

Knowledge management

A tool for SMEs to enhance competitiveness

David E. Chesebrough

Knowledge management can be a powerful tool for the savvy SME. It can increase productivity, effectiveness and efficiency in operations. Having a more complete view of the organization enhances the ability to understand new opportunities that were previously hidden from view. Any knowledge management initiative must be oriented towards communications, information sharing and value creation. Knowledge is at the heart of any business. Master knowledge and the business will prosper; ignore it and the business will fail. When time is short, the ability to make informed decisions rapidly is critical to sustained performance and to establishing an enduring competitive advantage.



Dr. David E. Chesebrough, P.E.
President

Association for Enterprise Integration
2111, Wilson Boulevard, Suite 400
Arlington, VA 22201, USA
Tel: (+1-703) 247 9474
Fax: (+1-703) 522 3192
E-mail: dchesebrough@afei.org
info@afei.org
Web: <http://www.afei.org>

Introduction

What did you know, and when did you know it? This classic question originated with the Watergate investigations during the Nixon presidency. It was a rallying cry for knowledge discovery in the context of the Watergate cover up.

The corollary for business is – what do we know, and how can we use it? Identification, capture and employment of organizational knowledge comprise one of the more challenging aspects of contemporary business.

The Information Age forces a transition to a networked or global digital economy. In the USA, when we say that we live in a knowledge-based economy, the premise is that the exchange of information, rather than goods and services, is becoming a primary economic

engine. The relentless pace of information and communication technologies, and in particular the Internet, is continuing to redefine the rules of global business.

There is evidence to suggest that the exchange of information is creating value in markets. However, traditional means of value creation, heavy industry and the development of industrial and consumer products, will always remain. After all, how can we possibly survive until we have a Rolls-Royce SUV or the full-wall plasma HDTV?

Consumption of goods and services will continue to drive producers and the economy. However, there is evidence of global shifts in production and consumption. India and Russia now have software programming capacity that did not exist a decade or two ago.

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Moreover, the impact of the yet maturing markets of China may be far-reaching and unpredictable.

Another even more unpredictable shift in markets may be the growing desire to acquire experiences as opposed to things. This mental model may in fact supplant the desire for ownership in the minds of consumers, leading to a radical shift in markets and subsequent impact on production. As Jeremy Rifkin points out in his book, *The Age of Access*: "In the hypercapitalist economy, buying things in markets and owning property become outmoded ideas, while "just-in-time" access to nearly every kind of service, through vast commercial networks operating in cyberspace, becomes the norm."¹

This vision can only be realized in the context of a ubiquitously networked environment, where information access and exchange is secure, reliable and seamless. The implication is that knowledge, and the ability to share it in the form of information, becomes a critical asset in the quest for competitive advantage.

A global model

The information age and the Internet have combined to give rise to a new class of business whose purpose is the creation of value in information exchange. Today, knowledge - the accumulated information, learning and wisdom of the organization - has become a valuable commodity. As our economies become more and entwined with the ubiquitous global communications networks, several truths emerge.

Decline of distance

Geographical distance is no longer a limiting factor to market participation. Historically, geography shaped and defined markets and the world economy. Local markets were created when suppliers and buyers were situated close to each other out of necessity. As civilization, transportation and technology grew, so did the reach of markets.

Today we participate in many markets that function on a global scale. For example, in the 1950's the "Made in Japan" label meant inferior quality. One generation later Japan is a world leader in production of high-quality consumer

electronics and automobiles, with a large portion of that production taking place offshore.

During the same period the U.S., which had invented television and once led the world in the production of television sets, has seen television production disappear from its own country and dispersed across the globe. Yet the U.S. is still a leading market for home entertainment systems. The impact of global communications and transportation has made geographical distance irrelevant.

Today the global reach of the Internet means any business or individual can interact or do business with anyone else on the Internet. Countries or regions located at traditional geographic gateways can no longer depend on this attribute to capture international commerce. On the Internet the cost of interaction is greatly reduced, and its reach is global. Everyone on the Internet can be a participant in global markets. But the Internet works both ways, allowing other businesses to become competitors who do not enjoy geographical access to markets. The Internet can place businesses into fully global competition, intentionally or unintentionally.

