

*The SMR Knowledge Services e-Profile*  
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## **Sheldon Ross of Swiss Re: Managing in a Knowledge-Friendly Environment**



“There’s an organic approach to knowledge at Swiss Re,” says Sheldon Ross, Americas Head of Group Knowledge and Records Management (GKRM) at Swiss Re. “Throughout the company, there is – and has always been – an understanding that proactively managing and using knowledge and information to create a competitive advantage is critical to the success of the organization. It’s in our corporate culture. That is an integral part of the success of what we do in the department I manage, Swiss Re’s Group Knowledge and Records Management Americas Hub. At Swiss Re, the work we do is not approached as a new initiative. It is what we are here to do, and it has been here all along.”

Ross came to Swiss Re in 1998. He was brought in to start up an information/library function for the U.S. office. He was charged with building on the company’s long-standing commitment to knowledge development and knowledge sharing (KD/KS)—actually several years before the concept came into the knowledge services picture—while providing traditional research and library support for Swiss Re’s developing ‘New Markets’ business. Ross was tasked with identifying what was needed, then with building the staff and structure. That also meant giving attention to enterprise and operational risk management, which might be considered, on several levels, to be similar to the general knowledge services concept of enterprise content management.

In building the knowledge function in the Americas, Ross found that the company’s inherent approach to KM/knowledge services gave him a strong foundation for leveraging his own ideas. With support from Sandra Gisin, Global Head of Knowledge and Records Management activities at Swiss Re, and Rudi Frei, Head of Corporate History, Ross recognized early on that the company’s respect for knowledge management was in itself a valuable advantage for him.

Today the Americas Hub is no longer a one-person library; it has been expanded to include records management and corporate archives. Structured to support the company’s knowledge and records management operations throughout the United States, Canada, and South America, the Hub and its libraries are part of the larger Swiss Re picture. This picture includes the main Zurich-based operations and a regional hub in Hong Kong. Now the largest company in the world selling insurance to insurance companies as a result of buying the General Electric Company’s reinsurance business for \$6.8 billion (announced November 18, 2005), Swiss Re provides reinsurance products and financial services that enable risk taking essential to enterprise and progress. Swiss Re prides itself on its state-of-the-art corporate governance and related transparency. The company’s long history of sharing knowledge and expertise with clients and other stakeholders explains why KM/knowledge services is not a particularly new or novel component of the corporate picture.

Like all industries, reinsurance has its own terminology and its own culture. Reinsurers employ enterprise risk management (ERM) as an essential tool for their organizations. ERM frames the work in the reinsurance industry, just as enterprise content management (ECM) frames the work that knowledge services managers bring to their organizations. For Ross, it is a happy marriage of ECM and ERM concepts that enable high standards of service delivery at Swiss Re.

“ERM is a vital concept in our day-to-day operation—we strive to manage and deliver knowledge and information in a manner that effectively reduces the risk that our professionals make decisions without correct or actionable information or knowledge.” Ross said. “We apply traditional library skills and expertise to corporate reputational and operational initiatives like sourcing, records retention, email retrieval, information distribution and the global dissemination of best practices.”

KM is understood and practiced in a wide variety of ways within Swiss Re. “Knowledge is a critical corporate asset,” Ross said. “That means we must manage the development of new processes and tools, set standards and produce guidelines that will not only support Swiss Re’s existing and future business but also guarantee a return on Swiss Re’s investment in supporting a corporate KM culture. Additionally, we’re required to demonstrate where the value lies, which we do when we focus on topics such as the risk of copyright infringement, records retention, content sourcing or compliance with Sarbanes-Oxley. Most management teams are concerned about these kinds of ERM/KM issues. Today, you must be able to speak management’s language and explain operational and reputational risk aspects of what you do. You can easily put a figure and metrics on what the company would lose if attention is not paid.”

That reference to Sarbanes-Oxley is not just idle conversation. Throughout corporate America, the Sarbanes-Oxley Act of 2002 (often referred to as “SOX” or “SarboX”) has changed the way companies do business. Requiring that public companies evaluate and disclose “the effectiveness of their internal controls as they relate to financial reporting,” as one description puts it, this wide-ranging legislation means that corporate compliance in financial oversight is not a matter of choice. For Ross and GKRM, this new focus positions records management, information sourcing and information management as top corporate risks for which they are responsible. Luckily, with a KD/KS process already in place, such compliance efforts seem more reasonable, a situation used to GKRM’s benefit.

