

# Criteria 7: Knowledge sharing activities

This chapter contains:

- Overview
- How your organisation can benefit from Knowledge Sharing Activities
- Evidence Required for Accreditation
- Guidance for establishing Knowledge Sharing activities
- Adding Value: The range of Good Practices

# Overview

“How can an organisation transfer knowledge effectively? The short answer, and the best one, is: hire smart people and let them talk to one another”

This quote from ‘*How Organisations Manage What They Know*’ (Harvard Business School Press) sums up the often elusive key to knowledge sharing.

Many employers, when the concepts of Knowledge Management and Knowledge Sharing began to gain currency approximately 10 years ago, developed a misguided fixation with data management and information sharing. Today, it is clear that human interaction is at the heart of successful Knowledge Sharing.

## Key Definitions:

**Data** - a set of discrete objective facts about events e.g. a receipt for petrol. The transaction of buying petrol can be partly described by the receipt: when the purchase was made; how many gallons were bought; how much was paid.

**Information** - a message, usually in the form of a document or an audible or visible communication i.e. data that makes a difference. Information is sent from sender to receiver e.g. copying an article and handing it to a colleague with a Post-It marked “F.Y.I.” Data becomes information when its receiver adds meaning, context.

**Knowledge** - is a fluid mix of experience, values, information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating new experiences and information. It originates, and is applied, in the minds of knowers. It can become embedded in organisational routines, processes, practices and norms.

Knowledge is shared in an organisation whether or not the employer manages the process. When an engineer asks his colleague in another office down the hall if he has ever dealt with a particular problem, the second engineer, if willing and able, will transfer his knowledge.

Spontaneous, unstructured knowledge sharing is vital to a firm’s success. So although the term ‘Knowledge Sharing’ implies formalizing transfer, one of its essential elements is developing specific strategies to encourage spontaneous exchanges.

A recent symposium, run by the Royal Academy of Engineering in the UK, entitled “Making the Most of Workplace Wisdom: A Briefing on the strategies for retaining, recording and sharing corporate knowledge” brought together contributors from BP, Rolls-Royce and Arup.

A common theme was the amount of engineering time spent seeking information and knowledge. It was estimated that 25% of an engineer's time is spent seeking knowledge. It was also heard that 70%-90% of this information is obtained simply by talking to people. Systems and technology only account for 10%-30% of knowledge transfer.

We can see then that knowledge sharing is about connecting people.

## PURPOSE OF KNOWLEDGE SHARING ACTIVITIES

- Gets new ideas and innovation flowing around an organisation
- Allows knowledge to evolve. Knowledge that stops evolving turns into opinion or dogma
- In a global economy, Knowledge Sharing can be your most competitive advantage
- Adults tend to prefer to learn in an interactive fashion. Speaking with others, sharing solutions, ideas and insights is an ideal form of adult learning.

## EVIDENCE FOR ACCREDITATION

### 7.1 Practices ensure 'tacit' knowledge flows through the organisation in a timely and efficient manner

- A culture of openness and trust enables and supports knowledge-sharing activities
- [At audit] Upper management can give examples of how they lead by example
- [At audit] Employees can give examples of their roles in knowledge-sharing activities

### HOW CAN YOU DO THIS IN PRACTICE?

### 7.1 Practices ensure 'tacit' knowledge flows through the organisation in a timely and efficient manner

- Reward, recognize and celebrate people in part on the basis of their knowledge sharing contributions
- Re-train upper management to support and resource new behaviours and to eliminate 'knowledge silos' and encourage 'knowledge hoarders' to share
- Build relationships through actual (or virtual) face-to-face meetings
- Senior executives understand they should set an example of good knowledge behaviours. They can do this by, among other things, operating an Open Door Policy; reading books and talking about them; attending external events and presenting back to staff on key learnings; working to improve their narrative skills in important communications.
- All employees should be educated on the attributes of knowledge-based business and knowledge sharing. Induction is the ideal time to set the right tone. (Indeed, knowledge-savvy organizations hire new workers partly on the basis of their potential for knowledge behaviours!)
- Your company CPD Policy should include clear roles and responsibilities with regard to knowledge sharing
- Quantitative and qualitative measurements are needed to evaluate the success of a knowledge sharing initiative. Ideally, knowledge sharing initiatives should begin with a pilot programme.

