

The Educe Group



Capturing Knowledge: Know What You Know, Know What You Don't

July 2008

Introduction

When capturing organizational knowledge, knowing what you don't know is as important as knowing what you do. All too often, knowledge management is focused on identifying experts, then leaving others to approach those individuals with requests to share their knowledge and expertise. For a knowledge management program to be effective, it must include the identification of experts as well as novices, and all skill levels in between. The program must also go beyond the categorization of individuals under pre-determined subject headings, and delve into the specific strengths and deficiencies within the group.

What is Knowledge Management?

The concept of *knowledge management* encompasses an organization's practices of collecting, organizing, analyzing, and transferring knowledge in terms of information, skills, and processes. Knowledge management is gaining increased focus as companies face the challenge of losing the skills and knowledge of baby boomers as they retire in the coming years, but other business needs are driving the development of knowledge management systems and tools as well. Objectives of knowledge management programs may include increasing organizational effectiveness, driving innovation, and achieving competitive advantage within an industry. By its very nature, knowledge management is also tied to both formal and informal learning, and the idea of continuous development.

The depth to which an organization collects, organizes, analyzes, and transfers knowledge depends on the methods used to capture and access this knowledge. An organization that relies primarily on informal exchanges between information-searching employees and subject matter experts, for example, may find that a great deal of knowledge is transferred across the organization, but that little if any of it is collected or organized for future reuse. At the other end of the spectrum, an organization may devote substantial resources to the development and maintenance of formalized document management systems and repositories to organize corporate knowledge, but without effective training on their use these resources never reach the intended audiences.

A comprehensive knowledge management program must focus on the development of all possible channels through which knowledge can flow. In the figure below, methods of knowledge collection are depicted on a continuum of informal to formal indicating the extent to which the mechanism is driven centrally by the organization (*Figure 1*). Methods of knowledge access are illustrated on a continuum of unstructured to structured to demonstrate how the knowledge is accessed by employees. Placement of each channel on these continua will vary from company to company, depending on how each method is implemented and the extent to which corporate culture either encourages a more unstructured, self-governing approach or opts for a more formalized, push approach to information.

