GOVERNANCE AND OWNERSHIP FOR PROCESS, KNOWLEDGE, AND DATA

Process, Knowledge, and Data Management Intersections Series

Governance and ownership pose plenty of challenges for process management, knowledge management (KM), and data management teams individually. When an organization wants to integrate its strategy for two or three of these areas, the conversation becomes even more complicated. But the benefits of integration are worth the struggle. When done well, an integrated strategy to manage processes and their associated data and knowledge can streamline the “asks” that these support functions put on the business, making it easier to get business groups to assume greater responsibility for all three areas.

In September 2020, APQC’s principal research leads Holly Lyke-Ho-Gland (process and performance management) and Lauren Trees (knowledge management) conducted the first in a series of roundtable discussions to further explore the benefits, tactics, and challenges of integrating process, knowledge, and data management. Discussing the effect of integration on governance and ownership, roundtable participants shared common challenges as well as instances where successful integration helped to mitigate these challenges.

Common Governance and Ownership Challenges

Governance and ownership challenges sometimes emerge from conflicts between support groups or because one or more areas of the organization lack maturity. However, more often the challenges arise in interactions between support groups and business stakeholders. On a broad level, common governance and ownership challenges for participants included:

» business stakeholders who resist assuming ownership of their own processes, data, or knowledge;
» turf wars or power struggles between support groups;
» lack of maturity in one or more areas; and
» resistance to established governance rules.

THE BUSINESS RESISTS ACCOUNTABILITY

Several participants noted confusion regarding the respective responsibilities of support groups that manage process, knowledge, and data management tools and approaches vs. the business stakeholders who use those tools and approaches. Ideally, support groups such as IT or the PMO should function as enablers that ensure processes are documented and optimized and data and knowledge get where they need to go. Business groups, on the other hand, should be responsible for validating and managing their actual processes, data, and knowledge. Unfortunately, reality doesn’t always match this ideal.
When the business resists ownership of processes, knowledge, or data, it often ends up causing problems down the road. Support groups, as one participant noted, “may understand how the data should be stored and collected, but they don’t really understand the data domain itself. It really needs to be somebody at the business level that understands how the data is being used in order to answer those data-driven questions on the business side.” If IT “owns” all the organization’s data, for example, it may end up designing data processes without considering the end users who need to use and manipulate that data for decision-making and reporting.

**TURF WARS AND POWER STRUGGLES**

Even without any kind of integration, process, knowledge, and data management groups often work on similar or overlapping projects and goals—which is a key reason for integration in the first place. But when an organization moves to integrate these three key areas, inevitably one or more groups will feel threatened or encroached upon, even if they all go into the endeavor in good faith.

Participants said that dividing responsibilities in support of shared goals is a constant balancing act. The partnership must be strategic rather than purely transactional, and whether one group is in charge or responsibilities are shared, it takes time to build strong working relationships. Good things can come out of dissent within governance, but stakeholders must work through conflicts to find consensus or compromise. This is more time-consuming than a unilateral approach.

Having leadership assign responsibilities (or hiring a third-party consultant) can make things easier than leaving groups to carve out their respective roles without any top-down guidance. However, when one group is put clearly “in charge,” it creates its own set of challenges. That group must be careful not to appear self-serving or as if it is putting its own objectives, definitions, or methodologies above those of the other groups.

**LACK OF MATURITY**

Governance is also challenging if process, knowledge, or data management maturity is uneven across the organization. One participant said that, while data governance standards must be in place for certain projects to be approved, “we don’t have maturity in terms of that greater overarching data governance across the organization.” For that reason, “it would be very burdensome to get everybody involved.” More mature areas also have different needs and priorities than less mature areas, even before disciplines are integrated. For example, a group might have strong KM practices but weak data management, which would color its outlook on the governance structures being applied.

**STAKEHOLDERS FAIL TO ADHERE TO ESTABLISHED GOVERNANCE**

Even when the business agrees to certain data definitions, naming conventions, or other rules that facilitate consistency, it is sometimes hard to get stakeholders to apply the standards consistently. This is particularly challenging if the business doesn’t accept any accountability for its processes, data, or knowledge and instead expects to be treated as a “client” of support groups that are responsible for enforcing governance rules. And even when new rules are implemented—for example, as part of a software implementation—the business may revert back to older ways of working once the “big push” is over and the focus shifts to other strategic projects.
In cases where support groups work closely and continually with the business, it makes sense for support groups to control the governance standards themselves, while collecting and applying feedback from the business. One participant’s organization, for example, decided that KM would “own” the enterprise taxonomy, but it collects daily input from other groups (such as data management and the business) on how the taxonomy needs to evolve and works with those stakeholders to ensure changes are applied in a timely manner. Commitment from both the business and support side is required to make such relationships work effectively.

**How Integration Can Help**

Most roundtable participants agreed that successful integration of data, process, and knowledge management—or even success in just one of these areas—requires the business to assume some ownership and accountability. Usually, business groups need to establish a role (whether full- or part-time) to support process, data, and/or knowledge for that corner of the business and liaise with the central support teams. This approach helps ensure the support teams’ strategies, systems, and approaches support business needs—and that the business is doing its part.

An integrated strategy means that an organization can streamline business ownership of all three areas. Once you set up the business-level owners for one, the others can follow that same structure. For example, one participant appointed process owners for all its end-to-end processes. When the organization launched a large master data management project, the data management team contacted the process team to see if it could leverage the process ownership structure that was already in place. In this way, the process owners became data owners for the data associated with their end-to-end processes. While this approach required some change management, it was easier to get the business on board for a distributed ownership structure because they had seen it work with process ownership.

This approach not only helps to balance accountabilities between central support functions and the business, but also helps integrate data, knowledge, and process management in the context of the business. If the same business representative owns the three areas (or even two of the three) for their domain, they will see how the pieces fit together and work with one another. This helps the organization move toward an integrated view, where it can see how data and knowledge flow through and generate value in the context of processes.

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