Compression of time

Two industries have combined to make time nearly meaningless - the airlines and telecommunications. The movement of people around the globe in our current day is unprecedented in world history. Never have so many people (and things) from all parts of the world been able to get to any other part of the world so inexpensively and quickly. While this has enormous economic influence, there is a dark side too. The SARS epidemic of 2003 should be evidence enough to support this claim.

Global telecommunications means that connections can be established between parties quickly, at any time of day or night. And wireless systems move this connectivity potential away from a place, say the office, and focus it on the person with whom a connection is desired.

The potential for instant interactivity through the connectionless (always-on) attribute of the Internet has brought a near-real time aspect to the exchange of information, bringing with it economic and social change. This too has a dark side. The emergence of spam, viruses

and other such malicious code places an overhead burden on the digital economy and in many cases causes real economic harm.

This environment requires companies to develop a culture of agility that is capable of dealing with constant change. Adapting quickly to economic, technological and business conditions, responding quickly to clients needs, and staying on top of a changing environment are today key factors for business success.

Re-invention of intermediaries

In the networked economy, buyers can find it more efficient to deal directly with sellers. Hence the traditional intermediaries (distributors, agents, etc) are eliminated. In the heady days of the "dot coms" this was termed dis-intermediation. One of the oft-cited examples was the plight of travel agents, as more consumers booked travel directly with airlines, through web-based portals.

However, this trend gave rise to a new class of intermediary, the information aggregator. Sometimes called an infomediary, these service providers collect information from many sources and present it to the customer in ways that add value and enable transactions. Travelocity and Orbitz are examples of successful infomediaries in the travel industry.

Value creation through the mediation of information has entered the mainstream of most developed economies. I suspect that one of the impacts of globalization is that the economic influence of information has also penetrated developing national and regional economies as well. Indeed, one need only look at Singapore to understand that in the highly connected environment of today economic success can come to those who take advantage of shifting paradigms in the international business climate.

Efficiency dislocation

The dis-intermediation mentioned above has economic consequence. Driving efficiency into a specific process, business or industry ultimately results in a certain level of dislocation, usually in the form of job loss. Enlightened organizations usually try to re-train workers; most do not. Travel agents felt the pinch severely when their customers left

them to book their own travel on-line, and the airlines reduced, then eliminated, the fees they paid to agents for ticketing their flights. The sales channels moved. Efficiency drove out overhead margins and jobs. A positive economic impact in one part of the travel industry was partially offset by negative impacts in other parts.

Another example of efficiency dislocation is the institution of automated parking fee machines at Dulles International Airport. Called Pay & Go, it is an automated system designed for quick and easy exiting from the parking facilities. It features machines located in the terminal that accept cash and credit cards for payment of parking fees. The validated ticket is then simply inserted into the machine upon exiting the parking area. No fuss, no muss, and no parking attendant. In this case, less costly, more efficient machines have displaced low-wage workers.

Knowledge itself

Knowledge is the possession of information or the ability to locate it. Samuel Johnson wrote in his early dictionary:

"Knowledge is of two kinds: we know a subject ourselves, or we know where we can find information upon it."²

Today we know that knowledge can be divided into two categories: tacit and explicit.

Tacit knowledge is expertise that's difficult to document. It is knowledge acquired and stored in employees' minds, such as experiences with processes, tools, techniques, customers, managers, suppliers, and co-workers. It is also knowledge gained through study of job-related material such as business journals or trade publications. When shared verbally, it enriches the informal knowledge-base of the organization. It is almost never captured for retention outside of the employee.

Explicit knowledge, on the other hand, is that which is codified in documents, databases, e-mails, photos, drawings, etc. It exists in physical media and can be accessed by workers if they know where to look for it.