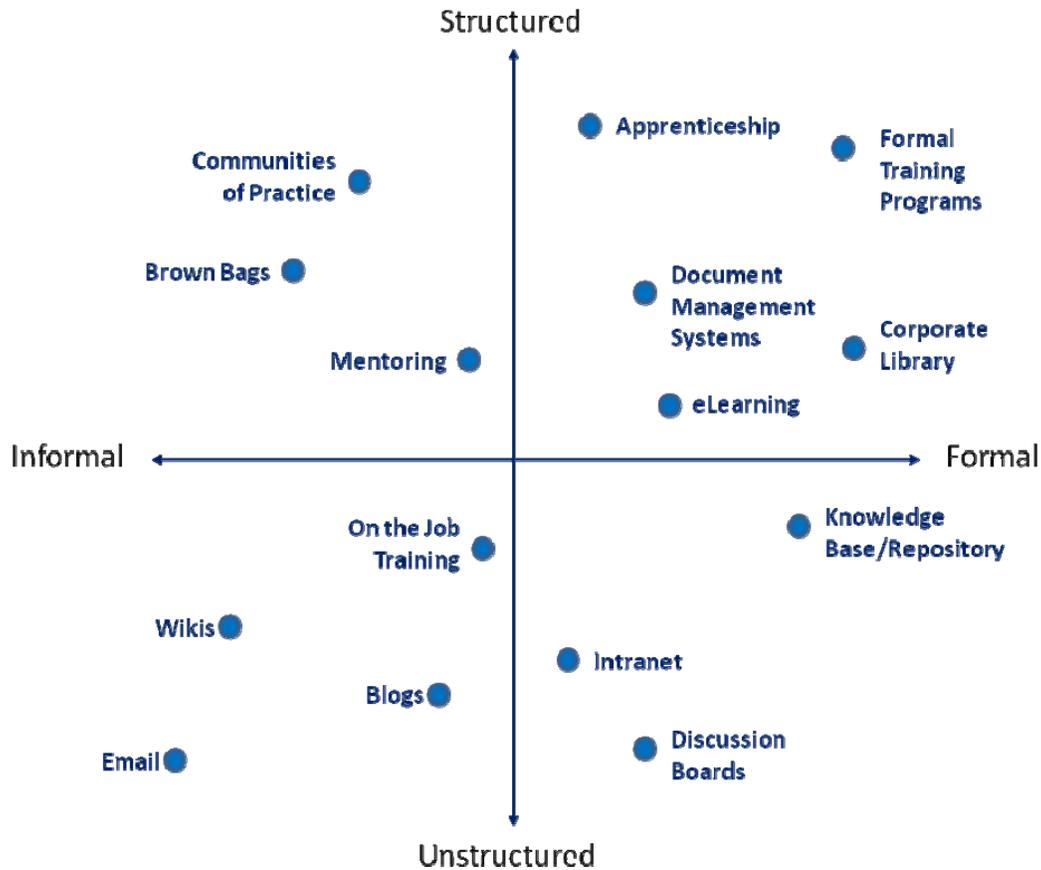


Figure 1: Methods of Capturing and Accessing Knowledge Within an Organization

Each of these methods relies on two groups: *knowledge seekers* and *experts*. The knowledge seekers either proactively use organizational resources to find the knowledge they need (*pull*), or are provided information the organization determines should be distributed (*push*). The experts transfer knowledge because (1) it is their role in the organization to do so (e.g., trainers, instructional designers), (2) they have been approached by a knowledge seeker with a request for information, or (3) channels have been established within the organization that allow the expert to volunteer information.

What's missing?

Regardless of the methods employed, every organization manages knowledge in some form, whether formal or informal, structured or unstructured, pushed or pulled. This exchange of knowledge takes place whether or not the organization has a formal knowledge management program. To increase the effectiveness of the program, organizations must also create a plan to include the identification of experts as well as novices, and all skill levels in between. The program must also go beyond the categorization of individuals under pre-determined subject headings, and delve into the specific strengths and deficiencies within the group.

You Don't Have to be an Expert to Share Knowledge

As stated before, most knowledge management approaches draw the traditional distinction between knowledge seeker and expert. By expanding the scale to accommodate varying degrees of knowledge, an organization can identify group skill levels and define resources that may have been previously untapped (*Figure 2*).

