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Internal Knowledge-Sharing Systems: Five Reasons why they Fail

A company's performance in the marketplace can be traced to its ability to use its collective knowledge to design, build and sell products better than competitors. In today's world workers have a many choices at their fingertips to help them do their jobs better: Internet/Intranets, telephone, e-mail, libraries, conversations with colleagues, etc. However, these tools are simply the ground floor that everybody can without much investment. To gain an advantage, organizations collectively invest billions of dollars annually in Knowledge Sharing systems to improve their ability to manage the flow of internal and external knowledge content in hopes of enhancing productivity and efficiency.

Unfortunately, these same organizations often become disappointed when such investments do not produce the expected results. Understanding why many Knowledge Sharing systems fail can help avoid these risks and increase your chances of success. Here are 5 of the most common reasons why internal knowledge-sharing systems fail.

1. Multiple competing pilots

Before investing in a pilot it may be wise to look around the company to see how many other pilot programs exist that allow workers to store and share content. You will be surprised. In an effort to sell their product, technology vendors often push pilot programs to allow their customer the opportunity to "test drive" their products and eventually buy the full version. Interestingly, they often manage to sell separate "pilots" to different functions, division or departments within in the same

organization, unbeknownst to the other pilot operation. To compound the problem, other pilots may exist using different technologies that cannot talk to one another, creating silos. So with multiple concurrent "pilots", the organization ends up with multiple silos that can only share within their silo – isolated from the others. The end result is that the organization's overall investment is unnecessarily multiplied several times over, actually resulting in less efficiency than if it would simply coordinate a single pilot program that can be developed into a knowledge sharing standard.

2. Get everyone on the same page

Multiple pilots are symptomatic of people who want the same things but are not strategically on the same page. Many people within the organization may see the same need to share knowledge but are independently trying to address the issue, resulting in uncoordinated and repetitive attempts that may temporarily solve a local sharing issue. But the lack off coordination actually prevents the actual wider sharing that organization expects in the long run. In addition, there are repetitive costs, maintenance and management of these repetitive initiatives. This is classic "reinventing the wheel" caused by working in isolation. An old theory among experienced Knowledge Management experts is that if you are trying to do something, it is safe to assume that others have thought about it and tried it. Therefore it is a good practice to do some research and seek these initiatives out before undertaking a new one. Coordinating with those who are involved in other KM initiatives is not easy, but necessary. In the end, users and



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management will benefit from the increased ability to share outside of existing silos, cost savings from shared planning & implementation, standard procedures & technologies, and from avoiding the added costs and isolation that would result from another new initiative.

3. Technology vendors with turn-key solutions

With apologies to technology vendors, their best interest is in selling their products, not in making organizations run better, even if their intentions are well meant. Beware that selling additional modules, modifications, and other proprietary add-ons is how vendors make money. The problem is that all of these modules and add-ons may not be needed so soon (or at all) and many times actually make things more complicated instead of helpful. Stick with tools that fit into the organizational platform and can easily interact with add-ons from a multitude of vendors. This way your options are always open to competitive changes and your chances of linking into the rest of the organization are greater. Remember one of the basic commandments of KM: "Technology should not lead the process". While this seems simple it is one of the most broken rules of KM and a common cause of failure, often attributable to over-zealous vendors or users looking for that technology "silver bullet".

4. Build it and they will come

This saying may have worked for Kevin Costner in *Field of Dreams*, but it is a dream if to think people will jump in and start using a new knowledge-sharing system simply because it is now available. Builders of internal Knowledge Management

processes sometimes become so enamored with its capabilities that they lose sight of the fact that users must:

- a. learn of its existence;
- b. find it easy to navigate;
- c. feel that it has useful content; and then
- d. choose it over the options that they are already using.

Truly understanding what it will take to win over users is often over-looked. Instead, developers unsuccessfully try to "force" people into using the new system through corporate mandates or forced obsolescence. Experienced KM professionals know that there is no better way to fuel a rebellion. Instead, it is wise to enhance chances of success by embracing features that workers already feel comfortable with. In addition, resist the temptation to overindulge users with too many bells and whistles at once. Most importantly, remember that deployment is not just making something accessible. Deployment includes implementing content management processes (taxonomy development and input/output processes), user awareness & training programs, soliciting user-feedback, and making on-going adjustments to fit evolving user needs. Let the users continue to tell you what to give them.

5. High-level technology & low-level personnel

Staffing a KM initiative can often result in a costly miscalculation of the talent required. Organization leaders often look at internal Knowledge Management through tangible solutions like portals, repositories and websites and give little regard to building a process and culture. Those leaders believe



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that the technology will simply make it happen and all that is required are administrators. But in contrast, do higher learning institutions like Harvard or Cambridge earn prominence through their expensive buildings and technology infrastructure? Or do they earn it through their reputation for having the best people who build the best processes? Do companies seek leaders for accounting, IT, engineering or sales departments who are low-level technicians or lower performing transplants who are ineffective in their current jobs? Or do leading companies seek the best accountants, engineers and systems people to lead these areas? Do they seek engineers to lead accounting and accountants to lead engineering? Unfortunately, many organizations tend to think they can accomplish world-class knowledge sharing and learning with lower-level technical personnel or transplanted managers who have little or no KM experience. That is not to say that there is not a need for people with these backgrounds. But companies that are poor at knowledge sharing tend to view the people who run and implement their KM processes as lower-level administrators compared to their accounting, engineering or IT counterparts. This generally becomes a self-fulfilling prophecy. In other cases it is simply assigned to the CIO since KM is viewed as a technology issue. Conversely, companies that excel at Knowledge Management generally seek the most experienced and talented KM professionals to build and run their KM systems. Professionals that have expertise and training in leveraging the value of knowledge across an organization are worth their weight in gold, but far under-valued by many organizations. Using the right people to implement the

process will give it a better chance of success.

Of course, there are many other things that can affect the success or failure of internal Knowledge Management processes. But remember, an organization's ability to organize and use its collective knowledge differentiate it from its competitors. So an organized approach to KM is vital and should be given the attention it deserves in order to succeed. Those that recognize this find the paybacks in productivity and efficiency will be exponential.