# Establishing Knowledge Sharing Activities

Knowledge can be categorised into two distinct areas, Explicit and Tacit:

**EXPLICIT** knowledge can be found in databases, books, processes and documents and can usually be articulated and described in a formal way.

**TACIT** knowledge is based on the experience and “know how” of individuals. For this type of knowledge there generally is no physical fixed assets or inventory. Implicit knowledge can be thought of as the “walking gold-dust” of your business. It can be difficult to describe and by its very nature, is generally more difficult to capture and share. When developing Knowledge Management Systems it is important to consider the capture and dissemination of both types of knowledge.

## The Culture of Knowledge Sharing

The old dictum that knowledge is power is certainly true in today’s global economy. At local level, and in international markets, people will only disclose and share knowledge in a very positive environment.

There are many factors that inhibit knowledge transfer. Davenport and Prusak in “How Organisations Manage What They Know” refer to these inhibitors as “frictions”, a handy way to think of it as they slow or prevent transfer and are likely to erode some of the knowledge as it tries to move through the organisation.

The following, they suggest, are the most common frictions and ways of overcoming them.

<b>Friction</b>	<b>Possible Solution</b>
Lack of trust	Build relationships and trust through face-to-face meetings
Different cultures, vocabularies, frames of reference	Create common ground through education, discussion, publications, teaming, job rotation
Lack of time and meeting places; narrow idea of productive work	Establish times and places for knowledge transfers: fairs, talk rooms, conference reports
Status and rewards go to knowledge owners	Evaluate performance and provide incentives based on sharing
Lack of absorptive capacity in recipients	Educate employees for flexibility; provide time for learning; hire for openness to ideas
Belief that knowledge is prerogative of particular groups, not-invented-here syndrome	Encourage non-hierarchical approach to knowledge; quality of ideas more important than status of source
Intolerance for mistakes or need for help	Accept and reward creative errors and collaboration; no loss of status from not knowing everything

Trust can trump all other factors that positively affect the efficiency of knowledge sharing in your organisation. Without trust, knowledge initiatives will fail, regardless of how

thoroughly they are supported by technology or management rhetoric, even if the survival of the organization depends on it. (See Francis Fukayama's 'Trust' (New York: Free Press 1995)).

There are three golden rules regarding Trust to enable Knowledge Sharing.

1. **Trust must be visible:** People must be seen to get credit for knowing sharing. They must directly experience reciprocity. There must be direct evidence of a bond of trust.
2. **Trust must be ubiquitous:** If part of the internal knowledge team is untrustworthy or a knowledge hoarder, the sharing dynamic becomes skewed and less efficient.
3. **Trustworthiness starts at the top:** Upper management example can often define the norms. Their values become known to the firm through signals, signs and symbols. If they cynically exploit others' knowledge for personal gain, that will have a very damaging effect ultimately.

### **The Status of the Knower**

People judge the information and knowledge they get in significant measure on the basis of who gives it to them. Organisations that ignore this fact are likely to be disappointed with the results of knowledge transfer projects. It is common for instance for organizations to send junior engineers to a conference because the company can spare them. Their work isn't considered as important as that of senior staff, who can't take time off from essential projects. What happens when the young engineer comes back from the conference and says: "We think we learned some things which the company can benefit from if we change our process in these ways"? Few listen, whether they are right or wrong. The knowledge they bring back will be rejected for the same reason they were sent to the conference in the first place: they are not *perceived* as esteemed employees. Remember:

### **KNOWLEDGE TRANSFER = TRANSMISION + ABSORPTION (and USE)**

If knowledge is not absorbed, it has not been transferred. Merely making knowledge available is not transfer. In 'Wellsprings of Knowledge' Dorothy Leonard-Barton talks about "signature skills" and how people's egos are often bound up with their core skills. They can often resist any innovation that may require them to abandon their signature way of doing things for new methods. Resistance to change is a powerful force. Think about WHO in your organisation is the best person to deliver an important piece of Knowledge if you really want people to take it onboard and act upon it.

### **VELOCITY and VISCOSITY**

The friction factors we've looked at will affect the 'velocity' of knowledge sharing, i.e. the speed with which the knowledge moves through an organisation. How quickly and widely is it disseminated?

*Viscosity* refers to the richness of the knowledge shared. How much of what we try to communicate is actually absorbed and used? To what extent does the original knowledge get pared down?

Viscosity is particularly affected by the method of transfer. For example, knowledge shared by means of a long established Mentoring relationship is likely to have a high viscosity: the mentee will receive a tremendous amount of detailed and subtle knowledge over time. Knowledge retrieved from an on-line database or acquired by skimming a journal article will be much thinner.

