



Legal Week

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Myths and principles



The importance of effective knowledge management is now an acknowledged fact in the majority of commercial law firms, but are they yet implementing the right strategies? Matthew Parsons reports

With most firms now engaged in, or planning, some form of knowledge management programme, it is perhaps a good time to reflect on some myths and principles in an effort to increase the chances of success for these investments. Success in knowledge management programmes has proved elusive in many implementations, in many cases because of flawed beliefs arising from the language of knowledge management itself.

To a lawyer, knowledge is the sum or range of what has been perceived, discovered, or learned: management means to control or to organise. Both are familiar and unremarkable terms.

It follows then that, to a lawyer, knowledge management means to control or organise that which is known within the firm — to manage all the knowledge. For lawyers, the beliefs about knowledge management, gleaned from the plain meanings of the words are:

I It is possible and desirable to manage all knowledge within the firm (else why have knowledge management in the first place?);

I An effective knowledge management solution results in all firm knowledge being managed and controlled. If any knowledge is not managed then the initiative, and the team running it, has failed;

I When firm knowledge is managed properly, everyone has the right information at the right times, using the collective knowledge of all people within the firm;

I Knowledge can be managed as a support function with marginal involvement of the rest of the firm, just like finance and accounting;

I To manage knowledge efficiently will involve capturing and storing knowledge in some form of electronic repository. This follows from the lawyer's experience of technology applied to the obvious scale of the knowledge to be managed; and

I Not to have all knowledge managed is to lose an opportunity for firm efficiency and performance.

Sound familiar? Most lawyers would share many of these beliefs in relation to knowledge management. These natural implications from these two common words are all wrong and will inhibit the success of knowledge initiatives within the firm. Knowledge management was simply never an appropriate description for the discipline that has emerged in relation to knowledge and knowledge worker productivity in the past decade. As these current beliefs are wrong, they must be openly addressed before a shared understanding and common framework can be developed in the firm from which a knowledge initiative can successfully proceed.

Firms need first to build a shared conceptual framework about knowledge — which includes the 11 concepts outlined below. These concepts are stated in plain language, language meaningful both to knowledge professionals and to knowledge novices, to the executives who fund knowledge programmes and to the lawyers upon whose behaviour those programmes depend for their success. The 11 knowledge concepts are:

I Every firm has a knowledge strategy it uses and has a strategy for knowledge, even if it does not have a knowledge management programme;

I A knowledge strategy has three components: personal, interpersonal and impersonal (or digital);

I Technology has an enabling role in each of the three components of a knowledge strategy, but is not the primary driver of the knowledge strategy;

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| Every firm has a stock of intellectual capital;

| Every firm has a knowledge culture: the firm's beliefs and culture about knowledge;

| Every firm has social capital: the depth and breadth of personal relationships at the firm;

| Every firm has a knowledge ecology, resulting from implementing its knowledge strategy, the operation of its knowledge culture and its social capital. Knowledge strategy, knowledge culture and social capital are key determinants of the growth of knowledge in the firm;

| A firm's knowledge ecology impacts firm performance;

| A firm's knowledge ecology has distinct attributes capable of measurement and improvement;

| Perfect knowledge is a dangerous unachievable myth; and

| Improving a firm's knowledge ecology, to improve organisational performance, is difficult and cannot be done without sustained cultural change and changes to behaviours and processes.

Less than successful knowledge programmes of the past decade have generally focused solely on impersonal (digital) knowledge strategy, invested large sums, implemented technology solutions, ignored the firm's knowledge culture, ignored its social capital and failed to identify the increase in organisational performance that was to be generated by the investment. Seduced by the plain meaning of the buzzword 'knowledge management' they believed that to have knowledge managed was the end in itself.

Successful knowledge programmes in this decade will understand that shared beliefs about knowledge in the firm are a more critical success factor than database technology and universal searches and they will start the work by first addressing the flawed beliefs that inhibit success.

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