

Christmas newsletter 2008

## Are lessons learned? Not until change is the result!

The Lessons Learned process is a key part of KM – where new knowledge and new learnings are identified through activity and review, and incorporated into future work practices. So why does Lessons Learned seem so difficult to get right?

Many of our clients are unhappy with their Lessons Learned process. Maybe they have a lessons database, but no lessons are coming in. Or they have a lessons database, and it's full of rubbish. Or they have a lessons database full of good quality lessons, and yet nothing ever seems to change, and the same 'mistakes' are made over and over in the business.

We have been pondering about this during the past year, especially the last point; where lessons are generated and documented, but the same problems keep recurring. Eventually people see errors and inefficiencies being repeated, and start to ask – if knowledge management and lessons learned are so good, why are we learning the same lessons over and over again?

The answer, it seems, is linked to another of our observations: organisations in which KM 'sticks' and consistently delivers business value tend to be characterised by

the ability to execute with discipline and rigour.

We are beginning to come to the view that a lesson is not an end in itself. A lesson is a temporary step along the way to a process, or to a process improvement. Therefore a lessons database is a holding-place which feeds a library of best practice – something that forms a temporary home in a workflow, rather than a permanent repository.

Think about a lesson coming out of a Retrospect. What have you learned?

Generally you have either learned how to do something for the first time, or you have learned a better way to do something (or of course, if the project was a disaster, you have learned a new way NOT to do something). So the lesson points to one of two actions:

- Document the way of doing something – ie write a process or procedure, or
- Document the better way of doing something, i.e. write a process or procedure improvement, which can then be evaluated and implemented.

This second point – process improvement – is implicit in the third question of the AAR: 'why was there a difference between what we expected, and what

### Season's greetings from Knoco

2008 has been yet another very interesting and professionally rewarding year for us and we look forward to working with you in 2009. Very best wishes, whatever your season or whichever festival you are enjoying or celebrating! From us, it's 'Compliments of the season', 'Merry Christmas' and 'Happy New Year' to you all.

actually happened'. The team followed the process, there was a difference from expectations, and therefore changes need to be made to the process. If there are no differences, then the process works perfectly, and we need to make no changes.

You can generalise this by concluding that: 'Learning has to lead to change'. If there is no change, there has been no learning. A Lessons Learned system needs to feed through into process change, as shown in the figure below. If this cycle is going to work, then we need, as part of our KM system, the following things.

continues over



**1** Activity review needs to identify not just lessons, but actions (and the actions have to be executed – see point 5). We see this applied by a drilling company in Alaska, where each lesson is accompanied by an action, and by the identification of the document (manual, procedure, guidelines) which needs to be updated. There also needs to be quality control of this step.

**2** The lessons database needs to contain a workflow, ideally automated, where new learnings and process improvement suggestions and actions are automatically forwarded to the relevant process owner. This is built into the system we are helping design in South America. The process owner can also validate the lessons, and make sure they are real learnings, not one person's opinion.

**3** There needs to be ownership for each key process, and these process owners need to be held accountable for reviewing all lessons and updating the processes that they own. This is built into the system used by a government Procurement department, and process owners who don't update their process are given a 'nudge' by a senior official. This ensures follow-through on learning.

**4** Once the process or procedure is updated, the lesson can be removed from the active lessons database and archived as part of the 'paper trail' that tracks why changes were made. The active lessons database then only contains pending lessons, which aren't yet incorporated into practices and guidelines, while 'closed' lessons are archived.

**5** Action tracking can be incorporated in the workflow, to ensure that the process improvement suggestions that arise from lessons are reviewed, and are closed out.

**6** People seeking knowledge now need to look in only two places for knowledge – the corporate guidelines, procedures and best practices, and the pending lessons. There's no need to wade through hundreds of past lessons, because all the learnings are already incorporated into the guidelines.

Excellence in following through to turn lessons into actionable process improvement is therefore a defining characteristic of learning organisations, and in these organisations we seldom if ever hear the claim 'Lessons Learned doesn't work'.

## Working with youth to build South Africa's capability

**2008** has been a landmark year for Knoco South Africa, with the appointment of Ali Corbett to run and expand the corporate social responsibility desk. This has been made possible through our KM work with Eskom, the national energy provider in South Africa.

