Advice for Designing Knowledge Management Approaches

What to do—and what not to do

Every knowledge management (KM) approach is different, and the “right” design depends on countless factors: the reason the approach is being implemented, the desired outcome, the structure and culture of the organization at which it will be implemented, available resources, and so forth. However, through APQC’s experience designing KM programs for clients, we have identified certain themes and guidelines that apply to almost every KM implementation.

Below are 10 recommendations for designing KM approaches.

1. **Figure out who’s responsible for what.** Before you design a specific KM approach, establish an executive champion, a design team, and a strong project leader/facilitator, and recruit advocates from the targeted process or knowledge domain.

2. **Combine different levels of funding.** Secure resources and support at both the enterprise and local levels to drive consistency and sustainability for each approach. Local funding provides contextual resources for the approach; enterprise or centralized funding makes it possible to establish a consistent infrastructure organization-wide.

3. **Make each approach inherently rewarding to use.** Realize that KM approaches may change the way employees are currently working, so there needs to be a compelling reason for them to switch.

4. **Pilot the approaches and their measures.** Allow for cycles of learning and experimentation, and look for the lessons that reside in failed attempts. Achieving an effective knowledge flow through an organization takes time, mentoring, and practice.

5. **Make each approach scalable and replicable.** Even if you decide to limit the initial launch to just one part of the organization, anticipate the largest possible eventual scale and design the KM strategy accordingly. Benchmarking other KM programs or using the APQC KM Capability Assessment Tool can give you a sense of the scale that your program will require.

6. **Don’t try to design the perfect IT solution.** Get the people and process elements right, and then find IT that will work. Technology is constantly evolving, so the tools will likely change over time anyway.

7. **Tackle tangible problems.** Focus on breaking down structural barriers to the flow of knowledge between employees who have it and those who need it—not on changing the culture. Common structural barriers include a lack of time; a cumbersome process; and employees who do not know where to find information, who to talk to, or whether they can trust the information they find. Work on these barriers rather than on the psychological makeup of your employees.
8. **Make it fun.** Brand each approach and use organizationally relevant terms, humor, and friendly competition to communicate about KM.

9. **Fit approaches into what employees are already doing.** Determine how and where to embed KM activities into the flow of work, and look for teachable moments when employees are most receptive to learning and change.

10. **Provide the right support system.** Don’t forget that all approaches require governance, change management, and measures of activity and impact.

---

**WHAT CAN GO WRONG**

Don’t start with approaches at the extreme ends of tacit or explicit knowledge. As every tennis player knows, the sweet spot lies in the middle of the racket.

At one end of the spectrum are approaches focused on explicit knowledge, in which the main focus is the design and deployment of large, enterprise IT applications. These approaches enable every possible type of knowledge exchange, but without a specific problem to solve and a change management strategy, not much actually happens. Technology applications do not, in themselves, motivate employees to share knowledge or change behavior. Technology is indispensable to KM in large organizations, but it must be part of a systematic KM strategy.

For years, we saw these IT initiatives start with a lot of hope and investment and then crash and burn when it became painfully obvious that no one was using the tools. Many an early chief knowledge officer’s career met its demise from a big IT implementation. “If you build it, they will not necessarily come” became a famous tag line in the early days of KM, and everyone knew that it meant an IT solution without a problem or a constituency clamoring for it.

For a long time we couldn’t understand why smart people continued to make that mistake. Then we realized why: IT is tangible. You either have it or you don’t. You know when you have rolled it out. It sounds like a solution. It is something you can describe and sell. And let’s face it: IT can be dazzling. We have noticed that some of the best KM programs make such creative use of IT applications that those who benchmark them don’t notice the “man behind the curtain.” The real wizardry lies in the organizations’ intense focus on letting employees take the lead on design; strong processes, communication approaches, and change management strategies; and campaigns to make it fun.

The best way to embed knowledge into day-to-day organizational life is to involve employees in developing a knowledge flow that supports their work and fits their culture. Employees usually support what they help create. Many of the best-practice organizations that APQC has studied are masters at engaging their employees in prototyping approaches.

At the other extreme are approaches focused exclusively on tacit knowledge transfer (e.g., a learning organization, mentoring, or employee development). These tend to revolve around intangibles, and it can be difficult to build buy-in or measure results. We would get calls from leaders of some of the best organizations in the world, frustrated that they couldn’t get any
traction with “the learning organization” as their mantra. These programs didn’t seem to have a concrete methodology or a tangible, urgent, and measurable problem they were designed to fix. You couldn’t tell whether you were making progress or not. And it blended too much into the woodwork. Ironically, it was so much in the workflow that you couldn’t even see it.

This is not to say that you shouldn’t buy IT solutions or develop a mentoring program if that is what your gap analysis indicates is the right approach. Just be mindful that it is risky to base your whole KM strategy on these activities unless you have a measurable business case tied to tangible outcomes that senior leaders care about.

If you pursue a holistic strategy that incorporates people, process, and technology while keeping the 10 guidelines above in mind, you should be well on your way to designing an effective KM approach. And if you run into snags along the way, remember that there are hundreds of best practices in APQC’s Knowledge Base that can help you troubleshoot and refine your efforts.

ABOUT APQC

APQC is a member-based nonprofit and one of the leading proponents of benchmarking and best practice business research. Working with more than 500 organizations worldwide in all industries, APQC focuses on providing organizations with the information they need to work smarter, faster, and with confidence. Every day we uncover the processes and practices that push organizations from good to great. Visit us at www.apqc.org and learn how you can make best practices your practices.