



KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT ISN'T JUST A FAD, IT'S A NEW WAY OF CONDUCTING BUSINESS

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Every not-for-profit Board and management team would love to be able to convert more information into knowledge. After all, the end result would be improved decision-making, and through that, improved member service! Sadly, most associations haven't even engaged in an assessment of their current situation or initiated a continuous improvement project to enhance their knowledge management activities.

What's stopping them? Pick one: lack of time; lack of resources; improvement culture not yet fully in place; lack of knowledge; no leaders or champions; and/or a limited technological capacity. These barriers can and do impede progress. That noted, education can help everyone come to grips with the fact that knowledge management isn't just a fad, it's a new way of conducting business.

Members have an understanding of what technology can support, and they assume their association understands their needs and wants. They are demanding more knowledge and less information. Like everyone else in the 21st century, your members are drowning in a sea of information. They are struggling to make sense of it all (assuming, of course, they have a chance to peruse it).

Boards, committees and staff are also under pressure to improve their decision-making capacity. Using more knowledge and less information will enhance their decision-making abilities, potentially reduce risk, and maximize opportunities.

Knowledge management supports decision-making by explicit and systematic management of vital knowledge and related processes. Key related processes include: understanding requirements and feasibility; capturing and creating; promoting; diffusion; application and evaluation. It is all about getting the right knowledge to the right individual, so they can make the right decision at the right time.

Examples of how an association can turn information into knowledge:

Information: The association packages and sells information from conference presentations.

Knowledge: The association has experts provide a "what you need to know" summary along with a list of key practices, tools, trends and issues, with supportive analysis.

Information: The association provides an information centre with sample policies or information.

Knowledge: The association provides a knowledge broker to engage in benchmarking, if necessary, to find the best policies and turn that information

into knowledge.

What follows are some key steps that can help an association get on the path to making better use of knowledge management.

Step 1: Leadership and Knowledge Brokers

Who will be our leaders and champions for knowledge services, and what must we do to prepare them for the journey?

Start with a refresher or orientation on the potential and importance of knowledge management for your key leaders (volunteer and staff) to get the strategy in place. Identify and select staff or contractors with knowledge broker capability, project management, benchmarking skills and entrepreneurial flair to initiate projects and achieve the intended outcomes.

Step 2: Understanding Your Current Situation

What are we currently doing, not doing, and what are we capable of doing?

Your first assessment should focus on internal operations. Does your association systematically organize and transfer knowledge internally? If internal operations are limited in capacity, this should be addressed. It could risk implementation of member initiatives. There are a number of tools available on the Internet that can help you with the assessment – they often look at key elements that must be addressed to be successful in this area.

Mapping your current knowledge management activities, both internally and externally, will help to track the flow from needs through to application. Often a simple chart can help. It can outline what is done by whom, when, and how, indicate the resources required. It may also identify how the flow can be improved and set the stage to accommodate new initiatives.

Step 3: Preferred Situation

How do we want to be positioned in terms of knowledge management?

Having a strategy leading to a preferred situation and clear outcomes will help to identify the gap between the preferred and current situation, and will influence the action required. Typical preferred situation statements for this area could include the following:

- We understand our members' real decision-making needs and wants
- We provide our members with access to the best and latest thinking on a timely basis so they can be innovative, solve problems and pursue opportunities faster
- Our knowledge program and its services reduce duplication and reinvention
- Our value proposition is understood and respected as we prevent knowledge loss, improve sharing, and save members' money through increased productivity and performance
- Our knowledge management program is comprehensive and integrated in our association
- Our staff has the capability to apply entrepreneurial spirit, technology and innovation to understand and develop feasible service; and
- Our association is sustainable and has a high rate of member retention and satisfaction.

These ideal situations drive development of specific strategy and action.

Step 4: Moving Forward

Given our current situation, preferred future and strategy, is there potential to create new knowledge services based on our member research, benchmarking and creative thinking? What is feasible?

First, examine the barriers or lessons learned regarding implementation challenges, and take

those into account when moving forward. Understanding these will help reduce the risk of failure.

Some barriers to successful implementation:

- Failure to do an assessment of internal capacity and understand improvements that need to be made prior to attempting to improve knowledge services to members.
- Lack of leadership and champions with clear responsibility.
- No strategy to support a program or projects along with supportive policies.
- Scarce resources and trying to do too much when only a pilot project is affordable.
- Job descriptions, evaluation policy and processes, along with rewards and recognition do not reflect related roles, responsibilities and expectations.
- Lack of understanding of members' real decision-making needs and wants. Understanding what members think is information and knowledge.
- Too much focus on technology and not enough on some of the basics. The lack of an effective classification system and integration impedes capture of knowledge.
- They do not understand the importance of blending it in with a continuous improvement culture.
- Lack of a project framework that is clear, efficient and effective, along with a supportive process to design, develop, deliver and evaluate.
- Feasibility for specific knowledge initiatives have not been completed and valuable resources have been used to try to create knowledge that was not sustainable.
- Internal cultures and silos often discourage sharing knowledge. Knowledge is often linked to power, and sharing and using knowledge are often unnatural acts.
- Employees are not given enough training, nor do they engage in benchmarking to support innovation and feasibility.
- Communications and marketing to support the delivery of knowledge services are weak.

Avoid these barriers and you will end up doing what is necessary to move forward successfully. Pay particular attention to the decisions that your members need to make and the knowledge they require to make those decisions. Doing so will no doubt result in a large number of possibilities. This type of information can be obtained by meeting with members of key membership segments. It is important to understand how people actually use knowledge while on the job.

The action plan to develop knowledge services needs to look at the key elements of moving forward: people, policies, processes, property, politics, pricing and promotion.

Ensuring sustainability of knowledge services is critical and, therefore, feasibility needs to ensure revenue generation will occur. Pricing decisions are important. Higher end information and knowledge are usually considered special services and a user pay approach typically applies. Knowledge services can help members save time and money – they are deemed by many as worthy of the extra cost.

Step 5: Evaluation

How did we do? What do we need to adjust?

Another aspect of sustainability is the monitoring and evaluation of knowledge services on a regular basis to ensure needs are being met. If they are not, you'll need to adjust or abandon.

Association success is directly linked to information and knowledge management activities. Buried in every service or product you offer is some level of information and knowledge. Associations are expected to be knowledge brokers. Members often join to take advantage of that very fact. During the next few years, expectations for knowledge services will continue to increase. Is your association doing as much as it can?

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