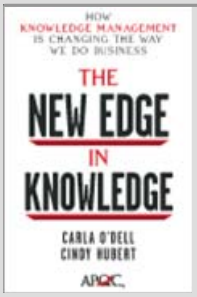

The New Edge in Knowledge

Carla O'Dell and Cindy Hubert
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Reviewed by Paul Harmon

Asked to choose the most important battle in World War II, some would identify Midway and others might choose the Invasion of Normandy. But many would say that the most important battle in World War II was Kursk. Before Kursk, Germany had launched one blitzkrieg attack after another in Western Europe and in Russia and seemed unstoppable. In the summer of 1943, the Germans hoped to straighten out their lines on the Russian front. If you looked at a map you would have seen a more or less straight line running from Leningrad in the Northwest down to the Caucasus in the Southeast, save for a square bugle, about 100 miles on a side, pushing west through the German lines around the Russian town of Kursk. The Russian General Staff proposed to nip off the Kursk salient with two simultaneous panzer attacks, one from the north and the other from the south, thereby surrounding the Russian soldiers around the town of Kursk. In a battle lasting from July 4 to July 20, or to early August, depending on how you define it, over 6,600 Russian and German tanks, 4,900 aircraft, and some 2,200,000 infantry fought. In the end, thousands of tanks and aircraft were destroyed and over 200,000 solders were killed or wounded. It was the first time that a German blitzkrieg failed. More important, it was a psychological blow, and many German senior officers marked it as the point at which they realized that Germany was going to lose the war. Before Kursk the Germans had always felt that they were vastly superior to the Russians, in planning, skill, and tactics. Afterwards, they realized that the Russians were at least their equals in all these things.

What had changed between the heady days of 1942 when German panzer divisions raced across the Russian steppes and the defeat, in 1943, at Kursk? Stalin may have been a dictator, but he had one very good idea. In 1942 the Russians knew they were unprepared. They lacked a knowledge of modern war. What they did do, even as they suffered one defeat after another, was to record what worked and what didn't. An officer attached to each unit was required, as soon as any engagement was over, to file a report saying what worked, what didn't work, and what were the consequences. In spite of the chaos that often prevailed, Stalin and the General Staff insisted that these reports be detailed, brutally honest, and that they be filed promptly. The Russian general staff compiled the reports and turned them into directives: " We no longer do x." "Whenever y happens, do z." In other words the Russian army structured itself as a learning organization. They knew they were deficient, and they knew that had to improve quickly. Thus, in the course of the most brutal circumstances imaginable, in hundreds of engagements in 1942, the Russian army learned from their mistakes and communicated what worked to those who remained alive to fight the next round of battles. By 1943, when the Germans attacked the Kursk salient, the Russians were ready with completely new tactics that were every bit as good as those used by the Germans.

This is what knowledge management is all about – it is about learning from experience and communicating what is learned to others in the organization.

It would be easy to think of Knowledge Management (KM) as an independent capability – as it was when practiced by the Russian army – but in recent years, it has usually been considered an adjunct of process work. Just as one builds flexible software systems that can be easily modified when processes change, one should design processes to assure that what is learned is captured and communicated to others.

KM, as a discipline, got a lot of attention in the mid-Nineties. Some of the early systems didn't deliver as much value as companies hoped they would, and interest in the topic died down a bit in the early Zeros, but it is enjoying a resurgence now. In essence, early KM systems were built with technology derived from work on expert systems, and they shared the curse of early expert systems. We imagined that knowledge was more static than it is. We thought that if we could just capture the 7,000 or the 12,000 rules the expert used, we would be able to duplicate the expert's performance. A little experience underlined a key fact: Experts are constantly learning. They attend conferences. They read books. They gain experience with new cases and from arguments with other experts and, in the process, they reformulate their knowledge and become better. The same is true of the knowledge that early KM developers put into their knowledge bases. As with expert systems, the knowledge was often 30% out of date by the time you completed the system, and continued to degrade after that.

