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RESEARCH METHODOLOGY

RESULTS & DISCUSSION

FINDINGS

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DEVELOPING A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT STRATEGY TO REDUCE COST OF QUALITY FOR AUTOMOBILE INDUSTRY

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ABSTRACT

Organisations are facing ever-increasing challenges, brought on by marketplace pressures or the nature of the workplace. Many organisations are now looking to knowledge management (KM) to address these challenges. Such initiatives are often started with the development of a knowledge management strategy. To be successful, a KM strategy must do more than just outline high-level goals such as 'become a knowledge-enabled organisation'. Instead, the strategy must identify the key needs and issues within the organisation, and provide a framework for addressing these. This paper provides an approach for developing a KM strategy that focuses strongly on an initial needs analysis. Taking this approach ensures that any activities and initiatives are firmly grounded in the real needs and challenges confronting the organisation. KM strategy reduces cost of quality. The cost quality is the cost of poor quality.

KEYWORD

KM strategy, cost of quality, Automobile Industry.

INTRODUCTION



There are many approaches for developing a knowledge management strategy, each supported by a holistic model of KM processes.

FIG 1: KM STRATEGY



These can be classified into two main approaches

- Top-down

The overall strategic direction of the organisation is used to identify the focus of the knowledge management initiative. This is reflected in a series of activities designed to meet this broad goal.

- Bottom-up

Research is conducted into the activities of staff involved in key business processes. The findings of this research highlights key staff needs and issues, which are then, tackled through a range of knowledge management initiatives.

Each of these approaches has its strengths, and in practice, a success KM programme must encompass both.

This article presents a model that focuses strongly on the needs analysis activities with staff, to drive a primarily bottom-up strategy, as follows:

1. Identify the key staff groups within the organisation. These groups deliver the greatest business value, or are involved in the most important business activities.

2. Conduct comprehensive and holistic needs analysis activities with selected staff groups, to identify key needs and issues.
3. Supplement this research with input from senior management and organisational strategy documents, to determine an overall strategic focus.
4. Based on these findings, develop recommendations for addressing the issues and needs identified.
5. Implement a series of strategic and tactical initiatives, based on the recommendations. These will select suitable knowledge management techniques and approaches.

OBJECTIVES OF THE STUDY

Historically, many knowledge management strategies have focused solely on the top-down approach, identifying high-level objectives such as 'become a knowledge-enabled organisation'.

With little understanding, of the key issues and needs of staff throughout the organisation, these initiatives found it difficult to engage staff in the required cultural and process changes.

As a result, many of these initiatives had little long-term impact on the organisation, despite initial efforts. Recognising these issues, this approach focuses much more strongly on the initial needs analysis activities.

METHODOLOGY

The approach to developing a KM strategy outlined in this paper provides a number of major benefits:

HOLISTIC

The focus on needs analysis will identify a wide range of issues and requirements. Some will be organisation-wide, while others will be specific to individual business units or job roles.

The use of a range of needs analysis techniques will identify:

- cultural issues
- key business needs
- duplication of effort
- inconsistencies in practices
- inefficiencies in business processes
- opportunities for improved policies or procedures
- major business risks
- and much more...

SOLUTION-INDEPENDENT

The approach used to develop the knowledge management strategy makes no assumptions about the solutions that might be implemented. As such, the approach is independent of any technologies implemented, or knowledge management techniques applied. Instead, the approach is to identify the need, and then determine the solution.

SIMPLE

The use of well-tested needs analysis techniques gives confidence that the true issues in the organisation will be identified. In practice, these simply 'fall out' of the research activities, with the key strategic and tactical recommendations becoming obvious in most cases.

This simplicity makes the process easy to implement, and ensures that the findings and recommendations are well-understood throughout the organisation.

EFFICIENT

A modest amount of initial research will be sufficient to identify the most crucial problems within the organisation. These can then be tackled with suitable activities and initiatives. Once this first round of projects have delivered tangible business benefits, additional targeted research can be used to identify further issues to be addressed. This 'iterative' approach can then be repeated, ensuring that business improvements are seen even as the next round of research is initiated.

TARGETS RESOURCES

There are many 'good ideas' that can be drawn from the field of knowledge management. The challenge is to identify those approaches that will have the greatest impact upon the organisation. By starting with the needs analysis, approaches can be targeted to address the most critical issues, or to deliver the greatest business benefits.

IDENTIFYING KEY STAFF GROUPS

The first step in the process is to identify the key staff groups in the organisation. The key staff are typically those directly involved in the most important business activities. In general, the key staff groups are more likely to be those at the front-line, rather than managers or administrative staff. This will, of course, depend on the nature and structure of the organisation.

Common staff groups involve:

- front-line staff
- call centre staff
- field workers
- researchers
- clinical staff
- production workers
- administrative and support staff
- managers (senior, line)
- IT staff

Each of these groups will have specific needs and issues, as well as those in common with the organisation as a whole. By targeting the key staff groups, the extent to which the needs vary across the organisation can be identified, and the KM strategy developed accordingly.

NEEDS ANALYSIS TECHNIQUES

There are a wide range of need analysis techniques, drawn from fields such as knowledge management, user-centred design, ethnography and anthropology.

Techniques include:

- facilitated discussions
- focus groups
- surveys
- staff interviews
- workplace observation
- contextual inquiry
- task analysis

In practice, more than one technique should be used with a selected group of staff, to ensure that a complete picture is built up. Each of the techniques is briefly described in the sections below.