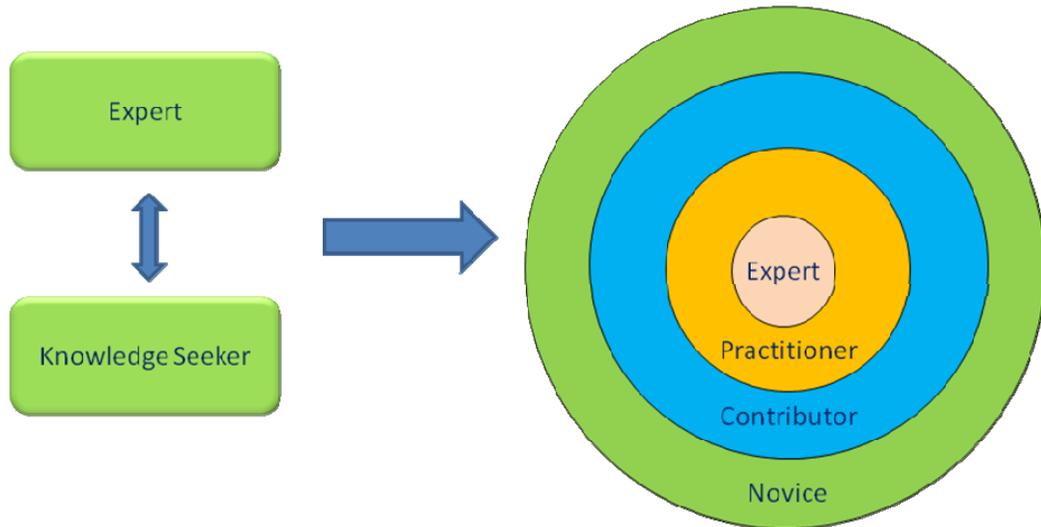


Figure 2: Shifting view of knowledge management roles

The scale can be defined based on an established proficiency scale used for performance management within the organization, or, to collect knowledge among a team or on a departmental level, a scale can be developed that is appropriate for the roles that the team/department fulfills within the organization. In the example above, a four level scale identifying novices to experts has been employed.

Identifying Group Strengths and Deficiencies

Traditional knowledge management relies on experts pushing knowledge to employees and knowledge seekers requesting information as needed (*Figure 3*). In both situations, each party lacks an understanding of the other; experts do not know what information knowledge seekers really need, and knowledge seekers do not know what a subject matter expert's true areas of expertise may be until a dialogue is started.

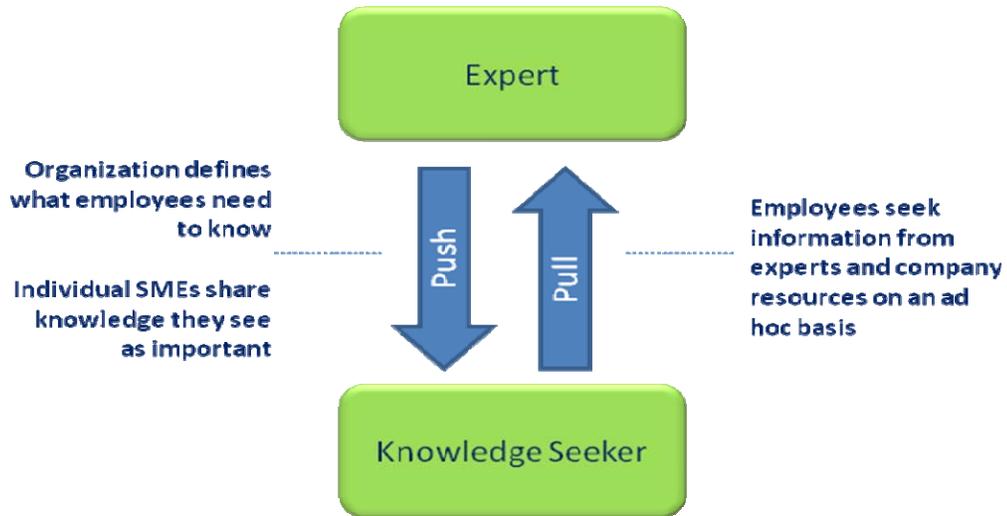


Figure 3: Traditional identification of strengths and deficiencies

By identifying group strengths and deficiencies, employees can transfer knowledge more efficiently. Once a scale has been identified, employees should be given the opportunity to self-assess their skill levels in specified knowledge areas (*Figure 4*). Those that define themselves as experts should be prepared to provide a brief summary of their expertise. Those that define themselves at other levels should identify one or more topics within that knowledge area that they would specifically like to learn more about as well areas where they have some level of knowledge that could be shared with others.

