

## Starting a Knowledge Management Program

At the core, great leaders strive to have a lasting positive impact on their organizations and ensure their organizations have processes in place to sustain superior performance after they have left their organization. To accomplish this goal, good leaders and managers identify areas to improve, innovate, and enable their organizations to generate solutions to the biggest operational and organizational challenges. Effective organizations understand the value of knowledge, knowledge sharing and efficient collaboration both within and between all levels of the organization. Having a robust and productive Knowledge Management (KM) program provides the essential tools to help those leaders build and sustain organizational effectiveness and enable decision making. A “program” is defined by Anthony J. Rhem in his book, *Knowledge Management in Practice*,<sup>1</sup> “as a collection of initiatives and KM initiatives that are designed to accomplish a strategic business objective.” We then can define a KM program as an organized, systematic, and focused approach to identifying and implementing the knowledge goals and objectives for an enterprise level organization. Chief Knowledge Officers manage KM programs and Knowledge Management Officers (KMO) execute them. Creating and/or managing a KM program is not an easy task, but implementing or improving KM within an organization has long lasting positive impacts. An effective KM program will achieve these four organization outcomes:

1. **Improve Decision Cycle Effectiveness:** reduces the time and produces better decisions for more mission impact.
2. **Enhance Mission & Organizational Performance:** creating efficiency and reducing duplication of effort.
3. **Create Agile Learning Organizations:** using dynamic and iterative techniques, such as collaboration, faster design solutions, feedback, and change in order to create progressive learning and performance processes.
4. **Facilitate Shared Understanding Through Collaboration:** This improves cross-functional communication and increases organizational identity while reducing stovepipes of information. It also puts the team members on the same page with respect to how the organization operates, decides, and acts.

An effective KM Program serves as a foundation of knowledge-based products and services that enable the four outcomes above. If you implement a KM program, the organization will benefit in the following ways:

1. Preserve employees’ expertise and experience.
2. Provide more clarity for better and faster decision making.
3. Streamline processes and eliminate redundant efforts.
4. Improve cross-functional communications.
5. Make critical knowledge easier to find.
6. Stimulate innovation through collaboration.<sup>2</sup>

The American Productivity and Quality Center (APQC) has developed a Knowledge Management Program Framework (Figure 1) to provide a detailed roadmap to help organizations start a KM program. The first three phases will get your program up and running. The framework highlights the results from each phase and how cycles of constant continuous improvements need to be performed at each phase.<sup>3</sup>



Figure 1. APQC Knowledge Management Program Framework

## Call To Action

During phase 1 of the framework, it is important to start by defining the value you want to achieve with your KM program. During this phase a deep understanding of your organization’s critical knowledge needs must be identified by creating a business case or value proposition<sup>4</sup>. We start with the company or organizational strategy and objectives, then look for opportunities where KM could enable successful achievement of one or more of those objectives.

To help achieve leadership buy-in, the KM program should be presented as a solution to move the organization from where it is today to where it needs to be in the future by resolving knowledge gaps. Discuss with your leadership how enhancing the flow of knowledge supports organization goals and functions which will improve organizational performance. At the strategic level, leadership needs to understand that KM can help achieve the four organizational outcomes.

The KM program needs to align with the organizational mission and priorities in order to streamline processes resulting in meeting goals quicker. This will help to secure senior leader endorsements and encourage them to advocate the importance to the organization. Once this phase is completed, you should have defined the critical knowledge needs of the organization and how the KM program will support and improve results. The results of completing phase 1

should provide leadership buy-in, value proposition, and also provide a clearer focus and direction for KM efforts.

## **Develop KM Strategy and Capabilities**

The second phase for developing the KM program focuses on turning the organization's vision into a strategy and a plan of action. During this phase, the capabilities to enable knowledge flow need to be identified and assessed. This will allow the organization to identify knowledge and operational gaps to prioritize areas to focus on. To do this, we identify and list the core business processes in the organization. Organizations have found that by focusing on a specific process, we can more effectively identify and analyze the gaps that need to be closed. When looking at the core processes, you should not only map the processes, but also document the phases and steps that each process requires. These steps include 1) who is involved in each process step, 2) what policies and regulations govern each process step, 3) how each process step is enabled by technology, and 4) what decisions or actions are a result of each step. This process-based KM approach allows us to "see ourselves" more clearly in the flow of work. "Seeing ourselves" also allows the integration of our KM practices and approaches into the way we work as opposed to something else we must do during work.

