

Enablers and Barriers to Knowledge Management for SMEs



A Department of Trade and Industry (DTI) Partners in Innovation Programme funded project

An Approach to Knowledge Management for SMEs



PROMOTING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

This knowledge management approach, called Knowledge-Event Management, has three stages: event-collection, debriefing-analysis and dissemination. (Leaflets on each of these are available). The Approach was designed around the needs of SMEs so that it would work with the way that they operate and not require substantive extra resources for it to deliver successful learning. SMEs need different sources and types of knowledge as their concerns are substantively operational with an emphasis on survival and cash flow. Their knowledge is small, oral, tacit and contextual with any approach to knowledge management delivering immediate outputs. Thus, this project has utilised simple technology and works on the immediate experience of managers.

The project has captured 264 events and undertaken 109 debriefings from 12 SMEs. These have delivered immediate knowledge to the individual participants and through company workshops used the knowledge-events to enhance the knowledge around the companies. A number of the companies have used the technique themselves and have developed the approach to be appropriate to their circumstances.

Barriers and enablers have been raised both from the events themselves and also the problems participants had in operating the approach. The latter were gleaned from questioning during debriefing and through a questionnaire at the company workshops. Removal of a barrier will become an enabler. Successful knowledge management operates through enablers at company, project and individual level.

ENABLERS FROM BARRIERS

Barriers and enablers exist at industry, company, project, and individual levels. Some enablers require work at all four levels.

1. