

What is Knowledge Management, and why does it matter?

"As we transition from an era of information scarcity to information glut, there is need for re-focusing on human sense-making processes underlying decisions, choices, and performance." **BRINT Institute, New York**

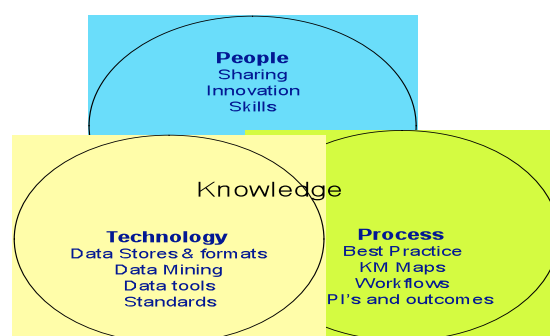
"Knowledge is the capacity for effective action." **Wittgenstein**

Knowledge Management ("KM") emerged as a discipline in the mid 1990s, not least in response to the opportunities and challenges presented by the new technologies of the Information Age. The challenges included the plethora of raw data that it had become feasible to collect, while the opportunities include rapid processes for turning those raw data into meaningful information.

Just over a decade later, better knowledge management has become central to the Government's drive to improve public services. The Government wants all organisations, comprising staff at all levels, to understand their information needs. These needs must then be met, to enable evidence-based decisions to be made. It is therefore critical that organisations understand how to gather, distil and use information to deliver the best and most appropriate service as efficiently as possible.

Knowledge Management is a key plank for the development of World Class Commissioning (WCC). In order to support WCC, Commissioners will need to base decisions on sound information and evidence. They will need access to a wide range of data, information and evidence which can be analysed, synthesised and used to undertake risk assessments, provide predictive analysis and enable modelling of health outcomes. The range of data and information which will be required to support this process will be drawn from a wide range of sources – Commissioners will need to have tools and techniques for gathering data and information from, both hard and soft sources, and to inform decision making. Managing and capturing a vast array of diverse sources will be key to success, and Knowledge Management will be key to enabling this process.

So what is Knowledge Management? There are a lot of definitions around, but essentially KM is a strategy, framework or system designed that enables organisations to create, capture, analyse, apply and reuse knowledge in order to achieve their goals. It is a means of creating and supporting an organisation that is able to maximise the use of knowledge to achieve sustainable high performance. A simple phrase that encapsulates a core aspect of Knowledge Management is "getting the right knowledge to the right people at the right time in the right format". This outcome is often considered to be the product of three key components - People, Process and Technology.



Knowledge Management is more than a fancy name for a combination of library, research and number-crunching roles – but it's not an end in itself. To be meaningful, KM must relate to fundamental organisational objectives such as improved performance, competitive advantage, innovation, developmental processes, lessons learnt transfer (for example between projects) and the general development of collaborative practices.

KM therefore requires a fundamental shift in an organisation's approach to all decision-making, from strategic planning onwards. Part of this shift is recognizing that knowledge is more than facts and figures. Data is a set of discrete, objective facts about events, whereas information is a 'message'; it is meant to change the way the receiver perceives something. In other words, information is data that makes a difference. Knowledge, in turn, is broader and deeper than mere information. When people speak of a 'knowledgeable individual' they mean someone who has a thorough, informed and reliable grasp of a subject – in other words, they're both educated and intelligent.

"Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information." **Thomas Davenport and Laurence Prusak**

Knowledge management recognizes the value of *all* knowledge within an organization, wherever it might reside: in the heads and expertise of the staff, in unwritten common practice, and in uncaptured dialogue. Effective KM ensures that that value is put to good use and not lost.

Historically, there have been a number of *technologies* 'enabling' or facilitating knowledge management practices in an organization, including expert systems, knowledge bases, various types of Information Management, software help desk tools, document management systems and other IT systems supporting organizational knowledge flows.

The advent of the Internet brought with it further enabling technologies, including e-learning, web conferencing, collaborative software, content management systems, corporate 'Yellow pages' directories, email lists, wikis, blogs, and other technologies. Each enabling technology can expand the level of inquiry available to an employee, while providing a platform to achieve specific goals or actions.

The practice of KM will continue to evolve with the growth of collaboration applications, visual tools and other technologies, just as the Internet has led to an increase in creative collaboration, learning and research, e-commerce, and instant information.

Knowledge Management may be viewed from each of the following perspectives:

- **Techno-centric:** A focus on technology, ideally those that enhance knowledge sharing/growth.
- **Organisational:** How does the organisation need to be designed to facilitate knowledge processes? Which organisations work best with what processes?
- **Ecological:** Seeing the interaction of people, identity, knowledge and environmental factors as a complex adaptive system.

The emergence of Knowledge Management has also generated new roles and responsibilities in organisations, an early example of which was the Chief Knowledge Officer. We have provided a link to a resource relating to this role, and to that of Team Knowledge Officer, in the introductory section. In recent years, Personal knowledge management (PKM) practice has arisen in which individuals apply KM practice to themselves, their roles and their career development.