Another approach to this step is to conduct a knowledge assessment to identify knowledge gaps between what you are doing now, and what you need to be doing in the future. APQC offers a knowledge assessment approach, as does chapter 2 of the [U.S. Army KM doctrine ATP 6-01.1, Techniques for Effective Knowledge Management](#).<sup>5</sup>

To make a proper and accurate assessment, the KM program must be supported by a KM advisory council or steering committee as part of its governance structure. This team will provide direction and support for all KM program activities. A KM working group (KMWG) should be created to determine where to focus KM efforts based on organizational weaknesses and operational gaps identified in the assessment. The KMWG is formed from KM representatives as advocates for KM in each section of the organization. These part-time representatives sit on the KMWG and help the organization KM team identify gaps at the point of the spear. The KM team are those individuals designated by the organization to develop and execute the KM program. Additionally, the KMWG will conduct focused assessments within the organization to determine its current state of knowledge flow and the use of collaboration tools.

The organizational KM team helps translate the KM program objectives into actionable projects and solutions that solve organizational problems. The initial goal of the KM team should be to focus on quick wins to maintain interest and buy-in overtime.<sup>2</sup> The KM projects or solutions selected should have the biggest impact on improving knowledge flow using the fewest resources. An important outcome to this phase is determining the business cases for KM and identifying the resources required, expressed often as a budget. These business cases should be told as a story and supported by measures of effectiveness which are developed in the next phase. A formal KM strategy should be drafted and approved by leadership.

Developing the KM strategy is a key step that should not be under planned. A clear definition of a KM strategy is, a plan for creating, organizing, storing, sharing, and accessing information within an organization. "The strategy should align with the organization's business goals and

objectives”<sup>4</sup>. The strategy should be thought of as a systematic approach to helping all stakeholders, staff, and employees to share and use organizational knowledge.

Here are five reasons why you need to create a KM Strategy:

1. Helps the organization utilize their knowledge resources.
2. Aids in the development of new knowledge.
3. Improves communication among employees.
4. Allows for better decision making.
5. Helps reduce costs associated with knowledge acquisition.<sup>4</sup>

There are four types of KM Strategies that you can use to model your KM program. The first type would be a “Structured” approach. This approach focuses more on the technical solutions and involves creating databases and document repositories. This strategy allows the KM team to focus more on formalizing information and data to make it easily accessible by users. The second strategy type is “Unstructured”. This approach is not as technical and uses methods involving social networking platforms and peer-to-peer collaboration efforts. This encourages users to share information and knowledge in a more informal manner or effort. It will involve more non-digital interaction between leaders and staff members. The third type is a “Hybrid” approach. This strategy is a combination of the Structured and Unstructured approaches. It combines elements of both approaches in order to take advantage of the best aspects or greatest strengths used in the organization. The fourth type is “Experiential”. This strategy focuses on learning from previous experiences and applying that knowledge to current KM efforts and future KM challenges.<sup>4</sup>

The results of this phase will be the development of a KM Strategy and KM Road Map. The KM Road Map helps organizations assess, design, develop, pilot, implement, and sustain the KM efforts. It should include specific tasks and milestones to be completed. While the KM Strategy tells us why we do KM (to achieving the four organizational outcomes mentioned above) and what must be done, the KM Road Map provides a general outline for how and when it gets done. Sometimes organizations call this road map a POA&M short for Plans of Action and Milestones. It can be expressed as a graphic with key milestones and dates along a horizontal or diagonal timeline as shown in Figure 2.

