

# KNOWLEDGE SERVICES

## YOUR FOUNDATION FOR BUILDING THE TWENTY- FIRST-CENTURY KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION

*by Guy St. Clair*

**A**s pointed out by President Barack Obama and other leaders in recent years, knowledge is the currency of the twenty-first century. Most organizations, though, are not yet prepared and struggle with a particular challenge: How does the organization manage what its people know? How do knowledge workers share and use the facts, truths, and principles they must have at hand in order to do their work? In many (if not most) organizations, knowledge is not shared as well as it should be. And generally speaking, not much attention is given to how what people know influences organizational success. Now, as the sheer volume of information, knowledge, and strategic learning content has increased in all communities, institutions, and organizations, impeded knowledge sharing has become extremely expensive, no matter how the cost is measured. Think about “big data” or all the concern about keeping up with the much-talked-about (and much-written-about) “information overload.” Enterprise leaders continue to be perplexed as they seek to find a solution to the dire state of knowledge sharing in the organizations for which they are responsible, and most agree that knowledge management (KM) alone is not the solution.

Many of us thought KM *would* be the solution we were looking for, but our optimism was short-lived as KM passed from the conceptual to the “How does this work in my company?” stage. Why? One of the major reasons is that the sharing of knowledge is specific to the environment or organization; there is no single solution for knowledge sharing that will work in all organizations, and much of the effort in KM appears to focus on one-size-fits-all solutions. It doesn’t work. Each organization’s vision, mission, and values is different, established to support that organization’s individual objectives. So it is

almost impossible to come up with a KM solution that can work in a wide variety of organizations.

Still, some versions of KM have been developed, with varying levels of success, but there continue to be issues. One problem has to do with the popular people-process-technology concept for the successful integration of anything related to the management of information, knowledge, and strategic learning. That ideal—that integration—has become somewhat skewed, because as we sought to apply the concept in the knowledge domain we forgot to connect to one of Peter Drucker’s basic principles, that “management is about human beings” (as quoted in Elizabeth Haas Edersheim’s book *The Definitive Drucker*). But when managers attempted to figure out how to share knowledge with KM, they did not get very far, and many organizations moving to KM ended up focusing almost exclusively on technology and process.

So we are not yet in a position to assert that an organization’s information, knowledge, and strategic learning are shared to the extent the organization, its stakeholders, and its affiliates require. We know that most organizations need better knowledge sharing to master the challenges of the twenty-first century, not only enterprise-wide but also within (and between) individual departments and business units. We seek a knowledge-sharing solution that is practical, applicable in a wide range of organizational types, and—as important as any process or technology adopted for its implementation—a solution that focuses on the people who will lead and manage its application as an organizational practice and those who will be most affected by its adoption. The solution is knowledge services.

## Knowledge Sharing Through Knowledge Services

Kevin Manion at SunTrust bank understands knowledge sharing as “the very core of how we lead our business,” referring to knowledge sharing as the “key concept of business leadership.” Knowledge sharing, he says,

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## *The solution is knowledge services.*

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...needs to be woven into the very culture of the organization. Leadership that does not promote a knowledge-sharing culture is far less likely to succeed in reaching the firm’s full potential and, by extension, to attract and retain the talent needed to grow and innovate beyond competitors. Knowledge sharing is a powerful differentiating factor in our increasingly competitive environment.

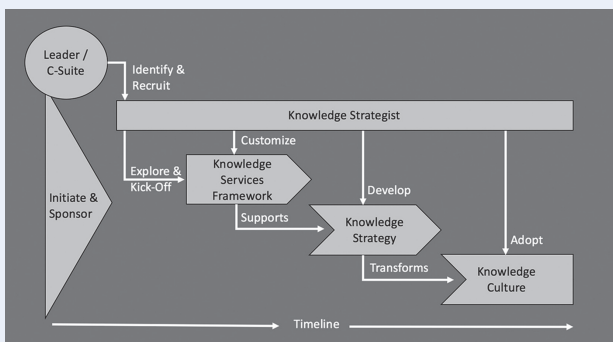
Knowledge sharing begins with knowledge services, an approach to knowledge sharing that converges information management (including technology management), knowledge management, and strategic learning into a single enterprise-wide discipline. (Knowledge services as a management methodology is spoken of as a single entity, a compound subject. As such, we apply the singular verb when we speak of knowledge services.) Indeed, as knowledge services includes KM as one of its three pillars, the discipline obviously connects with KM. Dale Stanley, formerly with Gilead Sciences, makes that clear: “Knowledge services,” Stanley says, “enables enterprise leaders to ‘put KM to work’—it’s the practical side of knowledge management.”

The purpose of knowledge services is to ensure the highest levels of knowledge sharing within the organization in which it is practiced, with leadership for knowledge sharing the responsibility of the knowledge strategist, the management employee who uses knowledge services as a foundation for creating (or strengthening) the organization’s knowledge culture. As a management discipline, knowledge services contributes to organizational success as workers improve knowledge sharing across the enterprise.