FACILITATED DISCUSSIONS

There are a wide range of facilitated discussion techniques that can be used to explore issues with targeted staff groups. These are most commonly used with management, consultants, and other staff comfortable with these types of meetings. Techniques such as 'affinity diagrams' can be used to provide structure to the discussions, and to capture the issues identified. In many cases, facilitated discussions are used as the primary mechanism for gaining the strategic input required for the development of the KM strategy.

FOCUS GROUPS

These are a specific, and widely-used, form of facilitated discussions that focus on exploring a topic within a group setting. Often used as a way of gathering input from larger numbers of stakeholders, focus groups must be run carefully if they are to generate meaningful results. Focus groups are best used to explore current issues and problems, rather than to discuss future 'wish-lists' of knowledge management approaches. Focus groups should always be used in conjunction with techniques such as staff interviews and contextual inquiry, to ensure that the results are meaningful.

SURVEYS

The use of surveys is widespread, and they are a very efficient way of gaining input from a large number of staff throughout an organisation. In practice, surveys are best used to gather staff opinions, rather than specific information on which to base decisions. Care must also be taken when developing the survey questions, and analysing the results. Survey results must always be supported with the use of other techniques, to provide confidence in the findings.

STAFF INTERVIEWS

One-on-one interviews are one of the most effective and often used techniques for identifying staff needs and issues.

WORKPLACE OBSERVATION

This involves going 'out into the field' to observe the activities of staff, and the environment in which they work. Workplace observation is particularly effective in environments such as call centres, manufacturing areas, field working, or on-the-road staff.

It is a very holistic technique that will identify patterns of work and environment issues that are impossible to gather using techniques such as surveys or focus groups.

CONTEXTUAL INQUIRY

This is a combination of staff interviews and workplace observation that involves exploring issues with a staff person, while situated within their normal working environment. By conducting the interview 'in context', it becomes possible to see the resources used by staff when conducting work activities. The interviewer can also ask the staff person to show them how they complete specific activities, for example, showing how they find a piece of information on the intranet. This technique is very effective at identifying issues with currently-available information sources and tools.

TASK ANALYSIS

Not all activities within an organisation are of equal value. Key business tasks should be identified, and investigated to gain an understanding of the steps involved, and the knowledge required at each step. The existing sources of the knowledge can then be identified, along with the key issues and roadblocks impacting upon the effectiveness and efficiency of the task. This type of research will identify mechanisms for both improving the task itself, as well as indicating how to improve the provision of knowledge to those involved in completing the task.

STRATEGIC INPUT

While the needs analysis activities focused on the 'bottom-up' aspects of the KM project, the overall strategic focus must also be identified. This strategic focus then guides the knowledge management strategy, providing a framework for the selection and prioritisation of individual projects and activities. In this way, both the bottom-up and top-down aspects of the knowledge management strategy are addressed.

There are a number of sources of input that can be drawn upon when determining the strategic focus, including:

- Senior management involvement, via interviews, facilitated discussions, or other interactions.
- Organisational strategy documents, such as the corporate plan or annual report.
- Results of other strategic research projects, such as 'staff satisfaction surveys'.
- External market research.
- Industry 'best practices', and other reports drawn from relevant industry or sector bodies.

These inputs can then be synthesised into a strategic focus for the knowledge management initiatives.

COMMON FINDINGS

The needs analysis and strategic input will highlight a broad range of issues and needs throughout the organisation.

- difficulty in finding key corporate information
- inconsistent and unstructured approach to information management
- ineffective dissemination of corporate and regional news
- reliance on 'rumour' and 'gossip' as the key sources of organisational news
- lack of knowledge sharing between related business units
- difficulties in determining and disseminating 'best practices'
- inconsistency in advice given by call centre and front-line staff
- over reliance on long-service members of staff as sources of knowledge
- cultural barriers between head office and regional staff
- duplication of effort between regions
- roadblocks between policy development and programme implementation

These are just a small sampling of possible findings, to provide an idea of the types of issues that will often drive the implementation of a knowledge management strategy.

ACTING ON THE FINDINGS

With an in-depth understanding of the problems, issues and needs within the organisation, it is then possible to meaningfully determine appropriate strategies for addressing them. This will undoubtedly include a range of both strategic (long-term) and tactical (short-term) initiatives. Depending on the issues identified, these might include:

- improving the corporate intranet
- formalising communities of practice
- implementing coaching and mentoring programmes
- improving document and records management
- facilitating skills transfer from retiring staff
- capturing staff knowledge in a documented form
- improving policies and procedures
- implementing new learning approaches, including e-learning
- enhancing the corporate staff directory
- implementing team collaboration tools and processes
- establishing after-action review processes
- formalising the role of 'knowledge brokers' within the organisation

These are just a small cross-section of the many possible approaches that can be taken to knowledge management. As highlighted throughout this article, only the needs analysis activities allow a meaningful selection to be made between these different approaches. In practice, each organisation will apply a unique mix of short-term 'quick wins' and longer-term projects to meet knowledge management needs.

CONCLUSION

Developing a knowledge management strategy provides a unique opportunity to gain a greater understanding of the way the organisation operates, and the challenges that confront it. By focusing on identifying staff needs and issues, activities and initiatives can be recommended with the confidence that these will have a clear and measurable impact upon the organisation.

Supplementing this 'bottom-up' research with a strategic focus then ensures that the KM initiative is aligned with broader organisational directions. Taking this approach to the development of a KM strategy allows limited resources to be targeted to the key needs within the organisation, delivering the greatest business benefits while positioning the organisation for long-term growth and stability. Indirectly KM strategy it reduces cost of quality.

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