Knowledge has been defined in other ways. But perhaps rather than defining the thing itself, we should see it in context. How do we know, for example, that knowledge is valuable? We know

when we use it. Suppose your firm was filling a vacancy for, say, Chief Engineer. Would any candidate make it through the initial screening if he/she were not adequately schooled in the disciplines essential for the job? But, since this is a senior position, should not the ideal candidate also possess a certain level of experience? And, because this is a position critical to the success of the business, should not this person's knowledge be validated through some level of significant accomplishment?

In this case knowledge gained through education, experience (on the job training), and the corroboration of mental models through successful application become important aspects of the ideal candidate. In fact, what you are looking for is a trained engineer who is an outstanding knowledge worker. In the same way there are different levels, or modalities, to knowledge within organizations.

Large corporations are spending a lot of money on systems that are intended to capture and codify worker's knowledge - tacit knowledge. The motivation, of course, for extracting knowledge from the brains of the workforce is the all too real fear of a key worker suddenly departing, taking with them all of that valuable tacit knowledge and depriving the organization of an important asset.

Extracting and codifying tacit knowledge is generally not a practical approach for the SME. It usually requires expensive outside consultants for facilitation, a repository tool for codification, and an internal adjustment period. Most small businesses can't endure its disruptive influence.

Knowledge management for the SME must first focus on identifying, organizing and making available the entire collection of explicit knowledge for the workforce. The workforce will respond by using its tacit knowledge to grow and improve the collection of explicit knowledge. They will, in effect, improve their capacity as knowledge workers.

The knowledge worker

Who are knowledge workers? Let's examine the definition found at the SearchCRM.Com website for knowledge worker.

"A knowledge worker is anyone who works for a living at the tasks of developing or using knowledge. For example, a knowledge worker might be someone who works at any of the tasks of planning, acquiring, searching, analyzing, organizing, storing, programming, distributing, marketing, or otherwise contributing to the transformation and commerce of information and those (often the same people) who work at using the knowledge so produced.

A term first used by Peter Drucker in his 1959 book, *Landmarks of Tomorrow*, the knowledge worker includes those in the information technology fields, such as programmers, systems analysts, technical writers, academic professionals, researchers, and so forth. The term is also frequently used to include people outside of information technology, such as lawyers, teachers, scientists, and also students."³

This definition is far too limiting within the context of the networked economy. It just doesn't hold water. It suggests that knowledge workers exist as a class, and as such hints at a certain elevated status, implying that other workers in the organization do not use knowledge in their jobs. This is simply not the case. What about the sales staff, production department or the shop floor? Everyone in an organization, from the Mail Room to the Board Room, uses knowledge to perform their tasks, and they learn from their experiences.

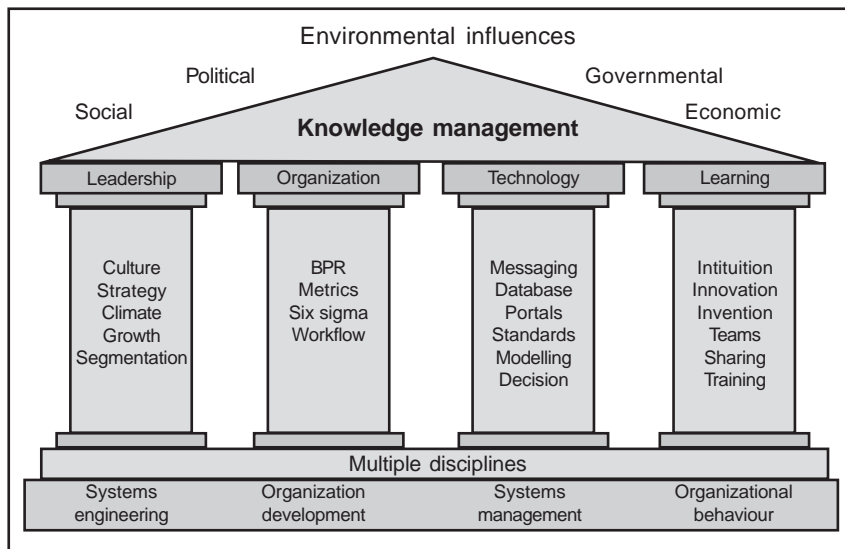
This is a particularly important point for the small business. Everyone in the business contributes to and uses the knowledge of the business. Thus, knowledge management for the SME must approach the business holistically if it is to be of any practical benefit. The question is, how do they get it?