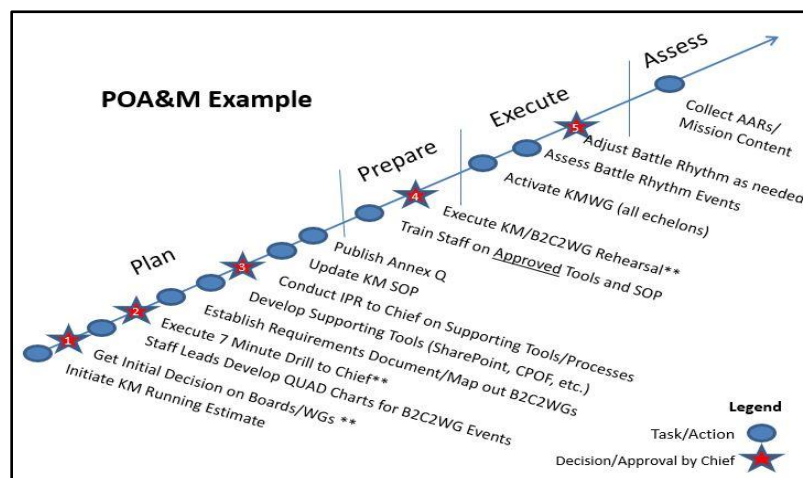


Figure 2. Sample POA&M

## **Design and Implement KM Capabilities**

Once the KM Strategy is finalized the next step is the implementation plan. The KM team that was formed during phase 2 can now focus on operationalizing the KM efforts. During this phase, the KM team will become more specialized and start building solutions, expressed as projects, with measurable results for leadership to evaluate. During this phase, roles and responsibilities are defined. Team leaders, subject matter experts, stakeholders, and personnel impacted by newly developed projects need to collaborate and share concerns and ideas. Using technology and digital information systems are key enablers to effective KM. It is important to leverage personnel from your front-line operations and your IT department and include them in the design and modeling stages of your projects. The front-line operators ensure the solutions meet the requirements of the users and the IT department provides the technical know how to build workflows, applications, and visualizations needed in the solution. The KM team can also provide assistance with workflows and visualizations.

Team leaders need to develop ways to measure performance and effectiveness. Measures of Performance (MOPs) are things you can count to measure a task. Examples of MOPs will be in the following format: “# of visits to a team/channel” or “% of population that like chocolate”. Measures of Effectiveness (MOEs) are used to measure the attainment of an endstate or outcome. Examples of MOEs will be in the following format: “reductions in time spent on a task” or “improvements in test scores”.

At this point in the development of your KM program, you want to be familiar with how knowledge flows throughout the organization to pinpoint key handoffs to different department sections. KM tools such as process maps and knowledge management maps can be used to identify bottlenecks and resource gaps. Once process maps are created, the team can begin to design solutions using the best approach, considering the culture and structure of the organization. Process maps are roadmaps to locate the information, resources, knowledge centers, and other knowledge assets and pathways.<sup>5</sup> Not all solutions are tools based, as many may be process based, or related to how content is organized and accessed.

When designing KM tools and approaches, you want to consider all the different platforms and infrastructures currently in use in the organization first. If current tools do not meet the future needs of an organization, new tools, technologies, and approaches should be considered. They must be scalable and compatible to most of the workforce capabilities. This will make it easier to build on KM success stories and share those ideas across the workforce.

During this phase we must also consider the training of our workforce. This training should be included in the implementation plan and should include both formal and informal training to help improve adoption rates of any changes made to processes or technologies adopted. Training should also be designed and provided to organizational leadership, to help them understand the value of the change needed and how the solutions contribute to improving the organizational outcomes.

This phase should provide the KM program with a resource model utilizing employee expertise, operational processes, and technology.<sup>3</sup> The results of this phase will be the development of dynamic plans for KM projects and infrastructure, detailed budget plan, and the implementation of KM solutions.

## **Evolve and Sustain**

At this phase of starting a KM program, it is up and running and a vital part of the organization. For the KM program to remain effective, it must continuously improve and expand its scope within the organization. Efforts need to be made to mature the program by identifying weaknesses and assessing progress on a recurring basis. According to APQC, “the best KM programs continually evaluate where they are in relation to goals, look for ways to improve their offerings, and become more mature and embedded.”<sup>3</sup> This will require the KM leadership to periodically realign or calibrate the KM strategy against the organizational objectives. This may include expanding the KM infrastructure to meet current demands and needs. The most critical needs of the organization should be reviewed annually or biannually within the planning cycle to reaffirm the KM program supports strategic lines of effort. The result of having a dynamic KM program is a measurable improvement in the 4 organizational outcomes listed above. It is in this phase that KM practices and approaches are embedded into the organization culture and day to day work. Employees and staff will recognize the benefits of a shared understanding of business processes and operations. These KM activities will lead to greater collaboration, which leads to innovation. The results of this phase are KM success stories, standard operating procedures, mapped processes, and improved data visualization in support of decision making.

