can help different teams and projects work more effectively, and secondly by making explicitly designated time available for knowledge gathering and sharing. It is also important to develop formal processes to capture knowledge from people leaving or moving to new roles.

Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Dr Christine Van Winkelen of Henley Management College, the study by Henley Knowledge Management Forum – on which these insights into knowledge-sharing on the front line are based – covered 17 typical front-line roles in 10 different organisations. The working party carrying out the research was assisted by Peter Hemmings of KN Associates, and included Forum members from organisations as diverse as GlaxoSmithKline, RWE Thames Water, Getronics and Orange.

- Encouraging people to care about the knowledge needed for their work and the needs of colleagues – by building-in time for learning and helping others, making it clear that everyone has a role to play in contributing to business objectives, and recognising and rewarding those who share knowledge with others.
- Establishing the value and importance of better knowledge practices – by making sure that knowledge-sharing initiatives clearly support the business strategy, by providing adequate resources to support them and by ensuring that senior managers actively demonstrate their commitment to knowledge-sharing.

Value shops

In value shops, front-line employees create value by identifying and solving customer or client problems. Customers pay for solutions, or for time spent working on their problems. Consulting firms, law firms, accounting firms, IT service providers – these are all examples of value shop businesses.

Typically, front-line employees in value shops work to tight deadlines to deliver proposals or customer solutions, are under pressure to achieve staff utilisation and profitability targets and must work hard to meet customer expectations. Knowledge management makes a difference by helping to build 'communities of practice' to generate rapid solutions, reducing re-work and improving staff utilisation through technology-based 'knowledge stores' and enabling new revenue streams by connecting knowledge from different parts of the business.

“What we’ve found is that sharing knowledge within front-line teams helps the process of sharing knowledge between front-line teams.”

Jim Downie, knowledge management group,
Unisys



Within value shop organisations, effective knowledge management at the front line can be enhanced by the following:

- Encouraging a collaborative culture – with informal user groups, communities of practice and regular networking events.
- Enabling knowledge-sharing through information technology tools – by providing intranet access to front-line employees, and making sophisticated search engines and a wide variety of communication technologies available to them.
- Encouraging people to care about the knowledge needed for their work and the needs of colleagues – by providing training in 'active listening' techniques, making it clear that everyone has a role to play in contributing to business objectives and providing recognition for those who share knowledge with others.
- Establishing the value and importance of better knowledge practices – by ensuring senior managers actively demonstrate their commitment to good knowledge management practices, reviewing knowledge-sharing systems and processes to make sure they meet changing business and user needs, and encouraging those employees who 'get' knowledge management to help embed its principles into business processes.

Value networks

Value networks create value by providing or maintaining a networking service between clients or customers, and include businesses such as utility firms, telecommunications companies and financial services providers.

In value networks, front-line employees are engaged in promoting the network, providing the network service or maintaining the network infrastructure. They are under pressure to maintain complex infrastructures cost-effectively with limited resources, minimise network down time and respond quickly and effectively to customer requests.

Knowledge management can make a difference by capturing and sharing best practices to reduce costs or improve efficiencies, prevent the repetition of errors and increase knowledge-sharing between teams and groups working towards continuous improvement targets.

Within value network organisations, effective knowledge management on the front line can be enhanced by the following:

- Improving the ways in which people are managed – by making knowledge-sharing part of the performance appraisal process, making good knowledge-sharing behaviours a selection criterion for recruitment and providing training and coaching in knowledge-sharing skills.
- Leveraging organisational processes to share knowledge – by using a commonly-accepted vocabulary for knowledge-related activities rather than specialised jargon, holding regular meetings and workshops for front-line teams to share experiences and learning with more dispersed colleagues, reinforcing the importance of using manuals and best practice guidance material and developing processes to capture knowledge from people moving to new roles or leaving the organisation.
- Introducing organisational processes to renew the operational knowledge-base – by using brainstorming and focus groups to generate new ideas, establishing ‘after-action’ review processes and including ‘lessons learned’ in formal reporting systems.

‘Real life’ front lines

At international construction firm Taylor Woodrow, a helpline staffed by experts provides advice and guidance on construction-related issues – anything from material properties to environmental good practice, explains Adrian Malone, head of knowledge management. Centrally-funded, it is made available to front-line projects free of charge.

“Our reward and recognition process incentivises front-line knowledge-sharing. Has there been a post-project review? Have the lessons learned been identified? And have they been made available for others to share?”

Adrian Malone, head of knowledge management,
Taylor Woodrow



At regional law firm Mills & Reeve, meanwhile, a former front-line ‘professional support lawyer’ is available to every front-line lawyer in the firm. “Their job is to give ‘teach-ins’, prepare ‘how to’ advice and practice notes and generally be there to support the front line – by phone, email, intranet and in person,” explains knowledge management partner Duncan Ogilvy.

And at international IT firm Unisys, the focus is on embedding the creation, harvesting and reutilisation of knowledge into the very fabric of front-line activities, according to Jim Downie of Unisys’ knowledge management group. “Through using web-based collaboration technologies to develop virtual ‘team rooms’

where sales and delivery processes are planned and managed, knowledge management isn’t so much an extra activity as part of the way that things are done,” he says.

Henley Management College

A business school established 60 years ago by business, for business. Highly pragmatic and relevant programmes are readily applied back in the working environment, to make a real difference to individuals and organisations. Henley’s Queen’s Award for Enterprise in the International Trade category recognises our success in exporting management learning around the globe.

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 or email kmadmin@henleymc.ac.uk for an information pack.

Publishing services provided by Grist. www.gristonline.com

