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Associations Are Indeed Knowledge Brokers

What is happening with your knowledge management strategy?

Over the last several years I have noticed references to knowledge or knowledge management creeping into the wording of vision, mission, and goal statements for associations. In turn, strategies to achieve knowledge related aspirations are being developed and acted upon. From what I have seen so far, it appears that associations are having difficulty in successfully implementing their knowledge strategies in a timely manner.

It is not possible to give up on knowledge strategies. Members often have an understanding of what technology can support, and assume their association understands their needs and wants. Therefore, their expectation for more knowledge and less information is on the rise. Members are beginning to drown in the sea of information made possible by the Internet. As a result, Knowledge or Resource Centers are appearing on websites trying to help members make sense of this deluge of information.

Associations are also finding that the for-profit sector is capable of providing knowledge related services to its members. Competition is beginning to occur. Most associations are in an infant or developing stage in rolling out knowledge strategies and services, whereas, the for-profit sector is nearing a mature stage. The for-profit sector tends to have greater financial means, and is able to work faster with fewer barriers. If associations don't become more aggressive and serve as knowledge brokers for their members, competition from for-profits and other associations will start to erode their value proposition.

In addition, Boards, committees and staff are under pressure to improve their decision-making capacity. Using more knowledge and less general information can help not only reduce risk but maximize opportunities.

A few key concepts need to be understood to appreciate why knowledge management is important. Knowledge management is all about supporting 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. There are two key parts of knowledge. Explicit knowledge is documented and may be structured or unstructured, and tacit knowledge is often in somebody's head, harder to access, and often valuable. It is all about getting the right knowledge to the right individual to make the right decision at the right time.

While this may seem simple, there are many barriers to successful implementation, including:

- 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.
- No real champion is identified and assigned clear responsibility.
- Job descriptions, evaluation policy and processes, along with rewards and recognition do not reflect related roles, responsibilities and expectations.
- There is a lack of understanding of members' real decision-making needs and wants. Understanding what members think is information and knowledge.
- There is 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.
- Some are treating knowledge management as a fad, quick fix or on-time project. They do not understand the importance of blending it in with a continuous improvement culture.
- Business cases for specific knowledge initiatives have not been completed and valuable resources have been used to try to create knowledge that was not sustainable.
- Obtaining valuable tacit knowledge is often neglected while implicit knowledge tends to be easier to obtain. Members are often looking for the tacit knowledge.
- 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.

Most associations are providing valuable information to help members become successful. Those looking to convert more information to knowledge will likely increase the level of member satisfaction. Some examples of converting information to knowledge include:

Service Area	Information	Knowledge
Membership	▪ Articles on recruitment and retention	▪ A package of better practices, along with tools to support the practices
Conference	▪ Information from the presentations	▪ Highlights from presentations, noting key practices, tools, trends and issues, along with supportive analysis
Publications and Reports	▪ Detailed reports on activities affecting members	▪ A summary of key trends and issues, along with a supportive analysis
Education and Research	▪ Books and articles on competency areas	▪ Take a practical course to develop needed competencies

	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Search the website to find a sample policy or information to help with decision-making 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Contact the knowledge broker to find the best policies from all related websites ▪ Specific industry reports
Common Needs	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Information about by-law change requirements ▪ Information on tax rebates ▪ Salary survey 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Sample documents ▪ A service that documents and obtains eligible tax rebates ▪ Salary survey interpretation and analysis of a specific situation
Standards	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ What they are and how to meet them 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ Review of compliance, improvements and accreditation to standards

Knowledge services can help members save time and money and are deemed worthy of paying extra.

Understanding Your Current Situation

The first thing an association needs to do is fully understand what it is currently doing, what it is not doing, and what it may be capable of doing. This requires an assessment that should first 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 will help with the assessment. The tools often look at key elements that must be addressed to be successful in this area. Some of the elements include: leadership, measures, processes, explicit knowledge, tacit knowledge, culture, people and competencies, opportunities and technology. For example the technology element may look at whether the information systems are real-time, integrated and “smart”.

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

Preferred Situation

Having a preferred situation will help to identify the gap between it and the current situation, and will influence the strategy and action required. Typical preferred situation statements for this area often 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.

How do we get to this position and increase the percentage of our knowledge services? First, look at the lessons learned, e.g. why implementation can be a challenge and then make sure any future strategies and plans take these issues into account. The strategies and action plan to develop a knowledge services program need to look at the key elements of moving forward: people, policies, processes, property, politics, pricing and promotion.

Moving Forward

As part of developing strategy and action plans, ask the following key questions:

- Who will be our leaders and champions for knowledge services, and what must we do to prepare them for the journey?
- Given our current situation and preferred future, is there potential to create new knowledge services based on our member research, benchmarking and creative thinking?
- What is feasible?

Understanding the decisions that members need to make and the tools they require will provide insight into the possibilities. This type of information can be obtained by meeting with a few members of key membership segments at their job sites. It is important to understand how people actually use knowledge on the job.

The benchmarking exercise results, combined with some creative thinking, will help refine strategies and supportive action.

Whether proceeding with the establishment of a full blown knowledge services program, or deciding on a pilot initiative, it is important to ensure there is a business case for the investment.

Some other key steps that need to be taken include:

- Ensuring the competency capacity to proceed is available internally and/or is outsourced.
- Completing necessary assessments and mapping.
- Putting in place a strategy to support a program or projects along with supportive policies.
- Establishing a framework that is clear, efficient and effective, along with a supportive process to design, develop, deliver and evaluate.

- Blending knowledge service initiatives into efforts to establish a culture of innovation, learning and continuous improvement.
- Making sure there are enough resources and, where necessary, prioritize initiatives and move forward with pilots. Pilots will help with quick wins and the lessons learned will help to make things easier next time.
- Adjusting performance evaluation policies, processes and rewards in order to have a clear link with internal and member satisfaction.
- Strengthening communications and marketing to support participation in knowledge services.

Ensuring sustainability of the strategy and knowledge services program is critical and, therefore, the feasibility needs to ensure revenue generation will occur. Pricing decisions are important. They need to distinguish between core services and special services. Core services are often covered by dues and, in some cases, by a fee. Where a fee applies, such as a conference, it is often on a user pay basis with a member discount available. The determination between core and special services often depends on the level of member participation, packaging, finances, policies and the value proposition to attract and retain membership.

Higher end information and knowledge are usually considered special services. A user pay basis normally applies as most members may not require the same level of access. If they did, it could be moved to core services and dues may increase, as required.

Another aspect of sustainability is the monitoring and evaluation of knowledge services on a regular basis to ensure needs are being met. If not, it may be time to adjust or abandon.

What's Next?

Association success is linked to information and knowledge management activities. Buried in each service is some level of information and knowledge. Associations are knowledge brokers. Members often join to take advantage of developing and using information and knowledge services. Some associations are responding to the challenge and are restructuring to accommodate the changes required. A trade association recently advertised for a Knowledge Management Director. This is an indication of what may be on the horizon. During the next few years, the level of expectations in the knowledge services area will rise. Is your association doing as much as it can?

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