Knowledge management needs a rethink

Summary: The growing volume of unstructured data and better capturing tools calls for a review of knowledge management approaches by enterprises.

By Jamie Yap | November 26, 2012 -- 11:05 GMT (19:05 SGT)

Knowledge management requires a rethink, given the growing advancement and ubiquity of technologies such as data analytics, social media and smart devices, to help contain and harvest knowledge scattered throughout an organization.

While knowledge management (KM) is not new a concept or practice among organizations in Asia, adoption of KM is not evenly spread to date—with most adoptees being the larger organizations, while many small and midsize businesses (SMBs) either eschew KM for financial reasons or are not aware of the idea in the first place, said Lee Chu Keong, program director for Master of Science in Knowledge Management at the Wee Kim Wee School of Communication and Information at Nanyang Technological University (NTU).

Charles King, principal analyst at Pund-IT, added for the companies that do practice KM, most efforts remain in the formative stage, rather than a mature level. And given the surge in data volume today, companies are "drowning in data while attempting to wrest more value from the [implicit] information and knowledge to turn them into true business assets".

Knowledge management initially started out with a focus on document management systems that sought to catalogue and categorize digital and paper-based data into large repositories, after which these tools got new abilities to gather "soft" information such as company processes, people's expertise and skills, employee morale and customer satisfaction, said Pranabesh Nath, research manager for ICT practice in Asia-Pacific at Frost & Sullivan.

Cloud, analytics and mobile changing KM

With the advent of cloud and analytics, for instance, a lot more information can be easily and quickly stored and analyzed with advanced algorithms. This is tremendously helpful for the company to formulate future strategies for competitiveness, growth and profitability, particularly in circumstances of talent crunch or high attrition, he noted.

Noting the current economic situation, John Brand, vice president and principal analyst at Forrester Research, said economic uncertainty was usually the driver for knowledge management projects in Asia. "Organizations feel that any impending loss of employees naturally means those employees also take with them substantial knowledge that needs to be captured."

Still, observers say as much as technological advancements have helped pushed KM to have greater capabilities to help benefit organizations, a rethink in the enterprise approach to KM must also happen in tandem.

According to Lee, ten years ago several organizations viewed KM as a panacea for all the problems they faced, but increasingly today, companies have a more realistic expectation of what KM can and cannot achieve.

It is not a resurgence of enterprise interest in KM, but "more of a recalibration of expectations and a realignment of its value and purpose with respect to the company's mission and vision", noted the NTU program director.

In other words, there is little point in highlighting what and how much more KM can collect, collate and
index within a company with the help of new emerging solutions, if there is not an accompanying mindset shift, he explained.

Lee pointed out companies would need to get used to the fact that KM would need to go beyond text and should include, for example, videos.

"It's difficult to document a golf swing in text, but it can be done much more easily in video, and today, unlike the past, videos can be easily captured by just a mobile phone. But whether the company's management accepts video as a form of codification is another matter. This requires a mindset change. Until this happens, capturing of knowledge will be stay restricted to explicit knowledge," Lee said.

**Balance is best**

Nath pointed out that big data, social, Web and mobile trends are putting a new spin on several industries including knowledge management. For example, with the rise of social media use among companies, more importance will be given to "people-centric", unstructured information as opposed to quantitative data.

Ultimately, the aim with KM is for the disparate information, regardless of origin, to be collected and converted into usable action that benefits the company and fulfils its goals, said Lee.

So the key question is not whether do companies have a knowledge management initiative but whether they are able to turn information into action, he added.

Brand concurred, adding by virtue of the fact that a lot more information is being captured digitally, there is theoretically a lot more potential for that information to be tapped. "Again, the challenge is whether the information captured is really valuable to the business and actually being used," he said.

Knowledge management is a balance between informational and instructional categorizations of knowledge assets, the Forrester analyst emphasized.

When something is purely informational, it can simply be about ensuring the ease of accessing and understanding that information, whereas instructional knowledge is what gets encoded into software applications and business processes, according to Brand.

"Where these two information types meet is the absolute sweet spot for KM--making sure that people in the organization have the right informational resources to meet the requirements of instructional business processes," he said.

**Topics:** **Enterprise 2.0, Data Management**

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**About Jamie Yap**

Jamie writes about technology, business and the most obvious intersection of the two that is software. Other variegated topics include--in one form or other--cloud, Web 2.0, apps, data, analytics, mobile, services, and the three Es: enterprises, executives and entrepreneurs. In a previous life, she was a writer covering a different but equally serious business called show business.

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