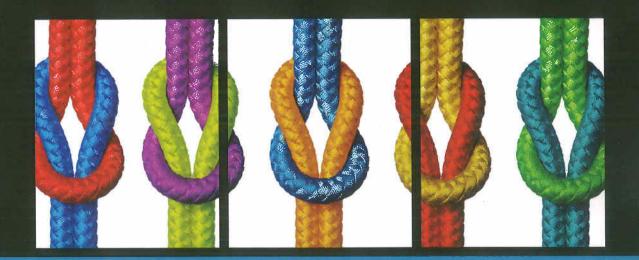# Next Generation KM: Insights and Practice for Resilient Organisations

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Chapter 8: Beyond performance – KM leadership

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Editor's Note: What new roles does the CKO of the 21st century need to take on? What does the traditional CKO need to master to take KM to the next levels in this century? How can qualities such as resilience, adaptability, and innovation be blended along with productivity and operational excellence?

A certain amount of 'messiness' and unpredictably will have to be tolerated as part of 21st century KM. How will the CKO define and promote this balance? This chapter will also provide real life examples based on companies such as MAKE award winner Mindtree, and useful tips and checklists for KM practitioners and leaders to follow. Upcoming challenges and roadblocks are identified, for which knowledge leaders need to prepare.

Introduction

The 20th century has seen the industrial era make way for the knowledge era and today knowledge management plays an increasingly important role in organisations. In order to make a visible impact, CKOs need to see KM as an enabler – for business, systems, culture, and change.

KM as a business enabler

KM should contribute directly to business goals and outcomes. When senior management views KM as a business partner and enabler, it will have a deep impact on business. How can this be done?

It is vital that a KM strategy demonstrates understanding of the business and organisation strategy in detail. What are the organisational drivers? What drives the industry? Who are the customers? What are the key business problems faced by the organisation? What is its strategy? What are the organisation's core competencies and unique differentiators? How does the organisation achieve success in the marketplace?

It is essential to have deep knowledge and expertise in the discipline of KM. Equally important is being passionate about the power of KM. However, there is a need to make the move from academic concepts to actual implementation within the organisational business context. This may involve morphing a concept, methodology, or framework to solve the organisational problem or to bring about the necessary change. That's when KM leadership will impact key business outcomes in a manner consistent with the organisation's strategy.

Value-add

Innovation and creating new knowledge flows should be the focus of any KM plan. The nature of innovation may vary depending on factors such as the nature of the organisation – their services or products, the type of industry, the dynamic nature of the business environment, and so on.

At Mindtree, a key element of the strategy involves account mining. The aim is to develop a deeper relationship

with existing customers by servicing more of their needs. In line with this strategy, adding value to existing customers via continuous improvements or offering new services becomes extremely important. The company has tweaked its earlier innovation framework and methodology, which was generic in nature, to meet these specific needs. This initiative was linked to existing systems and processes to drive greater adoption and governance and reviews were introduced. Leadership buy-in was secured by showing how the initiative would help to solve problems faced by the leaders. The innovation initiative was rechristened to 'value-add' to align with terminology popularly used in the organisation and to build traction.

KM as a systems enabler

The IT infrastructure of an organisation is increasingly becoming the key to managing organisational knowledge. KM needs to influence the platform and more importantly the flow of knowledge in enterprise systems to make a deeper impact.

Data mining and search

Most organisations suffer from an overload of data and information. KM can help people to navigate this vast ocean and retrieve information relevant to their needs. Data mining and analytics are essential to help people synthesise data properly. An integrated enterprise-wide search is critical to point people to the right information they seek. KM can implement and influence systems to achieve this.

Mindtree has robust document and content management systems as per the needs of various departments. These systems co-exist with the enterprise-wide social and collaboration platform called Konnect. A single entry point is provided in to all these applications and an enterprise-wide search links the applications, enhancing usability and navigation.

Social and collaborative platforms

Explicit knowledge (knowledge that can be articulated, codified, and stored easily) is relatively easy to manage via document/ content management systems. However, it becomes increasingly important to manage tacit knowledge as well, but tacit knowledge is largely experiential and difficult to document. Social and collaborative technologies have brought in features such as wiki, discussion forums, videos, and so on which are increasingly being used to help manage tacit knowledge.

Social systems can help the organisation to identify internal expertise, based on content generated. They help people connect to experts within the organisation and get knowledge that may not be available in the document/content management systems.

KM should influence all systems across the enterprise and help to make them more social. Most enterprise systems still do not harness the power of social action. KM can play an important role here by bringing the social connect to enterprise systems, making them more user-friendly, dynamic, and relevant.

Mindtree is adding social actions to many systems used by various departments. For example, the system that documents all quality processes and methodologies is being converted from a top-down, controlled system to a bottom-up, wiki-based system.

KM as a culture enabler

Organisational culture refers to the values, beliefs, processes, and assumptions which affect the way people think and interact with each other. Culture is one of the most difficult things to change or influence due

to its complex and hidden nature – but knowledge leaders need to take on this task to make a real impact. For example, the best strategy, system, or methodology on innovation may fail unless a culture of innovation is fostered and created. Accordingly, here are some ways in which Mindtree tried to design and create the culture of the organisation.

