
Advances in Project Management Series¹

Making knowledge count: Where to find meaningful information?

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Introduction to the June 2014 Advances in PM Series Article

In a dynamic and increasingly complex society knowledge continues to feature as a defining commodity and sign of progress. Aristotle reflecting on the height of Greek philosophy observed that “all men by nature desire knowledge,” while Socrates proclaimed that the only good is knowledge, and the only evil is ignorance.

Yet simply accumulating knowledge is not sufficient. Management guru, Peter Drucker reasoned that knowledge had to be improved, challenged and increased constantly, or it would vanish. Indeed, Drucker frequently noted that managers are responsible for the application and performance of knowledge.

Drucker’s prediction that modern industry will predominantly feature knowledge workers has largely materialised, as the global economy is increasingly recognised as a knowledge-driven economy in which ideas, information and knowledge, rather than industrialism underlie innovation and economic growth.

As anticipated by Drucker, knowledge is increasingly viewed as the only source of competitive advantage in firms. However, amassing knowledge requires judicious curation and organisation.

“Now that knowledge is taking the place of capital as the driving force in organizations worldwide, it is all too easy to confuse data with knowledge and information technology with information.”

– Peter F. Drucker

This explains the rapid emergence of knowledge management as a key supporting discipline. Knowledge management provides the framework for designing a firm’s goals, structures and processes so that the organisation can use what it knows to learn and improve, to facilitate informed decision making, and to create value for its customers, stakeholders, and the wider community.

¹The *Advances in Project Management* series includes articles by authors of program and project management books published by Gower in the UK. Each month an introduction to the currently monthly article is provided by series editor **Prof Darren Dalcher**, who is also the editor of the Gower *Advances in Project Management* series of books on new and emerging concepts in PM. For more on Gower project management, visit <http://www.gowerpublishing.com/default.aspx?page=2063>.

Developing knowledge management capabilities requires each firm to engage with its context and undertake a design process resulting in the identification and development of the underpinning infrastructure required for sharing and using knowledge and enabling effective knowledge management. Knowledge management encompasses the processes, practices, principles, structures, cultures, platforms and other enables required to mediate, facilitate and create knowledge. To an extent knowledge has always been managed; however given the importance of knowledge as an organisational asset and the need for knowledge in multiple locations, and across the firm, knowledge management is now viewed as an enterprise activity that underpins the survival, development and growth of organisations.

The 6th edition of the Association for Project Management Body of Knowledge explicitly includes knowledge management as part of the context perspective, defining it as “the systematic management of information and learning”. The implication is that personal information and accrued experience and lessons can be turned into collective knowledge that can be widely shared throughout an organisation, a collaborative arrangement, or even an entire profession or relevant discipline.

Knowledge can come from many sources. An essential part of knowledge management is concerned with capturing relevant knowledge, experience and insights. Experience and insights will surface inside the organisation, and hence can offer indispensable, contextually informed expertise grounded in relevant practice.

Experiences gained on projects are often documented as lessons learned. They may also exist more implicitly in project logs, and may be captured in various stakeholder documents and business analysis or systems engineering documentation. Ultimately, the purpose and value of capturing such experiences is in utilising the knowledge gained to improve future projects. Mature organisations will be able to offer project teams access to past experience and knowledge, enabling them to inform processes, expectations and estimates, whilst providing precious insights into the inherent uncertainties, and solutions that have been proved to be more, or less, effective in overcoming such uncertainties.

The area of lessons learned is often somewhat neglected. Many organisations collect lessons, but fail to make them accessible, distil them into useful format, or consider how to deploy them as a resource for improvement. This month’s contribution by Dr Robert Chapman encourages managers to consider the role of lessons learned and the ways they are captured. The article provides some guidelines and thoughts for structuring and considering the sharing of such insights.

The article is derived from Dr Chapman’s book: “*The Rules of Project Risk Management: Implementation Guidelines for Major Projects*”, published by Gower. The book endeavours to give project practitioners an updated view of risk management and offers a unique structure based on practical guidelines. In addition to a solid set of principles, it also offers a collection of other key insights including lessons learned from UK Government Gateway reviews and common causes of project failure. The principles encompass lessons and insights from projects ranging from the causes of optimism bias, to frameworks for project risk and summaries of specific standards.

Most importantly perhaps, the book does what it preaches by providing anecdotal and detailed insights from a range of twenty-six major projects. Lessons learned underpin and emphasise what can go wrong, when the principles are not adhered to. The cases provided are short and to the point offering relevant glimpses and valuable insights.

Information is a necessary pre-requisite for knowledge, but cannot by itself constitute relevant knowledge. Managing knowledge requires a more holistic approach to designing organisational knowledge needs into an achievable framework. Many knowledge management initiatives have floundered because executives failed to grasp the difference between information and knowledge, or because they could not see the link between knowledge and performance improvement.

‘Operationalizing’ knowledge requires understanding in context. Yet, in common with other initiatives and areas, real development will materialise when we are able to shift from managing knowledge, to leading. Leadership requires a move from passive acceptance, to an active attempt to make sense and reflect on knowledge in action and why things work. Rather than accepting written lessons, it necessitates a deeper integration and engagement. Moving beyond static knowledge will allow organisations to leverage their experiences while experimenting and responding to new conditions, thereby creating a true culture of organisational learning. It will also offer a new basis for leading and encouraging, rather than managing knowledge.

Hong Kong industrialist, Ka-Shing Li opined that: “We are approaching a new age of synthesis. Knowledge cannot be merely a degree or a skill... It demands a broader vision, capabilities in critical thinking and logical deduction without which we cannot have constructive progress.”

Immanuel Kant observed that all our knowledge begins with the senses, proceeds then to the understanding, and ends with reason, as there can be nothing higher than reason. The challenge therefore is to encourage and court reason from insights, experiences, and other actions.

In a modern world, new knowledge that counts, controls access to advancement, development and growth. Albert Einstein reflected that any fool can know; the point is to understand. To leverage the power of insights we must learn to adopt an inspired perspective that allows practitioners to look, lead and learn. Making knowledge count requires the ability to reflect, question and make sense of found information. The role of knowledge leadership will be to provide the architecture needed to empower practitioners to make their knowledge count.

References:

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