“Of course,” Ross said. “In this environment, we naturally give a certain amount of attention to establishing the value of what we do by ensuring that our work is recognized as being part of the larger corporate enterprise risk management picture.”

Not surprisingly, establishing value for the KD/KS process requires some tweaking from time to time, but Ross is comfortable talking about how he does it, which he describes with a smile.

“For us to be successful,” he said, “we need to be clear on where we add value to Swiss Re and be able to articulate it in a manner that management and staff can understand. Others in the organization must understand where we add value. Yes, knowledge is very much a tradition at Swiss Re, and yes, the value of knowledge is well established, but sometimes it requires a certain type of communication to help management understand the work of KM staff—we have to help them along by speaking their language.”

“Swiss Re is the foremost reinsurance company in the world, and as such, we should have the foremost KS/KM in the world.” Actively supporting and guiding information, records, and knowledge use throughout the organization is an essential part of the picture,” Ross emphasizes.

“Our vision has two facets. First, we are seeking to create self-service platforms. Of course what we do as knowledge services professionals is important, and we recognize that, but at the same time, from our customers’ point of view, we are just one more corporate asset. To maximize the return on that asset, it is important that we identify services which can be automated and instead, focus on the areas where our professional training and expertise return maximum value to Swiss Re. In the end, there should be a set of information and knowledge services right in peoples’ workflows, provided at the desktop just like the telephone and the computer. From that perspective, what we do cannot be a separate operation. We need to partner with the business professionals, create an ongoing dialogue and identify risks and offer solutions. Our services and our professional expertise are there to make people more effective and efficient. In short, our job is not only serve or make resources available but also help make the cash register ring.”

At the same time, Ross takes pleasure in describing the second part of the GKRM vision. It is a role that is needed and is slowly becoming more recognized throughout the company. “Instead of only providing services in a traditional sense, like maintaining a library or staffing a research center, we seek a role of greater inclusion based on a deeper recognition of the value of KM concepts. We are driving toward GKRM participation in strategic corporate initiatives, early on in the planning stages. We want the information/knowledge/learning components recognized on the front-end and not as an afterthought.”

Ross offers examples, “GKRM not only drives records and knowledge management. We also participate in several important strategic initiatives; e-mail retention (particularly in terms of corporate risk, of course) and Web-based conferencing.”

Additionally, Ross hopes GKRM eventually becomes part of the Swiss Re Global IT Roundtable, the group that has to approve all projects with an IT component. “Being involved in the development phase and raising strategic KM questions,” he says, “will not only sensitize developers but also support the expansion of our knowledge culture.”

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Whether looking at records retention or knowledge services, it is a concept that looks at enterprise content management as well as enterprise risk management. As Ross explains it, the whole idea “really goes beyond ECM and ERM because we have a holistic KM approach, and we have begun to apply it.....”

His voice trails off, but it is obvious that this kind of thinking, this level of being interested in the much-talked-about “big picture” describes the KM role that Ross and GKRM see themselves playing at Swiss Re.

“It all connects to that long-term commitment to knowledge as a competitive advantage,” Ross says. “I came to Swiss Re not only because I was going to build something, but because the company understands the competitive value of knowledge and the place of KM as an established corporate function. And it’s been a big success.”

How successful?

Ross does not hesitate.

“We established a strong local presence at a time where the home office typically set the tone and direction,” he says. “Everything was based on the corporate office in Zurich, and we took the best of that model and adapted it to the Americas. We can tell that we are successful, not just in the way our services are used by our clients, although that kind of monitoring and measuring is a standard part of what we do. We have an even easier test. We call it the ‘elevator test.’ It’s not hard to do. In many organizations, what happens when someone asks, ‘where is the library?’ They just get a blank stare. Not here. Here everyone in the company knows where the library is. It’s not a secret, not hidden away. It’s part of the corporate framework.”

Ross says, “Swiss Re is the number one reinsurer in the world. In many respects, the company is ahead of the curve. I figured out that what I needed to do was to meet with people, to speak with people working in the forefront of this effort, and figure out how I could work with them. It’s all here in the company. I just had to go look for it.”

But what about the barriers? Many knowledge workers worry about not being “allowed” to do what they need to do, because other things get in the way, things like corporate politics. How does one deal with corporate politics in such a huge organization, with such important responsibilities?

“You don’t worry about the politics,” Ross says, happy to advise any other knowledge services professionals who will listen. “I came to work here because of the culture of the organization, because the organization respects knowledge and knowledge management. My job is to focus on innovation and results and that’s what I do.”

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