In doing so, they establish knowledge services as supporting the organizational or business mission, leading to overall company success.

## The Knowledge Strategist

Knowledge services, though, is not the end of the game. In fact, knowledge services is only the beginning, used by the knowledge strategist to transform the larger organization. This manager develops the objectives of the knowledge strategy and then proceeds with designing implementation plans for how these objectives are to be achieved through the enterprise-wide adoption of knowledge services. A first step is an attempt to provide an honest response to the inevitable “Why do we need a knowledge strategist?” question. The answer takes the organization back to the “Why?” for knowledge strategy itself: organizational success requires an established environment for knowledge sharing, and it is the organization’s knowledge strategy that provides the blueprint and guidelines for ensuring that information, knowledge, and strategic learning are managed for the organization’s benefit. With a knowledge strategy in place, all stakeholders and affiliates come to understand the value of knowledge for organizational success, establishing the knowledge services/knowledge strategy function as a critical element in the enterprise-wide organizational structure and leading inevitably to the development of the organization as a knowledge culture, as shown in Figure 1.



**FIGURE 1. TRANSFORMING YOUR ORGANIZATION INTO THE SUCCESSFUL TWENTY-FIRST-CENTURY KNOWLEDGE ORGANIZATION**

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*“Why do we need a knowledge strategist?”*

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With a knowledge culture, all the pieces fall readily into place. At Microsoft, Nishan DeSilva believes that when the company functions as a knowledge culture, the leadership role of the knowledge strategist becomes even more important, positioning that employee to move knowledge-related projects forward. DeSilva notes that there are wide variations in awareness about the value and the importance of the knowledge-sharing function, and in looking at the overall organizational ambiance for success with knowledge sharing, “the company’s structure as a knowledge culture has great influence in policy development.” The knowledge strategist brings that influence into play.

Another important attribute of the work of the knowledge strategist is that the job provides a valuable opportunity for ensuring that all parties have the tools and content they require, enabling them to contribute to organizational success. Victoria Harriston at the National Academies of Sciences, Engineering, and Medicine in Washington, D.C., thinks so. She is absolutely certain that the more that knowledge services is applied across the overall enterprise, the better.

I want to embed knowledge services in every part of the organization. That’s my goal. And I particularly want knowledge services to be a critical component in the readily visible parts of the organization. I want the knowledge services staff to partner and collaborate wherever knowledge services is required. That’s the strategic direction I’ve chosen and it’s what I’m trying to bring to the National Academies.

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*All the pieces fall readily  
into place.*

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## Knowledge Services: The Leader's Role

In addition to the knowledge strategist's efforts, others with established management and leadership responsibilities must take an active role in raising awareness and participate in advancing knowledge services throughout the organization. Initially, the leader has to learn about the concept of knowledge services and get the ball rolling by, for example, reading this article or observing a department or affiliated company adopting the knowledge services framework. Being aware of the benefits and looking at the successful adoption of knowledge services elsewhere creates commitment for transforming the leader's own organization into a knowledge culture. Two critical tasks are required. The knowledge strategist must identify existing knowledge-sharing functions within the organization and, at the same time, identify suitable coworkers willing to participate in developing the knowledge services framework. The first is completed by assessing the knowledge-sharing success (or lack of it) in the identified knowledge-focused organizational units. This management exercise (usually referred to as a "knowledge services audit") establishes the background for developing the knowledge services framework. The second activity, identifying colleagues who demonstrate an interest in working with the knowledge strategist in moving to "better" or "higher-level" knowledge sharing, is achieved as the audit is performed. Indeed, it is a fairly common experience that when the audit is taking place, colleagues will make themselves known and in many cases ask to participate, often simply because they have already recognized that

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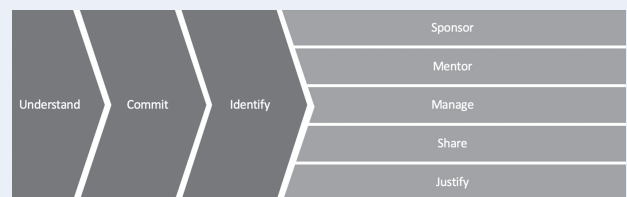
*Two critical tasks are  
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information, knowledge, and strategic learning can be shared better in their own workplace. And from a more positive perspective, employees already working in successful knowledge-focused units will quickly become interested in the adoption of the knowledge services framework. They, too, will prove helpful as the organization transforms into a knowledge culture.

From that point on, leaders play five active roles in supporting the transformation: sponsoring, mentoring, managing the change, sharing, and justifying, as shown in Figure 2. As a *sponsor*, the leader promotes the value of a particular knowledge-sharing initiative and expresses enthusiasm for its development and implementation. Moreover, the leader models the activity, perhaps by establishing it as a desirable tool or technique for use in the sponsor's workplace. Finally, the leader-as-sponsor reinforces and rewards the development of the initiative by ensuring that all stakeholders understand that the initiative is to be undertaken and implemented. At the same time, participants are rewarded by having the sense that their participation is recognized as a contribution to organizational success.