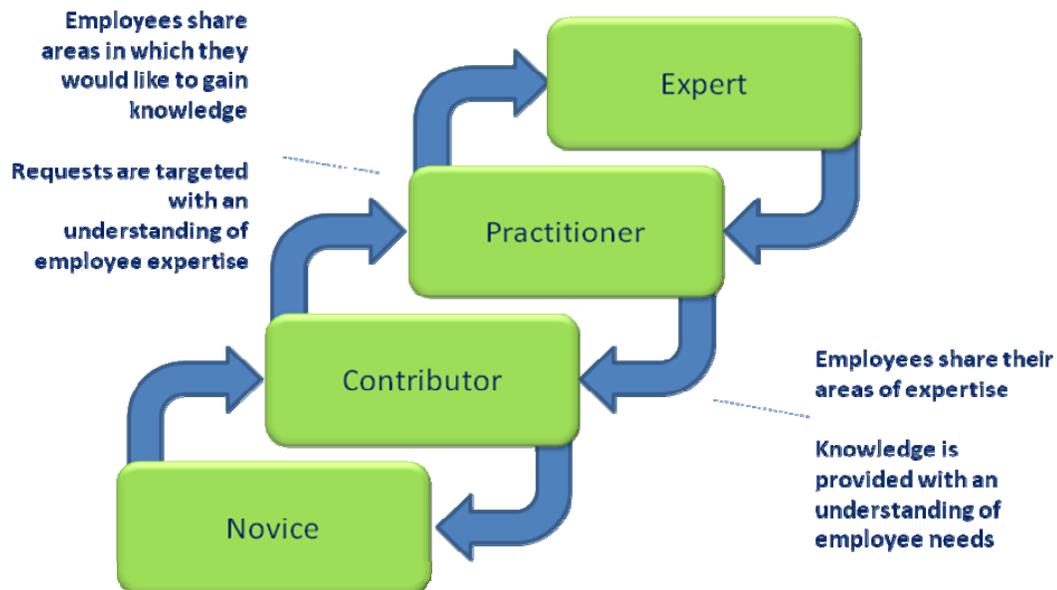


Figure 4: Collaborative identification of group strengths and deficiencies

This type of information exchange allows experts to provide information with a better understanding of the knowledge needs of their fellow employees, and helps knowledge seekers to target their information requests more successfully.

Getting the Value

As with other approaches to knowledge management, this new approach still faces many of the same obstacles:

- ❑ How do you collect and store data so it is effective for senior management decision-making as well as use on the ground?
- ❑ Should collection of data be an administrator-managed activity, a collaborative peer to peer exercise, or combination of both?
- ❑ Should data be edited? Can employee assessments of their own expertise be trusted?
- ❑ How do you ensure that content provided during the collection process is valid?
- ❑ How open is your organizational culture? Will employees willingly identify areas where they need more expertise?

Though difficult to tackle, these questions must be addressed within your organization in order to get the value out of any knowledge management initiative. Decisions should be documented in an overall action plan to ensure that all activities are aligned with knowledge management objectives.

Putting Together a Plan of Action

Once data collection begins, an ongoing plan must be implemented to ensure continuous transfer of knowledge and periodic update of the group's knowledge base and information needs. In addition to the strategic questions outlined above, consider the following as you put together your plan:

- ❑ Once information has been captured, how do you expect it to be used? How will you communicate these expectations to employees?
- ❑ How will data be stored to be referenced and expanded upon after initial collection?
- ❑ What safeguards can be put in place to prevent sensitive or proprietary information from being posted inappropriately?"
- ❑ What existing knowledge management channels can be leveraged for this type of data collection?
- ❑ What new knowledge management channels can be implemented?
- ❑ How will you track changes over time?

About The Educe Group

The Educe Group is a boutique firm dedicated to providing uncompromising service in an increasingly critical niche: the implementation and adoption of Talent Management software. With a diverse team of professional consultants, Educe helps companies develop and execute learning strategy, conduct vendor selection, implement and adopt talent technologies, and deploy customized training solutions. Educe has also been commissioned to conduct research and produce white papers on industry best practices in learning and development. More information is available at www.educegroup.com.

For information on how The Educe Group can assist your organization with your knowledge management program, or to schedule a service offering and capability presentation, please contact us at 301-215-7370 or info@educegroup.com.

© 2008 The Educe Group. All Rights Reserved. Reproduction of this publication in any form without prior written permission is forbidden.