

Understanding Knowledge Management in the Digital Workplace

Imagine a team that uses a mix of digital tools to collaborate and get work done, but has never been given guidance on how those tools should be used. There is no clear system of record for documents, so team members store them wherever makes the most sense and hope for the best. Some team members turn their cameras on for every virtual meeting, while others never do. New tools and system features roll out with little explanation, leaving employees to adapt on their own.

Organizations invest in digital workplace tools to make collaboration easier, but without clear guidance and support, the experience can feel fragmented and inefficient. Addressing this challenge requires a deliberate approach to managing knowledge in the digital workplace.

What Is KM in the Digital Workplace?

Knowledge management (KM) aims to ensure the right knowledge is in the right place at the right time to support employees and the business. The digital workplace is a virtual work environment that allows employees to work, interact, and collaborate regardless of their physical location through a series of integrated applications. Examples include Microsoft 365, Google Workplace, and Slack. The rise of the digital workplace has changed how knowledge workers interact with information and one another, and KM must adapt and align its processes accordingly.

In some ways, digital workplace platforms are an advantage to KM.

- **Working digitally makes cross-boundary collaboration a habit:** When an organization integrates digital workplace tools, employees soon grow accustomed to [collaborating across traditional boundaries](#)
- **Digital workplace platforms add helpful capabilities:** These [platforms](#) have many built-in features and easy add-ons that can enable enterprise knowledge flow

However, the digital workplace can also create information overload and collaboration chaos that harms KM efforts. This is especially likely when the implementation of these tools is incomplete or poorly thought out. If organizations rush adoption, don't sunset legacy systems and redundant apps, or fail to provide business rules to guide usage, employees may find it harder to share and reuse knowledge.

Tips and Best Practices for KM in the Digital Workplace

To effectively manage knowledge in the digital workplace, organizations must adopt new technology purposefully, clearly outline how each new application and capability will (and will not) be used, and ensure knowledge is available to employees easily and intuitively from the platforms and applications where they do most of their work. The following are APQC's most important best practices for KM in the digital workplace.

Ensure Content and Information Is Easily Accessible Where People Work

Digital workplace platforms are designed as holistic ecosystems. They allow people to connect with everyone across the organization.

They provide most of the capabilities that most people need to do most of their work, most of the time. Their apps are integrated and interoperable so that employees can work in different ways, at different times, and in different spaces, while still working together. Employees like how the digital workplace functions as a one-stop shop for all their work, so we shouldn't force them to go elsewhere to access [knowledge content](#).

APQC recommends integrating [enterprise search](#) functionality to ensure knowledge content is easily accessible in the digital workplace. Most organizations' knowledge content is stored in disparate repositories, and there are often good reasons to leave this content where it is instead of migrating it. An AI-powered enterprise search can surface content regardless of where it resides. Organizations can also connect their enterprise search function with other systems to "push" relevant knowledge out to employees as they work. For example, by connecting enterprise search with employee data and project management systems, organizations can recommend relevant knowledge assets to project managers at each stage of their projects.

Integrate KM Activities Directly into Collaboration and Workplace Applications

Just as employees should be able to access knowledge without leaving the digital workplace, they also should be able to contribute and share knowledge seamlessly. For example:

- If you want employees to capture project [lessons learned](#), they should be able to do that within project management tools/systems
- If you want employees to collaborate in [communities of practice](#), they should be able to do that with the digital workplace's collaboration toolkit (that is, with its built-in tools for video conferencing, chat, collaborative document creation, etc.)

It's smart to move KM activities directly into the digital workplace when and where possible. KM activities that are newer and have smaller footprints can be migrated quickly and easily. With older KM activities, consider doing a phased migration and/or using APIs to connect legacy systems with the digital workplace.

Use the Digital Workplace to Connect People to Relevant Experts, Colleagues, and Communities

Most digital workplace platforms have built-in capabilities to generate employee profiles and help people connect. Unfortunately, a lot of companies aren't taking full advantage of those capabilities. That's certainly a wasted opportunity, but it can also contribute to knowledge siloes. If people don't have access to broader networks, they're likely to over rely on their immediate colleagues. Their work groups may get frustrated with them constantly pinging them for answers and advice, and they may not receive the most accurate or comprehensive knowledge the organization has to offer. Employees also may become disengaged if they can't build their professional and personal connections beyond their teams and departments.