Proximate leadership

Everyone follows a leader. Leaders have a significant impact on the culture of the organisation. This can be amplified by proximate leadership where everyone is exposed to the leader's thoughts and actions. KM platforms such as the company's internal social network and communities of practice (informal groups that come together on a common interest or for a common purpose – e.g. a business analysts' community) can play a major role in enabling this.

At Mindtree, leaders take frequent face-to-face community sessions in multiple formats. In an unconference, the participants are allowed to choose a topic of their interest which is then facilitated by the leader. In town hall sessions, issues of common interest are discussed openly and possible solutions are arrived at. Informal learning sessions involve a leader sharing successes and failures, practices to adopt, and pitfalls to watch out for – and ensure knowledge is passed down the ranks.

Rich communication

The value of face-to-face conversations cannot be underestimated. However, the larger the organisation, the more difficult it becomes to reach everyone in this way. Leaders at Mindtree try to overcome this constraint by using the social networking platform called Konnect to write blogs, express thoughts, or initiate discussions on interesting and sticky topics. People can also choose to 'follow' leaders or topics of discussion.

Some of the key updates by the CEO are also shared in this social way. Departments and functions within Mindtree share interesting information via newsletters that they publish on a periodic basis.

Organisational stories

Stories are an important way to spread information about an organisation's culture. KM can help to unearth and distribute these stories across the organisation. Communities of practice enable people to meet and discuss these stories. KM helps to provide a structured way of sharing the story, in text or multi-media form, as learning histories.

These learning histories take people through a sequence of events as they unfold. It taps into the thought process, the emotional journey, and the actions taken by the teams in dealing with problems or opportunities. This ensures that important stories of successes and failures from the past become embedded in organisational culture and influence future behaviour.

Voluntary support networks

People's interactions outside the regular hierarchy and routine have a significant influence on organisational learning and culture. KM is best placed to create these platforms within an organisation to ensure that a medium is provided for rich interactions to flourish. At Mindtree, platforms such as communities of practice, mentoring, and action learning ensure that peer-to-peer and cross-group learning and knowledge sharing happen.

KM has a wonderful opportunity to tap into the power of these networks to solve sticky business problems. Some problems are easier solved through crowdsourcing

than working within the confines of the regular organisation structure. Mindtree has effectively used crowdsourcing in generating a repository of case studies via a contest. The quantity and quality of case studies created via crowdsourcing was better than that via traditional means.

Crowdsourcing can also open up untapped opportunities. Mindtree launched an initiative where anyone in the company could submit a business plan for a US$50 million idea. The winner was funded by the company and was provided with the resources to make the idea a reality.

KM as a change enabler

KM is well-placed to help organisations transform themselves as per changing business needs (e.g. newer products, services, and innovations), customer and employee demographics (e.g. Gen-Y), and technology trends (e.g. social, mobile). KM initiatives in an organisation are often change initiatives since they bring in newer ways of thinking and working. Hence, it is important for KM to become an agent of change in an organisation. Mindtree follows a three-step method to enable change, as described below.

Conceptualise

Think deeply about the problem and define it as clearly as possible. Ask hard questions – Is this important enough for the organisation? Why should this be part of the KM plans at all?

Once there is clarity, it is important to start socialising the concept. This is necessary to gather internal momentum and acceptance. It is important to invite people to comment and critique as this ensures robustness in the thought process. A sponsor must also be identified. The sponsor would be one who is most affected by the problem,

is influential in the organisation, and has the necessary resources and budget to support.

Evangelise

The next step is to evangelise the concept to important stakeholders and arrive at a design or solution. Since many KM initiatives are often in new and untested areas, it is important to start small with a pilot to test the waters. Through different iterations and with feedback and course corrections the solution matures and is ready to handle different ground realities.

It is necessary to design the solution based on sound KM principles – but important to use language that is simple to understand. Passion about the idea and good communication skills are necessary to influence stakeholders and get buy-in. Look for small wins, observe the first signs of change, and conduct studies to check if the necessary business outcomes are being achieved – and evangelise them to get greater participation.

Institutionalise

Once a steady state is reached, necessary business outcomes are being achieved consistently, and the process has attained maturity, it is necessary to put in mechanisms to enable the initiative to scale. This includes putting in the necessary systems, processes, policies, and governance to ensure lasting success.

The Role of the CKO

The above key steps cannot be achieved without the right leadership. The chief knowledge officer (CKO) is the key leader who can bring about this transformation in the organisation.

