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Do you know exactly what you know?

Gavin Ireland describes how your skills as a technical communicator can be used as a valuable resource throughout your organisation.

Enable and encourage analysts and developers to share their own knowledge

How did I get here?
When you find that things don't work quite as well as you think they should, that it's not as easy to find information as you think it should be and that your organisation works in silos with communication that could be improved, what do you do about it?

You're a technical communicator and that implies that you know how to get the information you need from subject matter experts and information repositories, and that you know how to present that information in the most appropriate form. So can those skills be extended to cover a wider area? Of course they can. Should they be extended to a wider area? Well, that is up to you, but I hope you will see the sense in it as you read on.

As I began my journey into Knowledge Management, I very quickly realised that these were potentially huge tasks and it would take me forever to manage it. Also this was only for one department; it seemed more than likely that I would have to repeat these tasks in other areas. So I decided that by far the best option was to enable and encourage the analysts, developers and so on to share their own knowledge, rather than doing it for them; and that is the essence of Knowledge Management.

So what if we lose a bit of knowledge?
For a moment, let's disregard whether you believe that NASA actually landed on the moon or not. Let's consider why they didn't go back again. Lack of funding? That seems to be what everyone thinks, but the truth is a little more scary. At the end of the Apollo programme, a forward-thinking manager gave the order to keep two sets of technical documentation on paper, take a microfiche copy, and destroy the rest. That should have been perfectly adequate, but when they came to need it again, the microfiche had degraded beyond saving and a burst pipe and flooded storeroom had taken care of the paper copies. Everyone who had been involved in the programme had either retired or passed away and the new generation of engineers had been taught from a starting point way beyond the level of this 1950s technology, so reverse engineering would be time-consuming and expensive; starting from scratch even more expensive.

How can Knowledge Management help?
Knowledge Management uses a combination of processes, technology and people to help you discover and retain the knowledge that you need, and to archive the knowledge that you no longer need.

Technology
Technology as an enabler is the least-important aspect of three. Whether you use SharePoint, Confluence or anything else isn't really important. What is important is that everyone who needs access, has it, and that everyone who has access can easily find the information that they need.

Process
The next most important aspect, process makes learning and sharing part of peoples' jobs and not just a 'nice to have'. Yes, it's an overhead to begin with, but once it's up and running, you'll be in a better position than you are now.

People
The most important part. When people understand and believe in sharing their knowledge, they will be keen to use the processes and technology that you've provided for them. Getting the people to let go of 'Knowledge is power' and to grasp 'Sharing knowledge is better' is key.

Types of knowledge
The classifications of knowledge are important because they'll help you to identify quick wins, valuable longer projects and the less-attainable projects.

The most obvious form of knowledge is the one that we as technical communicators deal
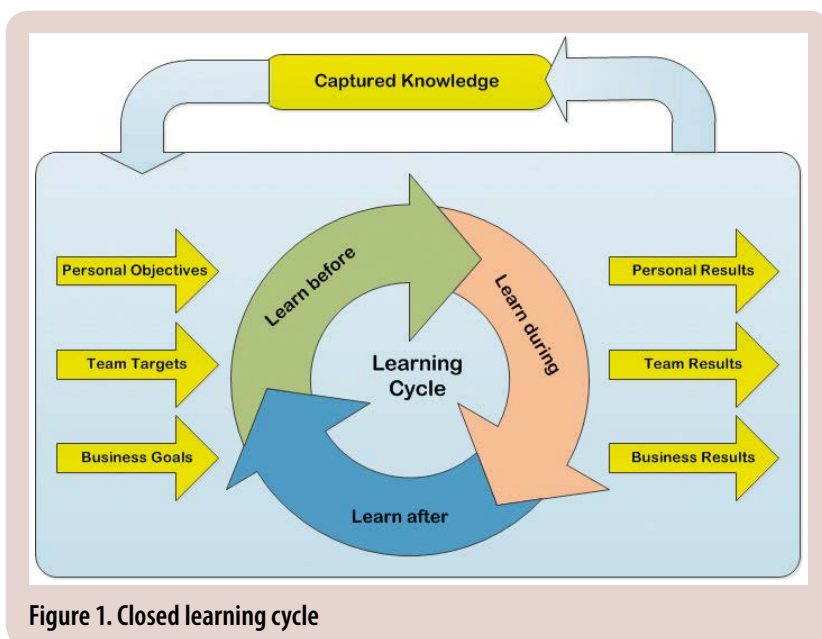

Figure 1. Closed learning cycle

with the most; **Explicit Knowledge**. These are the structured and documented facts, figures, models, interpretations and so on that form a large part of our source materials.