Both velocity and viscosity are important concerns for knowledge managers. Genuine learning is a deep human endeavour. Absorbing and *accepting* the knowledge is key. Aiming for high velocity can thin the viscosity.

One real example (Davenport and Prusak, Harvard Business School Press) from Mobil Oil shows how Mobil's engineers developed some sophisticated means of energy saving on a particular drilling project. They detailed the new techniques and their benefits and then sent a memo to all their colleagues in other oil fields, complete with calculations to prove the benefit of this new knowledge. They assumed all the sites would quickly adopt an innovation whose value was indisputable. Not one of them did. Nothing happened. The velocity (a memo) was high but the viscosity level of the new process was zero!

Most knowledge sharing efforts strike a compromise between the two factors.

## **A Good Story is often the best way to share Knowledge**

Human interaction is central to knowledge sharing. Human beings learn best from stories. This will be clear to anyone who has ever been a teacher or a trainer. Numerous studies have underscored the importance of narrative for knowledge sharing. A convincing tale, that is delivered with formal elegance and passion helps us empathise, and therefore internalize (absorb) knowledge.

Once we recognize that narratives are the best way to teach and learn complex "stuff", we can *encode* the stories themselves so as to convey meaning. Many companies do this through newsletters with stories of excellence in action, or video bulletins from the CEO to staff highlighting company 'heroes'.

If stories are important, it's important to have good story-tellers. How do you rate your staff's skills in influencing, presenting, public-speaking?

Remember, even in sophisticated, large-scale organizations, simple conversations, stories (even gossip) are the prime ways knowledge workers discover what they know, share it with their colleagues and in the process create new knowledge for the organisation.

The key to successful Knowledge Sharing is to match the knowledge you need to share, with a suitable messenger and the correct method.

## COMMUNITIES OF INTEREST /PRACTICE

Another way to help employees tap sources of knowledge is through the creation of Communities of Interest (or a Communities of Practice). A *community of interest* is an informal group whose members share an interest in some technology or application. The group might be a dozen engineers from different operating unit who share a common interest in energy-saving applications. It might be a group of managers interested in benchmarking techniques. Whatever the interest may be periodic meetings held by these communities (and minuted), provide opportunities to share knowledge and spark the imagination. Generally speaking, a Community of Practice is for practitioners in a certain field, as the name suggests.

External 'Communities' are equally important as stimulant. External knowledge invigorates and adds vitality to organizations. Employees access that knowledge when they have opportunities to attend professional meetings, visit customers and benchmarking partners, and when outside experts are brought in to share their know-how via lectures and workshops.

Methods of Knowledge Sharing
Team seating plans / Open plan offices / Open door policy
e-mail
Memo
Company cafeteria
Water cooler chats
Personal conversations / Drinks after work
Lunch 'n' Learn sessions
Internet
Engineering forums
On-line forums
Specialist Chat-rooms
Plasma screens
Newsletter
Induction Training
Project teams
Conferences / Seminars
Subject matter expert lectures
Web conferencing
Brainstorming
Conference calls / Video-conferencing
Consultants
Suppliers
Customers/Clients
Six Sigma Councils
Learning Centres / Fairs / Expos
Communities of Interest/Practice
Mentoring scheme
Apprenticeships
Intranet
Team-building 'away days'

## Good Practices

### Standard Good Practices

Knowledge Sharing activities such as Lunch 'n' Learns

Project Close-Out reports and Lessons Learned database capture important knowledge and experiences

Staff returning from CPD events disseminate key learnings to colleagues

Access to internet-based critical information systems e.g. IHS.

### Advanced Good Practices

Cross-functional Mentoring

'Communities of Interest' promote knowledge sharing and active problem solving

Engineering forums bring together senior engineering staff for knowledge sharing

Senior engineering staff deliver 'Master Classes'

Senior technical staff host Technical Blogs

Knowledge sharing promoted as a value in the company

# THREE THOUGHTS

- If none of your staff were allowed talk to each other for a month, what would happen your business? Are your staff talking to each other?
- Who knows the most about key subjects in your organization? Do they share knowledge or do they hoard it? If they left your organization tomorrow, would their expertise walk out the door with them?
- Is your company a bustling market place where valuable knowledge is bought and sold or are there monopolies and 'trade barriers' in place?