What qualities should a CKO possess in order to be such an enabler? The abilities and skills need to include the following:

- Understands the organisation, industry, and business needs – and hence is able to arrive at an aligned vision and strategy for knowledge management;
- Is an expert in best practices, frameworks, and methodologies in areas such as organisational behaviour, knowledge, learning, culture, and innovation – and hence is able to base the vision and strategy on strong foundations;
- Has extensive knowledge of systems related to social networks, portals, collaborative platforms, search, expert location, data mining, and intelligence – and hence is able to leverage the best systems available to implement the vision and strategy;
- Possesses skills of advocacy, influence, and persistence – and hence is able to manage stakeholders, overcome resistance, execute projects, and facilitate change;
- Is a people person who is seen as a trusted advisor and motivator – and hence has the empathy, openness, and listening skills needed to work effectively with people; and
- Along with left brain skills such as planning and execution, possesses right brain skills such as creativity, big picture thinking, design, storytelling, and empathy – and hence is able to achieve results in a differentiated way.

As the CKO requires comprehensive skills across multiple dimensions, it is imperative that this position is filled carefully, ensuring the right candidate is chosen for the role.

Should the CKO be chosen from inside the company or outside? There is no clear-cut answer. An internal candidate will bring past knowledge of the organisation and its business, culture, people, and situations – whereas an external candidate will bring in new knowledge, fresh ideas, best practices, and tested solutions from outside.

The decision also depends on factors such as:

1. **Leadership development approach.** Is there a good succession planning process in place so that a pipeline of eligible leaders is available? What is the organisation's approach towards leadership development and filling up of key positions? Are most leaders filled from inside or from outside?
2. **KM maturity.** Are the KM practices already mature and is there a need only to strengthen them? If so, an internal candidate makes sense since consolidation is the need of the hour. However, if the KM practices are immature or stagnant, bringing in an external candidate will inject new life and help to take KM to the next level.

Achieving success

Once the CKO is chosen, how do they work closely with the business to achieve success? How can KM be viewed as a critical business partner and enabler with senior management support during good times – and bad?

For this to happen, it is important to align the KM strategy with the corporate and business strategy – and ensure governance mechanisms are established to ensure the strategy stays relevant and effective. At Mindtree, this traction is achieved in the following ways.

The corporate strategy (what business the company should be in and how the company should manage its businesses) is created by the CEO and communicated to all business leaders and support functions. Based on this, every business leader works on the business strategy (how to create

competitive advantage in each of the businesses). Online KM platforms such as discussion groups and wikis are used to exchange healthy debate on the strategy and the nature of the support needed.

Towards the end of the process, each business leader presents and publishes their strategy document which mentions the support needed from various functions. These become inputs for the support function heads – including KM – to articulate its strategy. The KM function has meetings with key business stakeholders to discuss the various ways in which KM can meet the corporate and business strategies. The KM strategy and plan broadly covers how the function will conduct activities that strengthen the business strategy in a manner consistent with the corporate strategy.

The KM strategy and plan are prioritised based on feedback from business stakeholders and the budget and resources available for the year. A quarter by quarter plan is created and published to senior business leaders and the rest of the organisation.

The function provides periodic reports that highlight progress made on the plan and issues faced, along with key metrics. These are reviewed with the business stakeholders to ensure alignment and to remove roadblocks. Any changes to business strategy and priorities are reviewed and the KM strategy and plan are modified in line with this. The above processes help to define the role and scope of the KM function very clearly and ensure alignment with organisational needs.

Conflicts

While KM is evolving into a deeper, strategic role in the organisation, here are some of the conflicts that KM will invariably face.

Structure vs. un-structure
Follow the traditional top-down management approach – or leverage the wisdom of crowds? Rely on the traditional hierarchy – or leverage the power of communities? For example, to locate an expert in the system – do you rely on title charts and positions or decide based on who is most active in the social networking platform? Do you solve problems traditionally by allocating full-time resources or tap into the voluntary network in the organisation?

Tacit vs. explicit
Are you focusing on explicit or tacit knowledge management? Some organisations focus all their KM efforts around creating document management systems to capture explicit knowledge and have metrics, governance, and processes to ensure these are updated and used across the organisation. Others focus on tacit knowledge transfer and connecting the right people to ensure knowledge is transferred.

Innovation vs. efficiency
Are you focusing on innovation and the creation of new ideas, systems, and processes – or optimising what already exists and making it more efficient? Should you look for incremental and continuous improvement – or for big ideas and giant leaps?

It is unlikely that the answer will be found at either extreme – a hybrid approach needs to be adopted that focuses on each element as appropriate to the organisation and the problem at hand. There are no silver bullet solutions or ready-made recipes.

Understand your organisation in great depth – its business, strategy, leaders, culture, vision, values – and figure out what makes sense. Something that worked in a certain context or in a certain group may

not work in another. Chart your own course in the KM journey to achieve success in the new millennium.

Conclusion

This chapter has re-visited the key premises of KM as a business enabler, systems enabler, culture enabler, and change enabler. CKOs are placing an increasing focus on conceptualisation, evangelisation, and institutionalisation of KM at different stages of organisational KM evolution. A blend of operational and creativity skills is becoming increasingly important for the CKO. Emerging conflicts which CKOs will have to face are in the nature of management approaches, and organisational imperatives on productivity versus new business exploration.