The 'Nirvana' of Knowledge Management and, therefore, sometimes the hardest to achieve is **Tacit Knowledge**. This is the knowledge and experience that sits in the heads of your specialists. It includes experience expertise, behaviours and intuition and sometimes cannot be simply written down.

In between those two is arguably the most cost-efficient knowledge, **Implicit Knowledge**. This is sitting in the processes, techniques and methods within your organisation. It is the ways that people have developed to make their jobs easier and more efficient and if you can get people to show you, it's not that hard to share. Getting people to show you is one of the essential skills of a Knowledge Manager and I'd suggest that it's pretty important for a technical communicator too.

Knowledge Management tools
I suggested earlier that technology is the least-important aspect of a Knowledge Management programme, so I won't get bogged down in discussions over whether to choose SharePoint or Confluence, Skype or Lync and so on.

Types of knowledge:
- *Explicit*
- *Implicit*
- *Tacit*

Figure 2. Iceberg showing the three types of knowledge

The real tools used in Knowledge Management are the ones that get people sharing what they know, and you don't buy them from any shops.

To begin with, I would choose some simple, small wins to demonstrate that you could do things better. For example, say your organisation is spread over several locations and arranging meetings is more difficult than it needs to be. Most Outlook calendars seem to be set to show Busy/Free status only, and some are likely to be hidden altogether. If you want to plan a meeting successfully, you need to know that all of the attendees will be in the same office at the time. Depending on your organisation, you could either encourage everyone to open their calendars to show details so you can see where people will be on a particular day, or maybe get a mandate from management to enforce it. A small thing, but the time savings soon add up when you don't have to contact people first to find out where they will be.

Another issue could be finding the best person to speak to about a particular subject. If I wanted to find the best person to speak to about Attribute Modelling, for example, I would have to ask around until I got a useful answer. You could start with a Meet the Team area on your intranet where you can search for specific skills, and have pictures of the people and their interests too, so you can recognise your expert and see if you have anything in common. Further, you could develop this into a forum-based structure, to get away from having single points of expertise and to share the knowledge and responsibility among groups or related roles. In Knowledge Management, we call this developing Communities of Practice.

Who hasn't see wikis and similar things get overhauled every year or two because they've been allowed to get tired and out of date? Maybe during the next cycle of overhaul it would be a good time to stop it from happening in the future. Have a team whose secondary responsibility includes regularly checking on your wiki and document repositories and reporting back when work is needed. This team can be rotated on a regular basis so that everyone takes a turn.

Show and Tell sessions for when projects have finished, or for if someone has been on a useful course, can be a good way of sharing information. We also think carefully about each session and consider whether it would be useful to have an eLearning course and/or further sessions on the subject. Any eLearning courses are then published onto the Development Studio where we can get usage reports and promote the information to relevant people.

