IDENTIFYING AND PRIORITIZING CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE

Once you have decided on an overarching strategy and goals for knowledge management, the next step is to identify the knowledge that is most critical to your organization. Knowledge managers should work with the business to uncover the biggest knowledge gaps, challenges, and opportunities—and then prioritize which to tackle first.

HOW TO IDENTIFY CRITICAL KNOWLEDGE

INVOLVE BUSINESS LEADERS IN DECISIONS ABOUT WHAT’S CRITICAL

A fundamental tenet of knowledge management is that it should focus on solving important business problems. Thus, you should consult business leaders and others “in the know” when establishing KM priorities. Business leaders can provide insight into which knowledge areas are critical to support their functions’ short- and long-term goals. They can also help pinpoint areas where retirement, internal churn, and other factors are creating knowledge gaps and risks.

But business leaders are not typically KM experts, and they are busy. To focus their input, you need to provide explicit guidance on conveying knowledge needs and ranking them by urgency and strategic importance.

For example, Kraft Foods designed a process to identify critical knowledge that started with asking business-unit vice presidents to identify topic areas that should be targeted for KM. Then Kraft’s KM team performed the heavy lifting to assess the recommended knowledge areas by interviewing relevant experts and managers. After compiling data from the interviews, the KM team returned to the business leaders with a prioritized list of knowledge areas and documentation/transfer recommendations.

Another organization APQC studied, Lloyd’s Register: Marine, used a different strategy to acquire business leader input. Before moving locations, the organization created a business continuity that outlined critical business functions at risk of losing knowledge, individuals with critical knowledge in those functions, and the actions managers needed to take to ensure continuity of operations. Individual managers were responsible for filling out their sections of the business continuity plan, which meant they had ultimate control over which knowledge areas were prioritized. The KM team worked with the business managers in a consulting capacity to help them identify at-risk knowledge areas and experts. On a separate track, the KM team also conducted its own knowledge risk assessments to surface knowledge gaps and recommend potential solutions.
DETERMINE ON A SYSTEM TO IDENTIFY AT-RISK KNOWLEDGE

Feedback from leaders can identify knowledge areas that are ripe for documentation and transfer. But once a focus area is established, the KM team needs a system to bring together leaders, experts, and other stakeholders in order to outline the specific needs, roles, tasks, systems, relationships, and subdomains that the KM project should focus on. Based on more than 20 years of experience in KM, APQC recommends knowledge mapping as the best way to gather input and create consensus on what constitutes critical knowledge.

Knowledge Mapping

A knowledge map is a visual representation of knowledge resources. Knowledge mapping can focus on a process, role, competency or learning need, function, or strategic priority. To create knowledge maps, the KM team works with the business (e.g., subject matter experts, managers, or other stakeholders) to look at each step in a process or area and answer three questions:

1. What knowledge is needed?
2. Who has that knowledge, or how can it be accessed?
3. When is the knowledge needed?

Based on this information, the KM team creates a visual representation of how knowledge flows and performs a gap analysis between the reality that was uncovered in mapping vs. the ideal state. The discrepancies between how knowledge currently flows and how it should flow are the most specific insights that can be extracted from a knowledge map.

Other Techniques for Identifying Critical Knowledge

Knowledge mapping is the most common technique for uncovering knowledge needs, but many organizations have developed their own custom approaches. Examples include the aforementioned processes at Kraft Foods and Lloyd’s Register, as well as other types of knowledge audits and assessments. See Knowledge Transfer and Reuse: Approaches to Identify Critical Knowledge for information about the pros, cons, requirements, and expected outputs of various approaches as compared to knowledge mapping.
SOLICIT FEEDBACK FROM EXPERTS AND EXPERIENCED EMPLOYEES

If you pursue knowledge mapping, you will collect feedback from experts and other key stakeholders as part of that process. But in addition to—or instead of—this, you may want to gather feedback from experienced employees to understand what knowledge they have as well as potential problems in knowledge access and flow.

Some organizations have formal interview processes to extract information from experts and other key personnel prior to retirement or at key milestones, such as the end of major projects. (You can review common interview questions here.) Others use community leaders, fellows, process owners, and/or official subject matter experts to identify critical knowledge on an ongoing basis.

PAY ATTENTION TO GRASSROOTS KNOWLEDGE NEEDS

While it is essential to have a top-down process to identify critical knowledge, you also need grassroots channels that allow individuals, teams, and communities to voice their knowledge needs. KM teams can encourage employees to self-identify critical knowledge by submitting requests or documents, or they can reach out to employees via surveys.

Use Communities to Surface Knowledge Needs

Communities of practice (CoPs) are another means of surfacing end-user knowledge needs. At Accenture, communities are explicitly responsible for identifying and filling knowledge gaps. Community champions (subject matter experts) and social learning catalysts (a full-time role responsible for liaising between the KM program and end users) identify gaps and solicit or create content to fill them.

Knowledge managers can also identify knowledge needs by monitoring trends in community sites, collaboration tools, search, and other KM systems. For example, Praxair uncovers gaps by reviewing questions that come into its ask-an-expert system, which is integrated with the organization’s CoPs. Within each CoP, there is a role responsible for keeping an eye on questions and answers to identify anything that should be codified into formal enterprise content. Nalco Water employs a similar approach. When a technical topic arises repeatedly in its community sites, experts will create or update formal content on that topic.

HOW TO PRIORITIZE COMPETING KNOWLEDGE NEEDS

Once you have identified knowledge gaps and needs, you must prioritize what to tackle first. APQC has a simple tool called a Knowledge Loss Risk Matrix (Figure 1) that allows organizations to prioritize knowledge needs. Areas with the highest likelihood and consequences of knowledge loss should be the top priority. Knowledge has a higher likelihood of loss if it is not documented anywhere and resides only in the minds of one or a handful of employees.
Knowledge whose potential loss carries the greatest consequence is vital to the organization’s strategic priorities, products, and/or ongoing operations.

**APQC’s Knowledge Loss Risk Matrix**

![Image of the APQC Knowledge Loss Risk Matrix]

However, there are many ways to prioritize knowledge critical knowledge. Prioritization often depends on context. For example, if you’re focused on knowledge gaps related to projects, you will want to focus on knowledge that is broadly applicable across a range of projects. **Volvo and NASA**, for example, both use a structured process to prioritize the most critical project knowledge. But if you’re looking at R&D knowledge, there may be knowledge that is rarely used but nevertheless strategically important.

The prioritization methodology you use is up to you. The key is to define a methodology and apply it objectively and consistently to ensure you focus on the right KM needs and projects.

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