As a *mentor* the leader provides guidance to his or her mentee so that the employee can accomplish the



**FIGURE 2.** THE LEADER'S KNOWLEDGE SERVICES ROLE

organization-wide adoption of the knowledge services framework required for the knowledge strategy to succeed. Part of this effort (not surprisingly) requires the leader to focus on *managing the change*, which means overseeing the adoption process and installing measurements of the success of the change toward a knowledge culture.

As part of the leader's awareness-raising responsibility in *sharing* the knowledge services concept, noted previously, the leader must ensure that the "idea" of knowledge sharing is incorporated into the organization's strategic learning program. In this role, the leader approves—with appropriate organization staff—a strategic learning initiative to make knowledge workers familiar with the wide range of activities relating to knowledge services and knowledge sharing. Concurrently (probably by using known experts and the organization's existing communication framework), the leader embarks on a campaign to disseminate information about the value of knowledge sharing and knowledge services throughout the larger organization.

Last, the leader *justifies* support for knowledge services among the C-suite and other high-ranking executives to create buy-in from all relevant parties and ensure that utilizing the knowledge strategy is a priority at the highest organizational level. Progress metrics and continuous reporting of success will help to make the case for the adoption of the knowledge services framework enterprise-wide and allow the organization's transformation into a knowledge culture.

## Knowledge Services Best Practices: An Example

When dealing with organizational knowledge, one of the advantages of moving forward with a relatively new perspective is that some problems or situations not solved successfully in the past now become strong candidates for "the new way." Such has been the case with knowledge services and the establishment of knowledge strategy as an organizational function.

A fine example is the knowledge strategy developed for and implemented at the United Nations Human

Settlements Programme, headquartered in Nairobi, Kenya. UN-Habitat (the more common name) is the UN agency working toward a better urban future. As noted on the UN-Habitat website, its mission is "to promote socially and environmentally sustainable human settlements development and the achievement of adequate shelter for all."

At UN-Habitat, agency leaders recognized that the agency's success depends on how well its knowledge is managed and used. Accordingly, in 2009 and 2010 efforts were undertaken to develop a knowledge strategy. Agency leaders authorized a wide-ranging and comprehensive knowledge services audit to develop the background all stakeholders required. When completed, the findings of the audit led to important recommendations for future action and the development of basic knowledge-sharing principles focusing on UN-Habitat's role as a purpose-driven and service-oriented organization. As part of this effort, the agency identified a new vision for future strength and committed UN-Habitat to specific enhancements, including improved internal collaboration, empowered staff, and a new way forward that included stronger efficiency, effectiveness, and accountability. Among the vision's stated goals were strengthened capacity for staff and partners to "share, reuse, and create" information and knowledge, an aspiration that led to the development and implementation of a knowledge network system for sustainable urbanization and actionable planning for leveraging sustainable urbanization in countries throughout the world.

## Conclusion

At this point in time, as organizations move into the knowledge era of the twenty-first century, there is no longer any question about the need for managing and encouraging knowledge sharing. Knowledge management has been one approach, but KM is not always the best solution. Certainly by the late 1990s, many managers and enterprise leaders felt a sense of futility in speaking about "managing" knowledge because their responsibilities required dealing with knowledge sharing in more practical terms. Achieving



successful information management, knowledge management, and strategic learning became a challenge.

I took up the challenge. In our consulting practice my colleagues and I heard organizational leaders describe their struggles to find a solution to the knowledge-sharing problem (often an enterprise-wide problem), and we decided we needed to do something about it. As we spoke with executives we realized that they understood some of the concepts relating to managing information (especially technology management) and strategic learning, but the idea of “managing” knowledge continued to be a barrier. We concluded that the difficulty was probably related to fact that the “people” element of the widespread “people-process-technology” idea was being neglected. When we explained knowledge management and connected KM to their work with their people who managed information and strategic learning, the enterprise leaders got it. My colleagues and I found we could speak with executives about knowledge-related issues in terms of services required for solving their problems (as opposed to managing knowledge), a context that gave these decision makers a new perspective for thinking about information, knowledge, and strategic learning in ways they could measure and for which they could identify tangible benefits. Knowledge services came into the management lexicon.

This is the important distinction. With knowledge services the organization’s leaders recognize and understand the role of the people who are leading their organizations in addressing issues relating to the knowledge domain. Together with their knowledge strategists, knowledge specialists, and knowledge workers—employees and affiliates embracing knowledge sharing as a solution—leaders are now able to bring the highest levels of knowledge sharing to their organizations. They and their employees embrace continual and ongoing conversation, discussion, continuous learning, and the establishment of the

organization as a knowledge culture (in whatever “version” matches the needs of their workplace). As they embrace knowledge services, leaders arrive at the solutions their companies need. At the same time, they strengthen the people-process-technology alignment. This requires making sure that everyone on every team and in every business unit, department, and division of the organization understands and feels that he or she has a personal and professional role to play in building the successful twenty-first-century knowledge organization.



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