The next development of this which we're working on, is facilitated Knowledge Cafés. This is another tool to help to get people talking and sharing, based around learning through
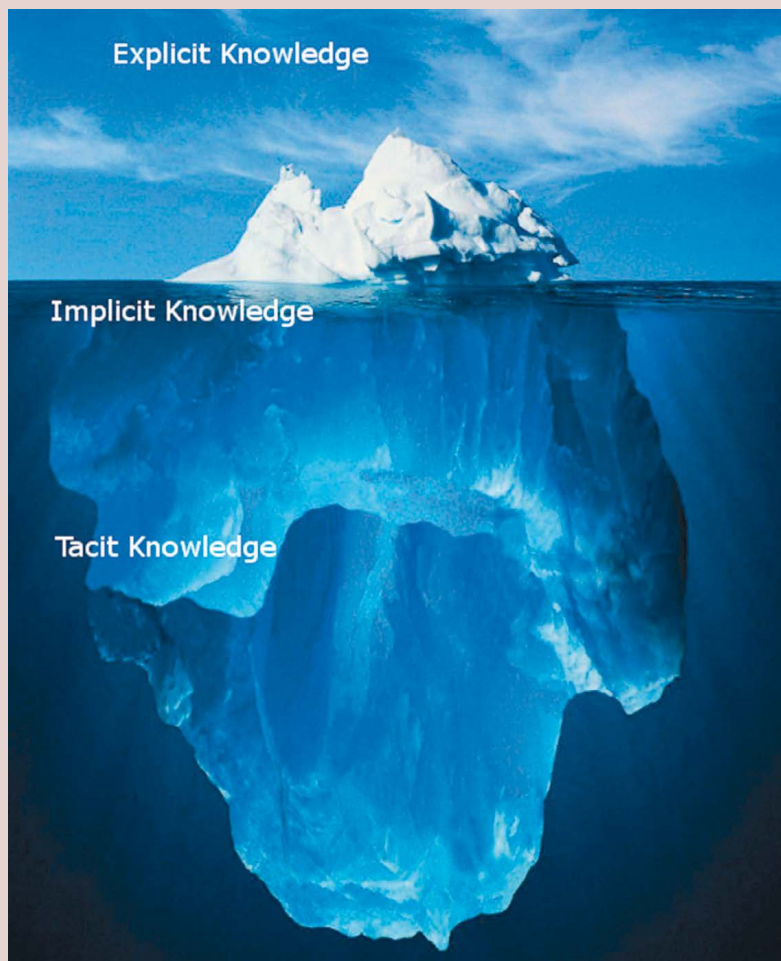
discussion and conversation, as opposed to learning by being lectured to, either by a person, book or website.

Other tools and ideas to consider could include Peer Assists, Blogs, Communities of Practice, Social Networks, Knowledge Harvesting Interviews and many more. The organisation's induction process and leaving process also come under the Knowledge Management umbrella.

How much?

If you wanted to implement a Knowledge Management programme, you may be able to tackle the quick wins without costing anything, but if you want your organisation to take it seriously, sooner or later someone will ask how much will it cost? And how much will my return be? There is no simple answer because it really does depend on the industry and the organisation. I've seen quotes from J.D. Edwards saving $5million per year in time and paper costs, BP's SNS team saved $3.5million from lessons learned, i2 reported use of their knowledge exchange tool reduced implementation times from 3-4 months to 4-6 weeks.

It's too early to report figures from my organisation, but we're looking to reduce project and analysis times by 10% in the first year. As part of demonstrating the effectiveness of Knowledge Management, a simple measure could be to sit with people doing their jobs and assess areas in which time could have been saved with Knowledge Management practices, and indeed, where it is already being saved.

Alternatively, you can use interviewing techniques to help technical experts to look back at knowledge blocks that they encountered, and any positive knowledge related experiences they had. Doing this, you can apply a value to time wasted and time saved, but you also build up a library of good areas to promote and bad areas to work on. That's what I'm doing now and I hope to be able to report back with the results some time next year. **C**

References

Jennex, M.E. (2013) 'Knowledge Management: The Risk of Forgetting', iKnow, Volume 3, Issue 1, May 2013.

Success Stories available online at: www. nickmilton.com/search/label/success%20story (accessed September 2013)

Selected Knowledge Management tools:

- Encourage employees to share their locations through Outlook calendars
- Develop Communities of Practice – a place to go to share knowledge
- Assign responsibility for checking wiki and document repositories
- Plan Show and Tell sessions to share knowledge
- Facilitate Knowledge Cafés.

Gavin Ireland FISTC is a Technical Author at SkyIQ with a special interest in Knowledge Management and Sharing.
E: gavin.ireland@skyiq.co.uk
Skype: gavin.ireland2