

# Knowledge Management in the Public Sector

by Ramon C. Barquin

There is a certain buzz going around many public sector agencies these days, especially those in the federal government. The buzz is accompanied by a drumbeat that others think they have heard before. There are articles, presentations, conferences, and committees. There is hope and there is skepticism. “Is this really the long-awaited solution to our agency’s problems,” many are heard to whisper, “or is it, one more time, just the latest technical fad to arrive in the scene?” Well, by now I trust you’ve figured out that the buzz I’m referring to is *knowledge management*. With respect to where it is, what it is, or what its impact is really going to be, we can only speculate. But it’s a worthwhile speculation because the discipline is arriving at a time when the public sector is being forced to continue its reinvention – but now, into the digital world of electronic government.

What exactly is knowledge management? Where does it come from? Why is it important? What is it good for? How do we do it? Who else is doing it?

While there are many definitions, I’ll take the liberty here of providing you with my own. Knowledge management is *the process through which an enterprise uses its collective intelligence*

*to accomplish its strategic objectives.*

But we need to go beyond definitions. First of all, knowledge management is not just about technology. As a matter of fact, it is very much not just about technology. It is about processes, people, behavior, workflow, and other factors, which are not necessarily framed or defined by technology. Some of the pioneering work in knowledge management was done by professors Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi in relation to how Japanese companies took new ideas and converted them into marketable products. There is very little mention in their work – if any at all – of computers or information technology. Knowledge management is about understanding how people work, sharing concepts and ideas, identifying group of people who work on similar things, and seeing how they can learn from one another.

At its most fundamental level, knowledge management is about letting the right hand know what the left hand is doing. Shereen Remez, Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO) of the General Services Administration (GSA) – and the first CKO of a federal agency – has probably said it best in her agency’s booklet, *Your Blueprint for GSA Knowledge Management*: “If

the Internet is about connecting computers, knowledge management is about connecting minds.” Her knowledge management initiative at GSA has focused on cultural change in the organization, education, identifying who knows what, and how sharing can be accomplished within that enterprise.

Knowledge management is about storytelling. The telling of stories has been proven one of the most powerful techniques for grabbing people’s attention and solidly transferring concepts. Talk to Steve Denning and learn about his odyssey at the World Bank and how he put storytelling to work for him in that institution’s knowledge management initiative. It is very difficult to capture the attention of economists, engineers, accountants, planners, and all the other members of the World Bank and country teams using the standard tools of the trade: graphs, spreadsheets, presentation slides. Yet Steve discovered that he could catch their interest from the beginning with a good story. “Let me tell you what happened in Kamana, Zambia, in 1981,” and then elaborate on the real issue. A story help make the point. All of a sudden, the “get it.”

Knowledge management is about communities of practice. A community of practice is simply a group of people who work on the same types of things. They may be insurance

claims adjusters, military engineers, rocket scientists, procurement specialist, jet engine mechanics, or data warehouse architects. The important thing is that they seem to speak the same language, encounter the same types of problems to which they are looking for the same type of solutions...and they constitute a peer group. Talk to Alex Bennet, CKO of the Department of the Navy, or to Susan Hanley, CKO of AMS. They can regale you on how working with and nurturing their communities of practice made all the difference for their knowledge management initiatives.

Knowledge management is about organizations learning from their experiences, and about leadership in organizations. And, yes, let's now go back to the beginning and admit it: Knowledge management is certainly also about technology.

We started out by saying that knowledge management was not *just* about technology. What we obviously meant was that knowledge management was not exclusively, nor mainly, about technology. But technology undoubtedly plays a major role in knowledge management. Consider the technical disciplines that underpin knowledge management.

Knowledge management is not truly possible without data warehousing. It is the real-time access to an enterprise's integrated data stores through data warehousing that complements an individual's tacit knowledge of how something is done. It is through

document management systems that we gain access to specific materials that are essential in the knowledge management process. It is through enterprise information portals (EIPs) that we harness the power of the net and deliver an enterprise's knowledge to its customers and employees. It is through collaborative software that we can enable the sharing on which so much of knowledge management is based.

So knowledge management is really about information technology after all, but not exclusively. You need IT to do knowledge management, but you cannot say that you're doing knowledge management just by implementing IT programs.

Is knowledge management important? You can judge for yourself. "The only thing that gives an organization a

Knowledge management is important. We believe it is here to stay. Learn more about it and judge for yourself. ■

*Ramon C. Barquin, Ph.D., is president of Barquin and Associates, Inc. in Washington, D.C. He is the author of the book, Knowledge Management in Government, which is scheduled to be published this fall by Management Concepts, Inc.*

---

*You need IT to do knowledge management, but you cannot say that you're doing knowledge management just by implementing IT programs.*

---

Competitive edge," affirms Larry Prusak, president of IBM's Knowledge Management Institute, "is what it knows." If that is remotely the case – and we believe that it is – managing an enterprise's knowledge is the most important activity that organization can engage in. Doing it effectively and efficiently provides the utmost competitive advantage. Already about 20 percent of the Fortune 500 have chief knowledge management officers. Four federal agencies have also joined the ranks of the CKO-enabled.