Our involvement with previously disadvantaged communities in and around Cape Town began in 2004, when a link was made with USA-based Creative Education Foundation (CEF).

This year saw KnocoSA work with the first group of young graduates from the 'YouthWise' programme developed by CEF. This aims to equip young people with creative problem solving skills and to develop their

leadership capability, enabling them to make a difference in their communities and their own lives.

Ali has also established a connection with the progressive Tsiba University based in Cape Town, which focuses on teaching entrepreneurial and business skills to young people who would otherwise be unable to afford to attend a university.

KnocoSA is currently establishing a not-for-profit trust aimed at providing educationally enriching programmes to young people in South Africa. In the past year, Ali has developed links enabling us to work with teachers from less privileged schools – it's highly creative and great fun. Many schools don't have the financial means to take the



**KnocoSA's Ali Corbett and YouthWise graduates**

creative problem solving techniques back to the classroom. We are aiming to change that in the New Year by providing teachers with much needed equipment to make learning fun.

# KM in seven continents

## *the impact of culture*

**K**noco have offered KM services in seven continents now over a considerable number of years, and culture and its impact have always fascinated us.

While an Englishman and a Scotsman found themselves in a Turkish Kebab house being served by a Lebanese person who offered them refreshment created in the USA, the subject came up again. As a result we spent time this autumn thinking of how the culture varies around the world, and how this can impact the way KM needs to be applied in each culture if it is to be successful.

These are just our preliminary impressions, and while we know they are partly caricatures and stereotypes, we think they give some guidance to those working or about to work in those cultures. We would be interested in what you think.

**Asia** Asia is very much an oral culture, and knowledge is most easily transferred through face-to-face conversation, often between peers. Online communities are frequently less successful here than in the US, for example. Care must be taken that experts do not dominate the conversations, because of the healthy respect for expertise seen in SE Asia. Peer Assists and peer-level Knowledge Exchanges are likely to be a very effective KM intervention, if well facilitated.

**Africa** This is a continent of many cultures. In some countries, the culture of oral story-telling is very ancient, and can easily be used in support of KM. South African society is an interesting mixture of *ubuntu* (which values



**KM strategy in Africa**

the collective whole 'I am because we are') with a strongly competitive spirit, which all rugby fans will recognise. Together these attributes create an interesting environment in which KM should flourish provided that competition is turned externally, as internal competition in an organisation can easily derail Knowledge Management.

**Australia** The Australians are very open to knowledge sharing, and to learning lessons from past performance; good or bad. They have a very open culture and are happy to challenge authority and orthodoxy. The tendency to avoid

appearing to 'show off' may make an Australian unwilling to volunteer a success or an innovation, and your Knowledge Management program should ensure that learnings are actively and proactively sought (eg through AARs) rather than waiting for them to be volunteered.

**Middle East** Another oral culture, knowledge sharing is embedded into normal life in the Gulf, in the *Douwania's*, or talking circles, seen in many people's home. This type of peer-based informal exchange is likely to be far more productive than a more formal online approach,



**KM engagement in Scandinavia**

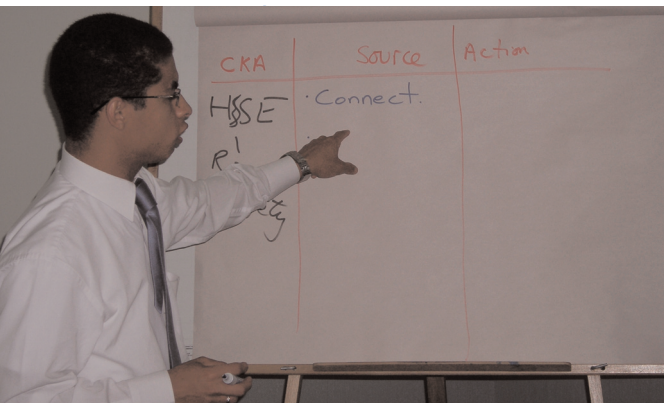


**Community building in the Middle East**





KM exercise in the former soviet union



KM planning in South America



KM training in the USA

where corporate hierarchy can get in the way.

