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Driving Smart

The Accidental Knowledge Manager

To get people who never asked for the responsibility to embrace a KM project, top management must lead the way.

By Peter Dorfman

A corporate knowledge management initiative can have many unforeseen effects on management and staff. At one site, knowledge workers will welcome the effort, anticipating the benefits and pitching in as both users of and contributors to the knowledge pool. Yet at another site in the same company, the KM project may meet with skepticism and confusion.

At one large retailer that launched its KM program three years ago, the response was a quiet revolt. "We were plotting its downfall," recalls a veteran of that experience in the IT department's help desk group. "We agreed among ourselves not to use the tool or submit content to it. I eventually began to soften, but my buddies were actively trying to sabotage the project."

It's not hard to see why this company prefers to remain anonymous. What could produce such a hostile response to a progressive management initiative? In this case, the primary problem was stunningly bad communication. Relations between the support team and management already had been deteriorating for some time before the project began. Consultants began showing up for closed-door meetings with executives. By the time management asked the support staff to work with the consultants, rumors were flying. "We sincerely thought management had a plan to get rid of tech support," the former staffer says. "We felt they were going to take our knowledge and then dump us."

The KM project was eventually accepted, but a number of the covert saboteurs, who under different circumstances might have been essential contributors to the project, left the company, taking their knowledge with them.

Blueprint for failure

This unfortunate example is extreme but not unique. In many organizations, top managers conceive a KM project, then drop its execution into the laps of supervisors and knowledge workers who are at best incompletely trained for it. Like the help desk agents, those people become accidental knowledge managers (AKMs), to borrow the title from Anne Tyler's novel *The Accidental Tourist*, about a popular travel writer whose secret of success paradoxically is that he hates to travel.

Too often, KM projects are imposed on people who have other jobs to do and whose performance is measured against objectives unrelated to their new responsibilities in authoring and using knowledge. KM essentially just happens to them. They are expected to fashion their own roles in the initiative and are given little or no guidance, training or documentation. They may be saddled with sketchy expectations, undocumented processes and no benchmarks against which to measure success. As a result, knowledge workers resist the initiative. They worry that if they spend time managing knowledge, their careers will suffer.

One company that has had success in avoiding knowledge management accidents is Enterprise Rent-A-Car. Based in St. Louis, the company employs some 40,000 people, operates over 4,500 rental branch offices in the United States, Canada, the United Kingdom, Ireland and Germany, and has a fleet of more than 500,000 vehicles.

Its field support department provides support for technology-related problems to all Enterprise employees worldwide. Deanna Harris, assistant vice president for technical support, who has run the department for six years, began KM efforts three years ago. "We understood the value of capturing and sharing knowledge," she says. "Support people were needlessly reinventing solutions to old problems. We knew we could reduce our overall costs and improve operational efficiency by removing the need for these redundant efforts."

At the start, Harris found that employees wanted tangible evidence of the value of the initiative. "From the beginning we needed to get everyone together and develop a KM solution as a team," she says. "You have to break it down to specifics, phases and tactics and show people exactly what's in this for them."

As in most organizations, there was trepidation about change. Some customer support analysts (CSAs) feared that management was attempting to change their mission from being a help desk to being merely a call center, where they were expected to read solutions from cue cards and pass along anything complex to more experienced technicians. "Our biggest challenge with this initiative was buy-in: to get the people to believe, to participate

