

Ten Things Every Business Needs to Know¹

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Everyone knows that “*business hates uncertainty*”. Uncertainty poses a clear threat to business, but it also contains significant opportunity. Sources of uncertainty must be understood so that these threats and opportunities can be effectively managed, avoiding and minimising unnecessary problems as well as capturing and maximising benefits. In the current uncertain business climate, it has never been more important for businesses to assess and manage their risks. But how do we do that when we are surrounded by uncertainty?

In *The Analects of Confucius*, the ancient Chinese philosopher says: “*Shall I teach you about knowledge? What you know, you know; what you don't know, you don't know. This is true wisdom.*”

(由，誨女知之乎，知之為知之，不知為不知，是知也。)

Taking our advice from Confucius, there are ***ten things every organisation needs to know*** if we are to survive and thrive in this increasingly uncertain world:

1. **Know your goals.** When times are uncertain you need to know where you're heading. This includes strategic vision as well as tactical objectives, both long-term and short-term. Ensure goal congruence and alignment to focus efforts on what matters.
2. **Know your market.** Don't assume you know what your customers might want – find out. Market intelligence is vital in identifying trends and opportunities that you can exploit. Reducing market uncertainty prevents wasted effort and optimises effectiveness.
3. **Know your business.** Review your processes, products and people, to identify and focus on the winners, and maximise return-on-investment (ROI) by increasing efficiency.
4. **Know your environment.** Be sure you understand the world in which you operate, including political, economic, social, technical, regulatory and legal factors that might affect you. Conduct an environmental scan to identify and challenge constraints.

¹ How to cite this paper: Hillson, D. (2018). Ten Things Every Business Needs to Know, Risk Doctor Briefing; *PM World Journal*, Volume VII, Issue 6 - June.

5. **Know yourself.** Assess your organisational culture and attitudes, identify your strengths and weaknesses, and determine your risk appetite and thresholds. These have a significant influence on how you respond to uncertainty.
6. **Know your friends.** Create and strengthen partnerships with stakeholders who can provide support and stability in uncertain times, especially with your supply chain and key contractors.
7. **Know your enemies.** Understanding the goals and strategies of competitors keeps you focused on your own business. Seek to respond rather than react, setting the pace of competition and keeping one step ahead.
8. **Know your options.** Uncertainty always creates alternatives. Conduct a strategic opportunity review to identify possible ways ahead, then select your preferred route, and develop fall-back and contingency plans to keep you on track.
9. **Know what you know.** Perform a knowledge audit to define the intellectual capital in the organisation, ensuring that lessons are identified and learned from previous experience to reduce the effect of uncertainty on future operations.
10. **Know what you don't know.** Scope the uncertainty to define areas of maximum risk, then assess and prioritise both threats and opportunities, taking proactive steps to minimise the downside and maximise upside exposure. Develop a risk-aware culture from boardroom to shop floor, allowing the right risks to be taken intelligently and safely.

By exploring and understanding these ten areas of knowledge, we can find our way safely through this world of uncertainty, and learn how to both survive and thrive.

To provide feedback on this Briefing Note, or for more details on how to develop effective risk management, [contact the Risk Doctor \(info@risk-doctor.com\)](mailto:info@risk-doctor.com), or [visit the Risk Doctor website \(www.risk-doctor.com\)](http://www.risk-doctor.com).

About the Author



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Dr David Hillson CMgr FRSA FIRM FCMi HonFAPM PMI-Fellow is The Risk Doctor (www.risk-doctor.com). As an international risk consultant, David is recognised as a leading thinker and expert practitioner in risk management. He consults, writes and speaks widely on the topic and he has made several innovative contributions to the field. David's motto is "Understand profoundly so you can explain simply", ensuring that his work represents both sound thinking and practical application.

David Hillson has over 25 years' experience in risk consulting and he has worked in more than 40 countries, providing support to clients in every major industry sector, including construction, mining, telecommunications, pharmaceutical, financial services, transport, fast-moving consumer goods, energy, IT, defence and government. David's input includes strategic direction to organisations facing major risk challenges, as well as tactical advice on achieving value and competitive advantage from effectively managing risk.

David's contributions to the risk discipline over many years have been recognised by a range of awards, including "Risk Personality of the Year" in 2010-11. He received both the PMI Fellow award and the PMI Distinguished Contribution Award from the Project Management Institute (PMI®) for his work in developing risk management. He is also an Honorary Fellow of the UK Association for Project Management (APM), where he has actively led risk developments for nearly 20 years. David Hillson is an active Fellow of the Institute of Risk Management (IRM), and he was elected a Fellow of the Royal Society of Arts (RSA) to contribute to its Risk Commission. He is also a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Management Institute (CMI) and a Member of the Institute of Directors (IOD).

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