## **Pitfalls to Avoid**

“When developing a KM program, keep in mind the core components of People, Processes, and Technologies as part of the Organizational structure or your KM journey is bound to fail.”<sup>6</sup> To better understand the four components of KM, the definitions are listed below:

1. **People:** Those who create, organize, apply, and transfer knowledge and the leaders who act on that knowledge. This category includes the training of personnel, access permissions, and authorities.
2. **Processes:** The collective procedures and activities used within an organization to accomplish the mission. These individual processes include procedures and activities integrated into staff and organizational operations. Processes defines how the work gets done.
3. **Tools:** Digital and non-digital tools. Digital tools or technology include information systems and the software used for analysis, content storage, and collaboration. Non-digital tools include items like white boards, bulletin boards, butcher paper, and sticky notes. These tools are used to put knowledge products and services into organized frameworks.
4. **Organization:** The matrix in which people-processes-tools function to integrate individual learning, organizational learning strategies, and KM capabilities to contribute to a learning organization. This category includes organizational culture.

Do not make the mistake of focusing too much on one key component. They are part of an ecosystem that must remain in balance. When developing solutions, it is important to understand how each component impacts the organization and how they are integrated to improve organizational outcomes.

Let us look at five of the most common pitfalls that can be encountered while starting up a KM program as outlined by Stan Garfield in a 2019 Knowledge Management 101 Workshop.<sup>7</sup>

The first common pitfall is, “trying to take on too much.” Start your KM program with quick wins early to gain leadership approval and workers confidence. This will prove to stakeholders that KM is beneficial for the organization. One technique is to focus on business processes. Every organization has them, and many are critical to the success of the organization. By structuring your KM approach around business processes, it allows you to focus resources, improve shared understanding of the process, identify critical knowledge needed in each process, and identify and engage stakeholders in the process.

The second pitfall is, focusing on technology. Remember there are digital and non-digital solutions to processes and collaboration efforts. Relying solely on IT reduces innovative thinking and discourages other stakeholders from contributing ideas. It is important to have representation from all your sections when developing solutions.

The third pitfall, not engaging constituents, is commonly overlooked when the pressure of meeting goals is high. Consider all stakeholders and listen to their concerns before developing solutions. Failed KM programs are awash in solutions no one wanted or used.

Doing too much studying and planning and not enough prototyping and piloting, is the fourth pitfall. Conducting a small test in a designated section is best to ensure your solution is cost effective and successful. Committing to a solution too early can be risky. Fail early and fail often.

The final pitfall, not reusing what others have already learned and done. Find other organizations that have created KM programs and study their successes. Get tied into the KM world and network with other KM professionals. It is helpful to learn from other organizations and recycle some of their best practices. There are many other obstacles that can be encountered such as employee personalities, organizational work culture, and overall trust.

## **People Make the Program**

It is safe to say that KM is a people business. To have a successful KM program it is important to understand the people in your organization and why knowledge is not being shared or why knowledge does not flow through the organization. The KM Officer within any organization will likely have fewer resources than needed, so building a team of KM Representatives across the organization with basic KM skills is a best practice for getting KM to “the tip of the spear.” Building relationships with key staff members is a critical step in an effective KM program.

At all phases in the development of a KM program, provide real world examples and lessons learned to highlight how KM achieves positive outcomes. Invest the time up front to train quality KM practitioners (those who develop and lead KM efforts) and KM representatives (representatives in each organization that understand the basics of KM and sit on the KM working group) to drive motivated KM working groups. KM Champions in the organization (Leaders who value organizational knowledge and will provide top cover) need to spearhead the efforts of the KM program and encourage innovation, which will help lead to achieving organization goals. Continuously review and improve the KM program to fully embrace a culture of collaboration and knowledge sharing.

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Anyone with a .mil email address has membership to APQC and can access their resource center at [www.apqc.org](http://www.apqc.org).

## **Notes**

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