An enterprise context

In some ways the term Knowledge Management can be misleading. It leads to a possible interpretation as being equivalent to other business management activities, such as asset management or facilities management. The issue is that reducing it to a separate functional discipline, isolated from the rest of the enterprise and operating on its own, can result in expensive and fruitless failures.

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Figure 1: Enterprise knowledge management architecture



Source: Stankosk, Calabrese, Baldanza, 1999

The George Washington University (GWU) Knowledge Management Institute in Washington, D.C. is a strategic partner with the Association of Enterprise Integration. The Institute focuses on the practical application of knowledge management in its graduate degree curriculum, attracting executive level students from government and industry. Its founder, Dr. Michael Stankosky, indicates that knowledge management is "well beyond the "fad" stage, and represents the new wealth of the Internet age."

Dr. Stankosky believes that when approached properly, in a systems manner, knowledge management can "literally change the way many organizations do business, treat people, effect change, and look toward the future ..." and that "we live in a knowledge age, where what you know and with whom you share it not only has value, but is also a competitive advantage."⁴

The systems approach

Knowledge management is fundamentally the efforts of an organization to generate, communicate and leverage intellectual assets. In the past, knowledge management practitioners tended to focus on technology-centric systems. The solutions from this approach are based upon rules, procedures or programmed software logic that capture preferred solutions (best practices) and generate

replicable solution templates. Essentially, this is a re-use architecture that has proven effective for certain applications.

The GWU Knowledge Management Institute's approach is to view the subject in the context of enterprise management, engineering and integration. Intellectual assets are given the same priority as other strategic assets of the corporation. The application of knowledge management must be both business-centric and value driven. The purpose for knowledge management is to improve efficiency, effectiveness and innovation, to essentially create value and competitive advantage.

Knowledge management can be viewed as the basis for integrating the four pillars of enterprise influence which are leadership, organization, technology, and learning in order to improve overall enterprise performance (Figure 1).⁵

The Xerox corporation has an effective knowledge capture system for its maintenance personnel through which they can share best practices for repairing customer products. It works because the installed product base is a large number of standard products, the maintenance is highly repeatable, and the solution can be replicated throughout the installed base. This is an example of a highly efficient form of knowledge management for a specific context. The problem with this approach is that it completely depends on a stable, rule-based operation that has a high degree of re-

peatable problems. It may be more difficult for such a system to adapt to a rapidly changing, dynamic business environment with less standardization and fewer opportunities for repeatable templates for knowledge application. Indeed, this is just the sort of environment many small businesses face today.

Knowledge management for SMEs

Small and medium-sized enterprises are the subject of much study and debate in the United States, as well as around the world. Widely recognized for their contributions of innovation and jobs creation, SMEs are often poorly positioned to maintain their growth patterns and at the same time adapt to what many of them find as a bewildering and wildly changing business climate. The influence of information technology, and the emergence of the economic power of information, can overwhelm a small business unprepared for its impact or unfamiliar with its rapidly changing uses.