Luckily for those interested in KM, the world has changed quite a bit since the mid-Nineties. The Internet first became popular in 1995, and the whole world of social media, from email and wikis to tweets and smart phones has blossomed, and a new generation of employees approach problems with new instincts and tools to facilitate sharing information quickly and broadly. Obviously, a given organization with a specific type of problem will choose some approaches over others, but the fact remains that we are entering a new age of KM, and smart organizations can now do more to capture and share knowledge than ever before.

All this is fortuitous for organizations in North America and Europe, at least, because they both experienced baby booms in the post WWII years, and all of those individuals are about to reach retirement age. If organizations can't capture the expertise of key workers in the next few years, they are going to find that they have lost invaluable resources as today's key knowledge workers retire.

If all this has convinced you that you ought to look into KM, for the first time, or again, then the place to start is with *The New Edge in Knowledge*, a book that has just been released by APQC. The American Productivity and Quality Control (APQC) organization is a non-profit group that was established in 1977 in an effort to encourage better business productivity in the US. The group is well known for its benchmarking efforts and its studies of key business capabilities. In recent years APQC has been a leader in studying how business organizations use and benefit from business process efforts. And, most important, in the case of this book, APQC has been in the forefront of efforts to study and improve Knowledge Management. Moreover, and important to those who read www.bptrends.com, APQC has consistently treated KM as a key element in a business process framework. Thus, for example, the APQC KM methodology calls for the creation of a matrix in which one tracks processes on one axis, functional units on the second axis, and shows in the resulting cells where knowledge is captured and communicated.

This book is written by Dr. Carla O'Dell, one of the world's leading experts on KM and the current president of APQC, and by Cindy Hubert, the executive director of APQC's Delivery Services. Over the past 15 years Carla has written a wide variety of books and papers on KM and worked to develop the APQC's KM methodology while Cindy has conducted studies and presented workshops to some 450 organizations that use APQC's KM approach.

I can hardly begin to discuss the KM methodology that APQC has developed over the course of the past decade. Suffice to say that it has evolved as we have learned more about processes and as new social media have become available. And, as with processes, we find there are steps that organizations musts take to develop their KM capabilities. One key APQC graphic explains that knowledge varies on a continuum from Explicit, concrete knowledge, to Tacit, experiential knowledge. On a second axis they consider the nature of human interactions involved in sharing knowledge and end up with a matrix that shows four different approaches to KM. They are, ranging from the Explicit and Low Level Human Interaction, upward:

- Self-service – where individuals share with emails and discussion groups
- Lessons Learned – where after action reviews are generated and shared
- Communities – networks set up by share and learn together
- Transfer of Best Practices – facilitated sharing between units in an organization

In all but the first case, KM requires a commitment by management, and the authors describe the experiences of organizations that have developed outstanding KM systems and consider what worked and what didn't.

Broadly, the book is divided into a set of chapters in which the principles and practices of KM are discussed, followed by a long appendix in which detailed case studies of KM work at ConocoPhilips, Fluor, IBM and MITRE are discussed.

Every large organization ought to be worried about what they will do when their current leading experts begin to retire. Service organizations, in particular, ought to be very worried about how to capture the knowledge that the best sales and service people use when dealing with customers. And everyone in process work ought to be interested in how the latest social networking tools can create KM systems that are dynamic and capable of capturing and then revising knowledge in something close to real time. Finally, anyone engaged in process work will know that new technologies can't just be dropped on an organization. They will want to read this book not only to learn about the latest knowledge management techniques, but to study how successful organizations managed to introduce, and how they continue to maintain, their KM systems.

The New Edge in Knowledge is a book that ought to be studied by anyone engaged in process work. KM is changing rapidly and you need to be sure you are up on the latest and most effective practices. KM is a body of knowledge you need to have when you consider how to make your organization into a winning organization.

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