



THE ROLE OF THE CKO FROM A FORMER CKO

This sidebar was written for inclusion in

The Knowledge Management Fieldbook (Wendi R Bukowitz & Ruth L Williams)

Financial Times/Prentice Hall, 1999

Chapter 8. Build and Sustain – Point of View (Victoria Ward)

“It’s a kind of Cheshire Cat. The programme should appear, catalyze, analyze, reorganize, and then disappear slowly, with the smile as the last thing to fade.”

The NatWest Knowledge Management Programme was developed with these risks in mind:

1. Credibility and position in the enterprise. The programme is often positioned around human resources, training or technology. It is run and seen as a support function by people without operating experience. The chief executive espouses the cause of knowledge management with passion but does not invest any of his or her own time in it.
2. Reach, scalability, and speed. It is hard for the knowledge team to reach out from the corporate centre and influence the whole enterprise. Knowledge projects are often isolated, sometimes accidental successes, and not rapidly scaleable to impact the whole enterprise or easy to replicate in business areas with very different characteristics.
3. Short-termism. A knowledge management program can be a well-meaning, but disconnected strand in a series of activities designed to change the culture in the organization. Cultural change takes 5 – 10 years to effect in a sustainable way, but knowledge projects are set the task of paying off in months. Not only are they supposed to pay off in hard benefits, or ‘soft’ benefits whose hard impact is well understood; they may also be vying for attention with other organizational projects. Short-termism also means that the reasons for success or failure in different projects are badly understood because of the urgent need to get ‘quick wins’ under the belt – with subtle but significant damaging consequences.
4. Poor business management skills in business heads. Businesses are managed on a short term, transactional basis by managers who see the development of effective information strategies as information technology projects, not information system projects. The way a project is initiated and managed at the outset misses key skills and tools which are necessary for success, such as coaching and information science and design skills.

5. Poor business skills in the knowledge team. The knowledge team does not run the knowledge programme like a business in its own right. Because there is often little business experience in the knowledge team there is a lack of hard edged analysis in the selection of an appropriate portfolio of projects, and at best a partial understanding of risk taking.
6. Poor branding and communications strategy. The knowledge programme, given its restricted ability to command and control in almost any enterprise, is forced back onto strategies to influence and create demand, either for the direct services and products of the team, or for knowledge management more generally. Implementation occurs in the business units where understanding of, and commitment to, the programme is likely to be at best fuzzy and at worst non-existent, even hostile.
7. Organizational baggage. ‘We’ve already tried that and it didn’t work last time’.

The NatWest Knowledge Management Program was conceived as a two year, three-phase programme (outlined follows). We felt strongly that this three part, investigative, pragmatic, evidence-based approach was right. We also felt that the fake/real, temporary/permanent, field/centralized, dynamic needed to be understood.

- **Fake/real:** rather than getting caught up in building a sophisticated prototype for an Intranet, we slapped together a “fake” one. It looked fake and it did not really work. By doing this, we could spend our time talking to people about what the real one should look like and do, instead of defending a prototype that we couldn’t possibly get right the first time.
- **Temporary/permanent:** all structures in organizations should be temporary, in fact, and that is certainly true for knowledge management structures. We deliberately aimed for a nomadic feel for the first phases.
- **Field/centralized:** there is merit in identifying the knowledge management programme as a separate strand where it can have reach, influence, and independence. However, there is also merit in hiding it in substantially well-run pieces of the organization. The issue is timing. It can be better to separate it out when it has some momentum, not at the outset when it is trying to break through. Or a project such as the creation of a directory can be deliberately positioned as a central knowledge project to draw attention to certain issues. Each aspect of the programme should be open for re-integration or separation at every stage. Willingness to see where a knowledge management programme goes based on what happens takes a uniquely unterritorial and highly supported approach. It is not a process for the faint of heart.

Phase One. (first six months)

- Conduct a couple of small-scale pilots
- Develop at least one broad-based tool such as a series of directories and resource guides to information that was otherwise hard to locate
- Establish the knowledge management team and create an intranet for the team as a clearinghouse, repository and communications vehicle
- Audit all knowledge-management related work in progress,
- Create a map to find knowledge “nodes” and programme cheerleaders
- Commandeer the library as a physical and skills base from which to extend the team’s reach
- Attract additional team members
- Manage the growing collection of learnings

Phase Two. (middle twelve months)

- Conduct a ‘wave’ 8-10 pilots building on previous learnings
- Consolidate, iterate, and develop the broad-based tools
- Forge common interests among those involved in duplicative or competing projects by creating a ‘safe’ space in which they could start to share ideas and consider common solutions to common problems.
- Consolidate business skills in the team – we envisioned each pilot as a new entity in which we invested venture capital for the entire enterprise. Individual businesses received immediate benefit. The knowledge team captured learnings which it could reinvest in other business areas.
- Conduct benchmarking to develop a model for a decentralized knowledge team
- Establish formal links, partnerships, and joint ventures with the business areas, other support functions and external suppliers.

Phase Three. (final six months)

- Collate and review all the evidence to determine where to go next. Choices moving forward were:
 - reintegrate the strands into the business
 - pass the programme or individual initiatives over to different groups
 - retain the knowledge management core team and position it as a separate, for-profit, nomadic, enterprise-wide think tank operating as an affinity business.

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