Knowledge management strategy for SMEs

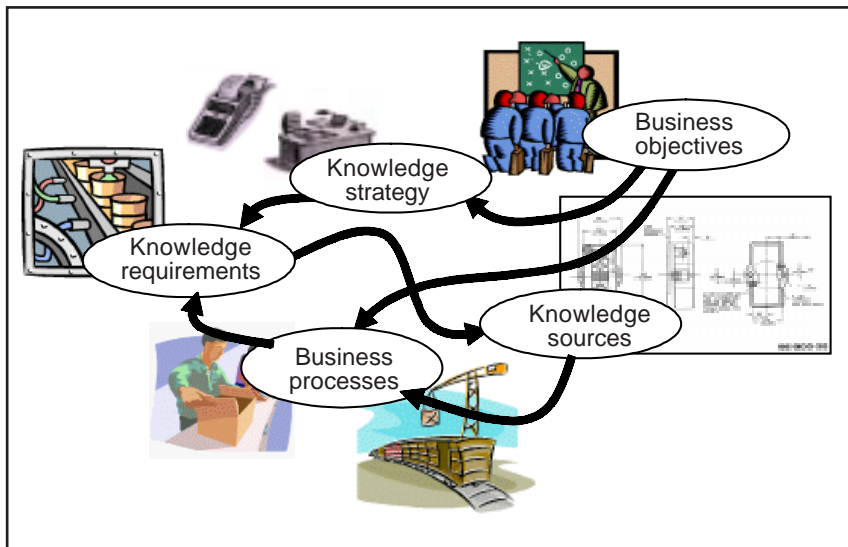
The small business, by its very nature, normally has a high degree of informal sharing of tacit knowledge. Many people contribute and have expertise in more than one functional area, and there is a tendency for employees to be multi-disciplined simply to make the business succeed. In cases where knowledge is not openly shared in the enterprise, that becomes one of the primary objectives of a knowledge management strategy.

True enterprise integration depends on the interaction of three building blocks: people, processes, and technology. These are all present at once in a successful knowledge management programme. A general knowledge management strategy can be outlined according to the architecture presented in Figure 1.

Leadership

- Knowledge management must be championed from the top of the organization. It will most likely be a disruptive technology and unfamiliar process. Executives must not only support but endorse, enforce and participate.
- The knowledge management strategy must be aligned with and mapped directly to the business strategy.

Figure 2: Elements of a knowledge map



Source: F. Caldwell, Gartner Group

- A culture of sharing and tolerance of change must be cultivated.
- Benefits, including incentives, must be clear and reinforced often.
- Identification of the big issues (that have clearly identifiable payoffs) to resolve, such as customer and product information to the sales staff when and where they need it.
- Encourage teaming and sharing at all levels and across multiple functions.
- Tolerate failure, and learn from it.

Where to start

The small and midsize businesses wanting to begin a knowledge management initiative should begin by developing key knowledge "artifacts". For example, the business objectives and strategy should be clearly and unambiguously defined, along with performance measures that are rational and for the most part quantifiable.

Next the business should attempt to define its knowledge map (Figure 2).⁶ The map addresses the generation, manipulation and application of information across the enterprise. Don't ignore outside sources and applications, such as suppliers and customers.

The knowledge map begins the process of developing a taxonomy, or method of classifying and cataloging information. Any knowledge management strategy for an SME should initially focus on identifying, organizing and harnessing the explicit knowledge of the organization.

Attempting to obtain knowledge from business employees will consume an inordinate amount, time and money, not to mention the risk of alienating them against the initiative. Focus on helping them do their jobs better,

Organization

- Assessment of key processes and core competencies helps with requirements, development and strategy mapping.
- Progress and results must be measurable across the organization.
- Re-alignment of functions may be necessary to achieve optimum results.

Technology

- Create a baseline of existing technology and map a future state that reflects business strategy.
- Make an inventory of explicit knowledge resources and the processes that create, manipulate and manage them.
- Identify technology that will accomplish business strategy.

Learning

- Provide continuous, constructive feedback across the enterprise.
- Highlight successes, and reward accordingly. Build knowledge and enthusiasm.

Table 1: Typical knowledge sources

E-mail	Memos
Data bases	Documents
Spreadsheets	Specifications
Presentations	Drawings
Client information	References
Voice mail	Ledgers
Web site content	Lists
Video	Data sheets
Minutes	Publications
Data models	Process plans

and engage them in defining what the knowledge system ought to be. Identify improvements in information or knowledge sharing that can have immediate pay off.

For example, the company may decide that increasing the ability of employees to collaborate would improve performance and result in better cash flow and increased sales. The answer may be to communicate tacit knowledge and distribute explicit knowledge faster. Thus an initial capability might be to employ instant messaging to aid with communication, coupled with a portal that allows access to documents on-line, thus providing a knowledge management solution by supporting collaboration amongst employees.

The employees will rapidly adopt such systems because they improve business and, at the end of the day, add more revenue and profit to the company and thus more money to their own pockets.