**Europe** As we all know, Europe contains more than one culture. However the Northern Europeans, where we have considerable experience, are very open to knowledge management. The Scandinavians are natural collaborators, and the British are very willing to analyse failures, and projects that have gone wrong, and to learn from the experience. Sometimes it has proven more difficult to get the Brits to analyse success! However the northern European fondness for process is a good supporter of the Lessons Learned process, and other project-based KM activities.

**North America** In the USA, analysing successful projects is not a problem: everyone wants to do it! Also the Americans and Canadians take very easily to online communities – so easily, in fact, that it can be harder to introduce some of the other knowledge management activities. The pioneering individual spirit frequently seen in the USA is a powerful driver in communities which take a bottom-up approach, and can result in excellent sharing and

collaboration. The same creative and collaborative attitude needs to be fostered in more structured activities such as knowledge capture sessions and KM plans.

**South America** In South America, there is a great respect for Knowledge, and for the company experts. The knowledge held by these experts can be used as a real resource, and the role of the expert can be subtly altered so that they become the custodians of corporate knowledge, rather than the providers of personal knowledge. People who are not experts need to be reassured that their knowledge is also of value to the community, so that the knowledge base is not entirely expert-dominated.



KM planning in the Caribbean

## Knoco website gets major upgrade

The Knoco Website has moved! To further recognise the global perspective of our practice we have moved it to **www.knoco.com** and it now contains many more items of value for you. These include:

- our complete back catalogue of newsletters
- a set of White Papers on topics such as KM in HSE, Choosing Communities, KM

and performance management, and Community Evolution

- a dozen podcasts on various KM topics which you can download to your video iPod or laptop
- two self-diagnosis tools for you to check the health of your KM program
- as well as descriptions of all our services and offerings

*We hope to see you there!*

## Knoco clients in the MAKE finals

This year we are delighted to see three of our major clients in the MAKE awards finalists list. Congratulations to BP, the BBC and Mars for their nominations, and we wish you well in the voting!

# Knowledge Management in a Petabyte world

This summer, Nick spent a week in Dubrovnik with the Society of Petroleum Engineers, discussing the 2020 world, when Oil Industry professionals will be working with Petabytes of data (a Petabyte is a million Gigabytes).

Much of the discussion was about data handling and data quality, but Nick came away with the following conclusions, which apply to any industry where data volumes are on the rise.

The oil industry is facing a

manpower crisis. As the volume of data rises while the size of oilfields falls, more and more work faces fewer and fewer people, who will need to work with an exponentially rising data volume.

There needs to be a breakthrough in productivity of the geologists and geophysicists, otherwise the Oil Sector will be constrained not by lack of new finds, but by lack of new people. Although technology can help,

there will also need to be an increase in the rate of learning.

KM-based techniques could help deliver this breakthrough, much as Technical Limit improved the productivity of Drillers, and Kaizen improved the productivity of assembly line workers. To date, very little work has been done on KM-based process improvement for geoscience, and the companies need to start now, before it is too late.

## Highlights of 2008

**2008** has been a busy and diverse year. Some of our activities have included

- Mapping out the links between KM and L&D for a global drinks manufacturer
- Capturing knowledge by telephone on motivating salespeople
- Packaging technical knowledge from a new technology chemical plant
- Helping an IT services company to develop its KM strategy
- Training Algerians, Azeris, Swedes, Brits, Kuwaitis, South Africans and Americans (to name but a few) in Knowledge Management
- Lessons capture from some large projects in South Africa, the UK, Alaska and Norway
- Supporting innovation in UK education

- Launching communities of practice in Kuwait
- Assessing and benchmarking the state of KM in a global defence contractor
- Assisting an African national Electricity provider through the early stages of KM implementation
- Launching a series of KM pilots in a South American oil and gas company
- KM planning for some large projects in Norway and Trinidad
- Knowledge capture from a retiring expert
- Leadership training for a project in Algeria
- Building a mineral resource management learning history spanning some 150 years of collective learning for a mining company
- Developing and running accelerated learning programmes for field geologists



Knoco's Nick Milton (right) receives the Lecturer of the Year award from Sweden's Chalmers University.

- to establish knowledge bases for exploration development
- Design and execution of a business-driven action learning project aimed at delivering a threefold improvement in productivity and 50% cost reduction