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Integrating of Learning and Knowledge Management into Work

By Jean Egmon

Learning and managing knowledge have existed as skills for survival, productivity, and innovation for as long as people have lived and worked together. There was likely some form of best practices shared about buffalo hunting, lessons learned about rubbing two pieces of flint together next to brush, and communities of practice formed during garment washing in the river. Be it cave dwellers or cube dwellers, learning and managing knowledge have always been a part of work and what people do.

However, in the last 30 years these practices have been broken down into roles, technologies, and practices separate from the work itself and separate from each other. The underutilized document repositories and other tools that require workers to stop their work to search and organize information is one example of what happens when valuable knowledge and learning opportunities are designed apart from the natural way people think and learn and separate from daily tasks. Bundles of expertise and practice get separated from each other and from direct tasks of the business. This is ironic given the move from the industrial era mindset of parts and pieces to the knowledge era mindset of connections and networks.

If business decisions are truly based on the knowledge at hand and adequate training, then corporate learning and knowledge management efforts should lead this integration by modeling how managing knowledge and learning are inseparable from daily tasks. This article suggests some early steps in this integration journey that individuals can do without relying on major structural changes. Although bigger changes are necessary, it is helpful to begin by demonstrating leadership at the place a worker can influence today.

A Model for Integrated Approaches

Like many institutions (including APQC), the Center for Learning and Organizational Change (CLOC) at Northwestern University recognizes learning and knowledge management as key leadership competencies. The CLOC asserts that these areas, along with the ability to lead and sustain innovation and change, are an integrated set of knowledge competencies necessary for any modern leader. Click [here](#) to view Figure 1 which shows CLOC's visual representation of underlying factors for many of today's business issues.

Whether workers are managing a global supply network, contracting offshore services, working with others who are both competitors and strategic partners, or helping technical experts transform themselves into professionals who can work across silos, they are faced with changing the way they think and, therefore, changing what they do and how they do it with the information resources around them. These resources range from technology tools to culture.

By peeling back discipline-specific practices surrounding supply chain management, outsourcing, marketing, operations, human resources, and other business disciplines, one finds the core issues of learning (thinking and doing in a new way), managing knowledge (creating new knowledge for others to learn and use, personalizing it, embedding it in the environment, sharing it, and expiring it), and innovating (creating and transforming products, services, practices and even business models). These core activities can be integrated across such disciplines.

Structural and Systems Challenges

Learning, knowledge management, organizational change, strategy, and innovation are often partitioned into separate initiatives with separate budgets, which raises structural

and systems challenges for integrating efforts across business units. Often what begins as good, focused intention results in unintended consequences such as being slow to respond to a new opportunity in the market or a rising customer concern (e.g., "That's marketing's job" or "Why didn't the CIA and FBI share intelligence data?"). However, just as people are the ones who create systems, structures, and practices (with unintended consequences and challenges that actually get in the way of good business), people can outsmart them.

Human beings are social, and they are designers of interventions by nature. Those are good traits on which to re-build the integration of learning and knowledge management, one step at a time. A good place to start is with learning and knowledge management professionals working with each other and with business unit leaders to design projects and solutions that can contribute directly to the value chain for customers. Some ideas to begin thinking how learning and knowledge management efforts can be integrated follow.

- Learning and knowledge management professionals can find medium-risk, medium-to-high profile projects to work on as a team that will deliver business results and enhance trust and respect with both internal and external customers. One example is an extranet that educates customers/clients as well as the people that work with those customers on changing trends and implications for the customer's business. This is being done in the financial services industry where investors and investment advisers learn together about market trends and can construct strategies from the knowledge provided to both, as a service rather than as a sell.
- Learning and knowledge management professionals can also partner to build a conceptual model that shows how their contributions work together to develop things like industry intelligence, consumer awareness, and improved decision-making capability. For instance, they could even build a tool that can be used by customers, and or by employees, to improve the speed at which complex decisions can be made and improve the confidence in those decisions by walking the user through a tested framework for decision-making. Tools for distributing one's portfolio of investments, or tools for ranking innovation investment opportunities are examples of decision tools.
- Learning and knowledge management can practice what they preach by piloting designs for methods such as communities of practice on themselves and capturing results and tips that they can then take and use with other business units to increase the speed at which they learn and to reap the benefits of the design.
- Scarce resources and separate budgets are often major stumbling blocks for people who want to work together. Learning and knowledge management can start small by sharing an intern as a resource who has knowledge and skills in both areas who can work on a project that requires meeting together and connecting the two groups. A pair of fresh eyes can also be invaluable in asking good questions to get the groups to talk through their similarities and differences philosophies, language, and approaches. Learning and knowledge management can start with their own issues. These two groups can consult each other pro bono on issues that have been long-standing, hard nuts to crack, such as: people having information but not using it or people being frustrated by having expertise and talent they do not know how to share. Often they will find, and have found, the issues exist because they have not designed for learning in KM projects or have not designed for KM in learning projects. Real work in real time needs both.
- The practice of design reveals a lot about how the designers are thinking and feeling, what assumptions they are making, what biases they have, and what results they lean toward. Learning and knowledge management sharing their design processes and working together on a design team to solve a problem that requires both perspectives is a practical way to work together and begin to understand each other.

Many of the current challenges in managing knowledge involve people having to deal with information overload and not knowing how or why to process it or use it. This requires learning. At the same time, many of the current challenges in learning involve people and organizations finding it difficult to access and leverage knowledge in practice that is disbursed and often localized and customized in different areas of the globe and even different areas of the company's culture. With these and other issues calling for integration, until recently the approach to managing knowledge and learning have

essentially remained constant and separate.

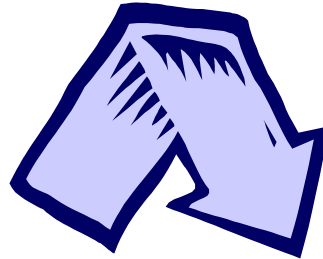
It is important to remember that then and now, people can outsmart the systems they create when the demands and opportunities of the times call for new ways of working. Perhaps it is time to re-integrate learning and knowledge management as basic human practices that rely on each other to do the work of drawing out and using the potential of human intelligence.

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Integration Model

Change
Business Innovation



Is Learning leading to good business?

Is KM leading to good business?

Learning, Cognition
Individual

KM relies on learning to transform knowledge into a personally actionable resource.



Leadership
Teaching/Enabling
Learning
Deciding
Designing



KM
Collective
(Social/Structural)
Cognitive Environment

Learning relies on KM to access & make available knowledge resources.