Typical knowledge management solutions for small and midsize businesses will incorporate collaboration, content-management, and search technologies based on quantification and cataloging of explicit knowledge. Table 1 shows typical information that should be catalogued for knowledge sources.

Larger or more technologically savvy businesses may desire to attempt a solution that uses both tacit and explicit knowledge. The costs and risk associated with the attempt to codify tacit knowledge must always be addressed before proceeding.

Core knowledge system elements

Good knowledge management practice requires a healthy balance be-

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Table 2: Core knowledge system elements

Access	Workflow	Collaborations
Workstations/laptops	Process	Virtual space
PDA	Models	Teams
Cell phone	Roles	Expertise locator
Other wireless	Templates	Discovery
		Mentoring
Content management	Search	Document management
Navigation	Federated	Audit ready
Cataloguing	Mediated	Authentic
Taxonomy	Assistants	Versioning
Data bases		Accessible

tween organization and agility, and a focus on delivering value to the company. These are access points, content management, workflow, search, collaboration and document management.

Access points are the means by which employees access the knowledge management system. Most companies have many such access points available, but they are not tied into a systemic, networked knowledge system. In most cases, the organization has not even created policies or procedures on how to use capabilities such as e-mail or PDAs in any integrated manner. This is a key success factor – integrating existing technology with the knowledge system. The knowledge management strategy should provide general guidelines on managing e-mail, online collaborative team rooms, instant messages, voice mailboxes, and documents to optimize access to enterprise information (Table 2).

Content management should not only address digital information, but should also provide means for helping employees locate information in other formats as well (print, non-digital video, etc.). Be aware that many view content management as simply applying to websites. In the context of knowledge management, content management should apply to more than what is posted to portals and websites. It should also involve correlating, tracking and revising pieces of content hidden in various places throughout the organization in both physical and electronic media.

Workflow is a set of software that automates business procedures. Docu-

ments, information or tasks are passed from one participant to another in a way that is governed by rules or procedures. Workflow should be integrated to the maximum extent with other applications such as accounting, sales force management, production scheduling or enterprise resource planning. However, one must keep in mind the rule-based nature of workflow solutions and be sure to factor in the ability to reconfigure easily as criteria in any selection of products.

A federated search capability allows access to information stored in file servers, databases, e-mail servers, and the Internet, from one location. Since smaller companies often have fewer resources, their employees can be faced with multiple responsibilities, making time a scarce commodity. Information demands, such as a request for proposal or quote, or questions regarding order status or sources of help for a potential new customer, can be handled as quickly as possible through a search for information and resources. The ability to search both structured and unstructured data must be kept in mind. The latter is particularly useful, when the search for bits of knowledge is dispersed across large volumes of plain text, such as archived e-mails. An example of this type of capability is TextOre, which provides a search tool, specifically for this purpose. (Their tool can be sampled at our website, www.afei.com.)

Capitalizing on organizational knowledge often results in the implementation of collaborative technology, such as instant messaging or virtual

meeting space. Both are particularly well suited to dispersed enterprises. The essence of collaboration is the collective application of a team's tacit knowledge to the creation of explicit knowledge products that further the goals of the organization. To the extent technology can support this, it ought to come under the purview of the knowledge strategy.

Document management is simply good business practice. It should be integrated into the knowledge management system. The function of document management is to manage the company's documents - and multiple versions of those documents - over an extended period of time and to make them available as required. It also involves maintaining the detailed corporate records necessary to achieve regulatory compliance. A document-management system assures access to the most current version of a document, or access to older, archived versions. By making information, documents, and their authors easily accessible, companies can make quicker and better-informed business decisions. In the USA, document management has become critical since the passage of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which requires retention, in authentic form, of documents on which corporate decisions are made, and which affect shareholder value.

Benefits

What are the benefits of knowledge management for the SME? Clearly, from the title of this article the answer is to enhance competitive advantage. But what, exactly, does that mean in the context of the business climate we presently face? Two obvious benefits are improved efficiency and effectiveness. Improving efficiency means being able to make better use of scarce resources, having tighter control over costs and waste, and doing it right the first time. Better distribution of knowledge throughout the enterprise makes this possible. The applicable type of metric in this case is quantity.

