

K noco news

Welcome to the April 2010 issue of our newsletter.

The main theme this issue is KM in the public sector – an issue of great interest to companies and public sector organisations around the world. We know how KM works in the private sector, but can it work equally well in the public sector? And for those of you in the private sector, there's a couple of articles on collaboration and lesson learning as well.



What's different about the public sector?

Knowledge Management began its life in the military and private sectors, and quickly developed a reputation as being a strong enabler for the development of an effective organisation. The private sector has now taken an interest, and many KM initiatives have been launched. To date, however, there seem to be relatively few public sector KM programs that can be shown to have delivered measurable benefit in financial or effectiveness terms.

Why is that? Is there something different about the public sector that makes KM difficult to deliver? Given our span of clients from public and private sectors, we have a few ideas.

We like to use the word OPEC as an acronym for the organisational factors that support KM. The acronym is Openness, Performance

focus, Empowerment, and Communication. When these four factors are in place, KM thrives. Let's look at how these four differ between public and private sector.

Openness is the first factor – openness to reviewing mistakes and errors as well as successes. This is a struggle in the private sector, but many companies have worked hard at this, and feel they can be fully open in the way they learn from performance. In the public sector, however, this seems more problematical. Public sector bodies are publically funded, and the media seem to pounce on anything they could portray as a waste of public funds. So while a project manager in the private sector might say "this project could have gone better", it's less likely in the public sector, and especially in government, given the level of media scrutiny.

Performance focus is also key to successful KM. We know there is a strong link between KM and

performance, and KM is a key driver of continuous performance improvement. Performance is easy to measure in the private sector, but much harder in the public sector. What are effective metrics and targets for a hospital, a police force, a government department? Without clear metrics, you can't determine which practices are best, and who needs to learn from whom.

Empowerment can be developed in both public and private sectors, though we have seen the lowest levels of empowerment in government, where reports can be rewritten and reworked through several levels of hierarchy.

Finally, **Communication**. Here there is little difference between the sectors, and communication can thrive in all settings. Perhaps that is the reason that many public sector KM initiatives start with the development of communities of practice, to promote peer to peer communication.

KM in the Public Sector Context

A contemporary Australian perspective

Robert Flynn

There are three tiers of government in Australia: federal, state and local. Recently I have met with representatives from all three for the purpose of introducing Knoco and our range of KM services. I have picked up two interesting insights, observable in all three contexts. The first is a tendency to see KM as being of relevance only to private sector organisations, and of correspondingly little relevance to public sector agencies.

The second relates to prevalence of a syndrome I refer to as the "oven full of half-baked scones". This describes situations where an attempt has been made to introduce KM by a well-intentioned enthusiast, some early work has been done, but the process ran out of steam due to lack of understanding of what's involved in successfully implementing a KM platform. The enthusiasts still believe in the value of effective knowledge identification, creation, capture, sharing, application, and renewal, but simply don't know how to make it happen in practice. They can then experience difficulties in maintaining the support of senior level sponsors.

In combination these two insights provide supporting evidence for the claim that very few Australian government institutions have

successfully implemented KM by the end of the first decade of the 21st century. What conclusion can be drawn from this for those of us passionate about the value of knowledge as a critical institutional asset, and secure in our conviction that it can be effectively managed and purposefully applied to improve public sector performance?

The principal conclusion I've drawn is that the biggest challenge to be faced in terms of public sector penetration relates to the need for KM education. In consequence, I've designed a one-day introductory workshop entitled: "A Knowledge Management Primer – *what it is and how it's vitally relevant to government institutions*". It breaks down into three main segments.

First, the misapprehension must be dissolved that KM is relevant only to private sector business enterprises. This can be done by dealing right up front with the nature and scope of knowledge, how it differs from information, and why, thus understood, it is just as much (if not more) a vital currency in public administration as it is to private sector functioning. I go on to demonstrate that a good way to understand KM is as follows: it's the way you manage your organization when you fully appreciate the importance of knowledge to your mission effectiveness and enterprise success.

The second workshop theme relates to avoiding the half-baked scone syndrome. I

show that critical to this is (a) design of a KM platform suitable to your specific needs, and (b) formulation of an implementation strategy that is not only technically robust, but also culturally feasible within your prevailing context. I emphasise the latter because it has often been forgotten or neglected by those who have accumulated half-baked scones.

Last but not least, I devote the final segment to the tried and tested maxim that 'seeing is believing'. I show the audience one or more carefully selected knowledge assets now in use in other organisations. Two in particular are good choices for a public sector audience. The first is an asset dealing with the whys and wherefores of applying for EU funding. This is a good contextual example because it is the creation of a UK development agency.