The digital workplace should make it easier to find and connect with others, not harder. APQC recommends the following tactics to ensure you get the most out of built-in [employee profile systems](#).

- **Integrate employee profiles with enterprise search** to allow employees to surface people and content with one query
- **Integrate employee profiles with relevant systems and repositories**, such as project management tools and content libraries, to personalize user experiences and enable in-the-flow people recommendations
- **Train and encourage employees to use employee profiles** to find answers and build their networks across the organization
- **Train and encourage employees to fill out and update their own profiles** (beyond what can be automatically populated) to ensure they are complete and discoverable for new connections and opportunities

Create Structure, Boundaries, and Training to Guide Virtual Collaboration

Most organizations have taken a careless attitude toward the guidance and management of [virtual collaboration](#). Vendors promise that their collaboration tools are easy and intuitive, so why provide training? Outside the enterprise, online networks evolve organically and manage themselves, so shouldn't we let our work groups do the same? Organizations buy into these ideas and position the lack of top-down guidance as a feature, not a detriment.

However, APQC finds that employees whose organizations have no rules or ad hoc rules for virtual collaboration are significantly more likely to be dissatisfied. This finding aligns with widespread reports of remote work burnout and virtual meeting fatigue. Virtual collaboration tools are easy to use—but it's also easy for employees to drive each other crazy with constant pings, irrelevant requests, and other annoyances as they use these tools.

The extent of structure, boundaries, and training needed for effective and efficient virtual collaboration varies based on each organization's culture, demographics, and a variety of other factors. But at minimum, APQC recommends three key tactics.

1. **Create criteria for virtual meetings and guidelines to navigate collaboration options.** Employees need to know when to schedule a meeting vs. when to use chat or discussion threads.
2. **Establish rules for creating, joining, and being added to groups.** Employees don't want to be forced into too many overlapping or overwhelming channels. Many also need "safe spaces" where they can collaborate with select colleagues only.
3. **Permit employees to set boundaries between collaborative time, solitary work time, and the rest of their time.** Employees need to know when they're expected to respond immediately, when they can turn off notifications to focus on their work, and when they can ignore messages until Monday morning.

Set these guidelines, provide training on them, and ensure they're documented somewhere that's easily accessible so that employees can point back to them as needed.

Analyze Platform Activity to Identify Knowledge Flow Needs and Gaps

Most KM teams have a lot of experience interpreting and acting on activity data and user feedback from KM systems. APQC recommends they expand these efforts to the digital workplace. Digital workplace platforms offer a wealth of data, and they often have built-in tools that can help KM teams aggregate, interpret, and visualize this data. By looking at how people interact with knowledge and each other in the digital workplace, KM can guide the organization about what is and isn't working. For example:

- If people are only interacting with their immediate teams in the digital workplace, then the organization should consider cross-functional communities, people search and recommendations, or other approaches that will help people "serendipitously connect with each other" online
- If people are spending a lot of time searching, the organization may need to invest in better content management and/or add-on technology to improve search and discovery
- If project teams archive their sites without contributing project lessons learned or other knowledge content, KM may need to provide how-to guidance or a facilitator to make it easier for project teams to capture and share knowledge

In addition to leveraging the analytics tools and feedback mechanisms built into digital workplace platforms, APQC also recommends conducting occasional surveys and/or focus groups. These can help KM teams gain deeper insight into users' experiences with the digital workplace, KM content, and KM activities.

Key Takeaways

While the digital workplace can make it easier for people to connect with knowledge and one another, that doesn't happen automatically.

It's up to KM teams to work in partnership with key stakeholders (including business partners as well as functional partners such as IT and HR) to build the connections and structures that enable knowledge to flow through the digital workplace.

For additional guidance, see APQC's [Guide to Emerging Technologies for Knowledge Management](#), and the [Emerging Technologies for Knowledge Management](#) and [Virtual Collaboration: Rules of the Road](#) collections.

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