



The Power of Knowledge Sharing

Systems to manage the wealth of knowledge inside companies can help junior staff get a leg up in career advancement.

Knowledge management systems help connect workers to knowledge and other people regardless of physical distance. They are wide-ranging and can vary from custom-designed knowledge repositories to web-based systems which comprise discussion forums, file sharing and organisation charts, to name but a few features. There is no shortage of companies offering IT-based solutions to help harvest an organisation's collective intelligence and these have only expanded in number since the advent of Web 2.0. "Electronically linked communities", "expertise locators" and "lessons-learned databases" will be familiar terms to Chief Knowledge Officers (CKOs) ☒ those seeking to share wisdom throughout the organisation. But how much of an impact do these systems have on the careers of those using them?

In a study with Kishore Sengupta, INSEAD Associate Professor of Information Systems, we looked at the use of a knowledge management (KM) system in a well-established strategy consulting company we've named Morpheus for the sake of anonymity. In total, we were able to access the data on 250 consultants within the organisation, from junior level to senior consultants who were all on the "partner-track". We were able to see what type of data the consultants accessed, whether it was explicit, "encyclopaedic" knowledge, such as PowerPoint presentations,

project proposals, tables of contents and analyses of market trends, or "social" knowledge which implied more tacit knowledge and concerned contact information, directing individuals to experts within the firm. We were then able to map this against the speed of consultants' promotions within the firm.

Road map of an organisation

We found that KM system use helped the career progression of junior and mid-level consultants. In particular, those junior and mid-level consultants who used social information from the KM system were promoted more quickly because they were able to build a network and connect to key people in the firm. As such, a better sense of the social landscape was more likely to be established by these individuals with several benefits. Firstly, the KM system, because of its neutrality, allowed younger consultants to connect to the right people without being influenced by other colleagues' opinions of these key people. They also had access to experts they would otherwise find difficult to approach. For those in mid-level positions, where networks may already be established, the KM system facilitated their move away from the "lovable fool" within the organisation – someone who is liked and easily approachable but not necessarily the best person to go to for information - and instead

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gave them access to the best source of information.

Secondly, we suspect, that by connecting to the right people, consultants in their early and mid-careers were able to form their professional identity by using these people as role models for how senior consultants behave and think. Morpheus was therefore able to benefit from employees who gained in creativity, social capital and a deepening sense of what it meant to be a professional consultant, which, for a firm that prides itself on “customised strategic consulting services”, there was clear added-value. The diverse nature of the knowledge accessed through the KM system (encyclopaedic and social) was also a contributing factor to the career pace of these individuals and as the firm relies on these junior consultants to “feed” the higher positions, the added-value to the firm was again evident.

Fewer benefits higher up the ladder

One surprise finding was that senior consultants’ career progression through KM system use was insignificant compared to employees lower down the career track. The underlying reason is probably that they had already established themselves within the firm and relied more upon their own understandings and relations rather than accessing knowledge through an IT system (which could be interpreted as a sign of weakness).

While the use of KM systems was therefore not seen to be beneficial organisation-wide, in terms of career progression, it points to the opportunity to build more “collaborative” systems where people are “pulled out of their boxes” and encouraged to discover what other colleagues are working on. Ideas and knowledge can be shared via online seminars, forums and virtual meetings – as such, a collaborative KM system could overcome the constraint that “the content in the system is only as good as the people’s ability to use it” – in other words the knowledge is not meaningful without an understanding of the nuance behind it. Executives’ working lives are busier than ever and asking them to contextualise the knowledge that they share through the KM system can prove to be a challenge, but online networking could provide an obvious solution.

No magic wand

Knowledge management systems are undoubtedly costly to acquire and maintain with current information. They should by no means be thought of as a magic wand to be waved at your organisation’s complexities, but we have seen that the career progression of younger and mid-level consultants can be enhanced through their use.

As a professional services firm whose business model relies on the knowledge they bring to the market place, there is a strong reason to develop your junior consultants’ capabilities as much as possible. They do, after all, form the bulk of the fee charging population of your firm. As a junior consultant starting out on your career, by taking advantage of the knowledge available in the system and the networking opportunities open to you – your career can only benefit. The investment should certainly be considered.

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