

Understanding Change Management

Imagine you're in charge of a rollout. At first, everything seems successful—The tools are in place, your team delivered comprehensive training, and early feedback was positive. But a few months later, very little has changed. Employees slip back into old habits, no one is using the new process, and the expected impact never fully materializes.

This is a common pattern with knowledge management initiatives. The challenge is not introducing new approaches but getting them to stick. Change management is what makes that possible by reinforcing new ways of working and ensuring they take hold over time.

What is KM Change Management?

In broad terms, change management is the application of a structured process or set of approaches to transition employees, teams, or an entire organization to a desired future state. New and evolving knowledge management (KM) programs frequently require change management. For KM to make an impact, employees need to change how they work by adopting new tools, processes, and/or behaviors. Common levers to drive change include:

- [Proactive and visible support from senior leaders](#)
- [Internal communications campaigns](#)
- [Formal and informal training](#)
- [Rewards and recognition](#)

For the most part, change management for KM is not fundamentally different from the change management applied to other initiatives. Thus, if your organization has a change management center of excellence or a [preferred methodology](#) (e.g., Prosci ADKAR, the McKinsey 7-S Change Model), we recommend leveraging it to manage changes associated with KM. It's best to stick with what's established and familiar in your organizational culture.

However, there is one way in which KM change management may differ from other change efforts: KM change is rarely "done." Even longstanding, mature KM programs apply aspects of change management to ensure employees continue to share and reuse knowledge. For this reason, KM change management should involve iteration and continuous improvement loops in which the KM team monitors outcomes and adjusts based on feedback and evolving needs. With KM, you want the business to not just accept the change, but to truly own it.

Tips and Best Practices for KM Change Management

The following are APQC's most important and enduring best practices for KM change management.

Talk to Executives about the Problems They Care About and Focus KM on Those Problems

Driving KM adoption without business leader support will be an uphill battle, no matter how much communication and training you do. For leaders to get on board, they have to see KM has an avenue to something they care about—that is, a way to solve a problem or harness an opportunity that's important to them. Talk to leaders about their goals (or review available strategy documentation), and make sure KM initiatives link directly back to business priorities.

Pick Targeted Projects to Start, and Scale from There

Another common mistake is trying to change too much, too fast. Find a small pilot group or manageable project to take on, and make sure you secure approval for the resources you need to make it happen. Once you have a success story, you'll be better equipped to communicate what KM is and how it can help people in the business.

Communicate “What’s in It for Me?” and Reward Desired Behaviors

You'll need to educate employees about what you want them to do, but don't forget to communicate why. Instead of vague altruistic reasons (e.g., “share your knowledge to help others”), focus on how the proposed changes will save people time, reduce their frustration, or otherwise improve their day-to-day work. It helps to partner this messaging with rewards and recognition so that employees see intrinsic and extrinsic benefits at the same time.

Identify and Empower Change Champions in the Business

Building business ownership for KM starts with business advocates. These can be KM sponsors, but more often they are first line employees whose roles benefit most from KM or are most enthusiastic about the changes that are happening. Champions are typically volunteers who promote and support KM in addition to their regular job duties. In the early stages of KM program development, you may not be able to offer them much more than kudos and development opportunities. Still, APQC recommends:

- **Formalize champion roles.** Make champions “official” by defining their responsibilities and securing permission from their managers.
- **Assign champions specific duties.** Task champions with tangible and manageable action items such as gathering feedback, sharing KM updates, or beta-testing new KM technologies.
- **Make champions feel special.** Consider offering exclusive swag, sneak peeks, and designated spaces (e.g., a KM champion community of practice or chat group) that are just for your champions. Thank them often and—most importantly—listen and act upon their feedback.

Integrate KM into Employee and Business Performance Measures

If you want to build knowledge sharing and reuse into employees' workways, it helps to outline these activities as part of their job expectations. This can be done explicitly (e.g., assigning knowledge sharing goals for specific roles or projects) or subtly (e.g., encouraging people to cite KM participation as an example of how they met broader performance expectations). It also helps to use data to connect KM to business KPIs, such as showing that customer service agents who use KM content resolve customer problems more quickly and receive higher satisfaction ratings.

Key Takeaways

Change management can feel daunting, but it helps to take it one step at a time. If change feels really hard, go back and talk to stakeholders, and try to figure out why. Do people understand why the changes are happening and what their role is in the change? Is the change conflicting with other priorities or creating unintended negative consequences?

Some change resistance is natural, but if change feels truly impossible, KM may not be solving the right problems—or, the solutions may be too onerous, complicated, or time consuming. Be honest about what KM can reasonably achieve, given resource and budget constraints both within the KM team and in the business. Choose manageable projects, start small, gather success stories from advocates and early adopters, and continue to gather feedback so you can course-correct and continuously improve.

For additional guidance, see [APQC's KM Essentials: Change Management](#) and [Making Change Management Mindful](#) collections.

About this Content

This content can include median values sourced from APQC's Open Standards Benchmarking database. If you're interested in having access to the 25th and 75th percentiles or additional metrics, including various peer group cuts, they are either available through a benchmark license or the Benchmarks on Demand tool depending on your organization's membership type.

APQC's Resource Library content leverages data from multiple sources. The Open Standards Benchmark repository is updated on a nightly cadence, whereas other data sources have differing schedules. To provide as much transparency as possible, APQC will always attempt to provide context for the data included in our content and leverage the most up-to-date data available at the time of publication.



APQC (American Productivity & Quality Center) is the world's foremost authority in benchmarking, best practices, process and performance improvement, and knowledge management (KM). With more than 1,000 member organizations worldwide, APQC provides the information, data, and insights organizations need to support decision-making and develop internal skills. [Learn more.](#)

US: 1-800-776-9676 **INTL: +1-713-681-4020** **FAX: 713-681-8578**

123 N. Post Oak Ln Houston, TX 77024