The second asset I show is one dealing with 'partnering'. This is relevant because there is an increasing trend for Australian public institutions to pursue partnering arrangements with other organisations. A good example of this trend is the move towards managing and funding large government civil infrastructure projects via the so-called PPP arrangement (Public Private Partnerships).

For readers interested in the possibilities associated with greater adoption of KM in public enterprises, hopefully the points made in this short article will prove useful and thought provoking.

Example KM programs in the public sector

Over the years, Knoco and associates have been involved in several public sector KM programs. Here are some examples.

Knowledge Retention. In the UK, Knowledge retention is a huge issue in the public sector. Recession-related manpower cuts mean that government departments and public sector agencies alike are shedding staff and, as a consequence, shedding knowledge. Several bodies have been in touch with us to train them in the techniques of Retention interviewing, and to co-deliver Retention programs to train them on-the-job.

Cross-government lesson learning. Increasingly government departments and agencies are being held to account for the quality of their lesson-learning. The

The legal implications of Lessons Learned

Tom was having an discussion recently with a client Knowledge Manager. "We were chatting, and speculating if it was better to have no lessons learned system at all, rather than have one that operated badly. For example, if you had an accident or incident in your business which was a repeat of an earlier incident, then perhaps the presence of a lessons learned system might make it far harder to

press is latching onto examples of repeat mistakes or repeat inefficiencies, and embarrassing ministers as a result. Our recent review of lesson-learning across several departments identified many opportunities for improvement, and for delivering an effective cross-departmental learning approach.

Communities of practice in local government. One area where cross-government learning has been proven to work has been in the area of communities of practice. In many areas, the principles, processes and technologies that underpin communities have been successfully applied to improve connectivity and knowledge sharing between bodies that previously were isolated.

Building a learning system. We have also been working with a national public sector

institution with a remit for building and spreading best practice in one area of public sector services. We have helped them with their KM strategy, and have run a number of training courses for them, including the introduction of knowledge management plans.

A community approach for education. Carol has been very active in this sector, working with schools in Detroit and in South Africa to take a systemic view of the community factors that influence education, and how these can be strengthened and improved. Learn more [here](#).



avoid accusations of negligence, as it could be assumed that the system should have avoided the repeat mistake. Any negligence could invalidate your insurance, or lead to a court case".

It was an interesting discussion, and at the moment the legal aspects are unclear. It could equally well be argued that you would be negligent in not having a lessons learned system in the first place.

Far and away the best approach is to have a lessons learned system in

place which actually works, and so to avoid having any repeat incidents at all. This is the thinking behind the lessons system at NASA, who believe that an effective lessons learned system is a component of organisational due diligence.

One of the functions of the Knoco KM assessment is to look at the effectiveness of our client learning systems, and to make sure that there are no holes and no gaps that would negate that due diligence. If you would like to give your learning system a check-up, give us a call.

KM and Collaboration

Stephanie Barnes

What does collaboration mean to you? Does it mean doing what you're told? How about finding someone else to do the work? Telling someone else what to do?

I hope none of those are your definitions of collaboration, and I hope that your definition of collaboration looks nothing like any of those.

Wikipedia defines collaboration the following way:

"Collaboration is a recursive process where two or more people or organizations work together in an intersection of common goals — for example, an intellectual endeavor that is creative in nature — by sharing knowledge, learning and building consensus. Most collaboration requires leadership, although the

form of leadership can be social within a decentralized and egalitarian group".

I like this definition of collaboration, but it does not always mirror my experience of collaboration. I like this definition because it talks about working together for common goals; sharing, which is a big part of Knowledge Management; building consensus; and that leadership comes through a decentralized and egalitarian group. I really, really, like this last part.

Leadership can come from anywhere and when I am working on a team that is collaborating effectively, leadership does come from anywhere and everywhere. Everyone contributes, and everyone reaps the benefits. Everyone gets a chance to have a voice and contribute to the end product, diversity of opinion is valued and the end product is better than any

one of us could have done on our own.

Unfortunately, I have also worked with groups/people that do not collaborate effectively. They wait for someone else to do the work, or to make things happen. They wonder why deadlines are missed, why communication is a challenge, or why the team doesn't function effectively.

Things happen too quickly now, in this information age, with instant or near instant access to information. No one can know it all. If we don't work together towards our goals, breaking down hierarchies which only slow things down, we will be left behind, and no one wants that.



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