KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

VOLUME 4, ISSUE 10
OFFICE OF TECHNOLOGY STRATEGIES (TS)

INTRODUCTION

All organizations contain a wealth of knowledge. Some of this knowledge is clearly stated within an organization, while some may be hidden in the depths of key individuals. How does an organization gather all the relevant knowledge and leverage it to improve operations? Knowledge management (KM) is "the deliberate and systematic coordination of an organization's people, technology, processes, and organizational structure in order to add value through reuse and innovation." In this Tech Insight, we provide a history and introduction to KM, its benefits, and how KM is currently applied at the Department of Veterans Affairs (VA).

HISTORY OF KM

KM is not a new term, as humans have always been interested in acquiring and sharing knowledge. In the 1950's, Alfred Sloan divisionalized General Motors, which sent a message of the techniques necessary for large-scale business management. Over time, the focus has shifted from business management to include viewing human talent as a primary competitive differentiator, which is why many consider this to be the beginning of the KM we know today. KM began its development as a discipline in the 1970's by researchers Peter Drucker, Paul Strassman, and Peter Senge who conducted studies to inquire how knowledge was produced, used, and diffused within an organization. By the 1980's, most business and corporate organizations understood the significance of knowledge as a competitive asset. Advancing technologies provided tools for organizations to gather large amounts of data. However, the data needed to be managed in a thoughtful way and communicated to all stakeholders.

KM emerged as a new business practice in the 1990's and began to be recognized by many of the world's leading companies as a required asset for success. Business consultants started to build revenues by coordinating KM projects for other businesses. Some companies were transformed through their understanding of the power of KM. In 1997, Ikujiro Nonaka made KM an official discipline when he was appointed as the first distinguished professor of knowledge at the University of California.

INTRODUCTION TO KM

The Government Accountability Office (GAO) defines KM as follows:

- Involves sharing reliable information across boundaries, both internally and externally
- Links people across boundaries to share knowledge they may not otherwise share
- Includes technological tools to facilitate knowledge sharing
- Helps organizations maximize their value and manage their risk

KM draws upon a vast number of diverse fields including organization science, linguistics, information technologies, education and training, etc. and therefore be hard to define in simple terms. KM is a mix of strategies, tools, and techniques such as storytelling, peer-to-peer mentoring, etc., which is why many regard it as a multidisciplinary field. It is viewed as a response to the challenge to try to manage the complex, information overloaded work environment. KM is achieved through the promotion of creating, sharing, and applying knowledge as well as through the feeding of lessons learned and best practices used in order to foster continued organizational learning.

KM scholars distinguish between two types of knowledge, explicit and tacit knowledge. Explicit knowledge is information that is set out in tangible form and can be disseminated within an organization through documents or standard operating procedures. It is discrete or "digital" and can be readily transmitted between individuals. Tacit knowledge was originally defined by Michael Polanyi in 1966 and often referred to as "know-how." It refers to the intuitive, hard to define knowledge that is largely experienced based, which makes it personal in nature. Many regard tacit knowledge as the most valuable source of knowledge, however, KM systems have a very hard time handling this type of knowledge. An information technology (IT) system relies on codification, which makes it is difficult and near impossible to handle tacit knowledge.

BENEFITS OF KM

For an organization, KM can help drive strategy, solve problems quickly, diffuse best practices, and build organization memory. Actively managing knowledge is important to an organization's success as it helps to: 1) facilitate decision-making capabilities, 2) build learning organizations by making learning routine, and, 3) stimulate cultural change and innovation.

In addition, KM can also help an organization to maximize its value and reduce risk by:

- Helping leaders facilitate and manage change
- Supporting results orientation and matrix management
- Aiding coordination and integration across agencies, units, levels, and boundaries, etc.

- Helping managers plan their IT efforts to support employees' knowledge-sharing needs
- Helping employees identify with their organization's strategic plan
- Helping leaders and employees embrace needed cultural transformation

Actively managing knowledge can help organizations increase their chances of success by facilitating decision-making, building learning environments by making learning routine, and stimulating cultural change and innovation.

KM AT VA

At VA, an enterprise-wide KM solution is provided by Enterprise Veteran Operations (EVO) to disseminate accurate and consistent general benefit information to VA staff, Veterans, beneficiaries, and the public in an intuitive, easy-to-use application. As of early March 2017, there are over 30,000 VA KM users and the user base is growing consistently. As KM grows it is vital that information be disseminated to users as widely and through whatever channels are available. Information can be shared not just from EVO but from user-to-user within VA.

VA's Office of Information & Technology (OI&T) is also driving KM for VA's IT strategy through the VA Enterprise Architecture Repository (VEAR). The VEAR will provide a one-stop shop for VA's business, data, application, and technology architecture guidelines and standards, and provide resources that are tailored to strategic planners, investment portfolio directors, and IT project teams, using the VA Enterprise Architecture (EA) website as a common user interface. The VEAR is undergoing a transformation to accommodate recent initiatives including the VA Systems Inventory (VASI), Enterprise Shared Services (ESS) architecture, and Authoritative Data Sources (ADS). The VEAR will continue to add new EA artifacts to ensure that stakeholders obtain the right information at the right time to support both strategic and project-level decision-making.

VA recognizes that data and knowledge facilitate discovery and the exchange of information across VA organizational boundaries. KM can also include data management and data governance, which are key to VA's ability to harmonize, standardize, protect, share, and store information. The Department's focus on enterprise data management and data governance through efforts like the my360 and myVA initiatives will help to deliver a seamless Veteran experience.

CONCLUSION

Companies and government agencies started experimenting with the use of KM and KM systems over the past few years to improve operations and capture knowledge and information. Ask yourself, the following questions: How do you currently capture knowledge

and data? What else can VA employees do to ensure that knowledge is captured and available to those that need it? And more importantly, how can we help to prioritize KM as a best practice within VA?

TS TECH INSIGHT SERIES

The monthly Tech Insight series aims to help readers make better decisions and be more informed customers (of Office of Information & Technology's products and services) by providing them with high-level overviews of technology issues that impact or will impact VA's Information Technology (IT) environment. Tech Insights introduce topics in an easily digestible fashion by presenting background information on the topic, clearly explaining its importance within VA, and providing recommendations for success from TS. View all TS Tech Insights here.