Furthermore, having better access to knowledge allows organizations to do the right thing, improving its effectiveness. Improved, streamlined processes mean not only efficiency, but also mean eliminating non-value added ac-

tivity and getting to the right solution without trial-and-error guess work. The applicable metric here is quality.

In an era where competition is fierce, it must be said that while worthy, there is nothing very remarkable about these two benefits. Every competent organization must strive to do better in these areas. However, there is a benefit to practical knowledge management that can move an organization ahead of its competition.

An adaptive enterprise: The real benefit

In the environment described earlier in this article, organizations survive if they can be agile, responding appropriately to unpredictable external factors, whether local or global, and internal circumstances. They become good at adapting themselves to changing conditions. But since much in the way of change is unpredictable, the response cannot be planned for.

This really is a conundrum for modern business strategy. How can an organization plan to adapt to every unforeseen circumstance? It can't. Instead it must learn to deal with uncertainty, and to be able to adapt to changes as they are detected. An adaptive enterprise is one that is not stuck in pre-determined patterns of behavior, but makes adjustments to strategy and tactics to react to changes, or to re-invent itself to pursue whole new opportunities. The key tool in constructing the adaptive enterprise is the ability to know yourself, your people, the competition and the environment. Stephan

Haeckel, author of *Adaptive Enterprise* states: "An enterprise's ability to adapt depends on how it processes information."⁷ Thus it is the decisions that the organization makes, based on information and knowledge, that determines if it is adapting appropriately to uncertainty.

Faster and better decisions: The competitive advantage

One can conclude that the ability for organizations to make accurate decisions is, in large part, based on what they know, and that this can be enhanced by a practical application of knowledge management. But how does this yield competitive advantage?

Some insight can be derived from the theories and work of Col. John Boyd.⁸ Col. Boyd was an Air Force pilot and Pentagon maverick who developed a way of thinking about strategy that he called the OODA loop. (Boyd is also credited as being the father of the F-16). OODA stands for observe-orient-decide-act. It addresses the ability to interact with the environment and to make decisions faster than the competition. This is called "getting inside the OODA loop." If you can adapt and make decisions that improve speed to market, customer responsiveness, and operational efficiency quicker than the competition, you have competitive advantage.

Grant T. Hammond wrote the following about the OODA loop theory: "Knowledge of the strategic environment is the first priority. Secondly, one must be able to interact with the environment and those within it appropriately. It's all

about rapid assessment and adaptation to a complex and rapidly changing environment that you can't control!"

Conclusion

Better decisions are the primary benefit of having a practical knowledge management system. For the SME, knowledge management must be applied in a practical, business-oriented approach. Done properly, it will yield results in short order. The primary emphasis should be given to organizing and making available appropriate explicit knowledge accessible through various electronic and physical means. Knowledge management is not a technology initiative, it is a workforce initiative that employs technology to improve worker performance.

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Asian Knowledge Management Award

The Asian Knowledge Management Award has been developed by the Asian Knowledge Management Association to enhance competitiveness and to promote business excellence in Asian firms to meet the challenges of global knowledge-based competition. The Award aims to:

- Establish guidelines and criteria that can be used by business and industrial firms, government and other organizations to practise effective knowledge management for the improvement of their overall performance;
- Stimulate and assist organizations throughout Asia to participate in knowledge management activities, leading to an increased role of knowledge, technology and learning in the performance of Asian firms; and
- Recognize the achievements of firms that adopt world-class knowledge management practices and provide an example to others.

The Asian Knowledge Management Award is given to the following: ● Individuals/Service organizations ● Manufacturing organizations ● Individuals who have conducted excellent research in the theory or application of knowledge ● Management or those who have made remarkable contributions to the dissemination of knowledge management.

For more information, contact:

Asian Knowledge Management Association
3/F Max Share Centre, 367-373 King's Road, North Point, Hong Kong SAR
Tel: (+852) 2512 0113; Fax: (+852) 2570 4207; E-mail: info@akma.com.hk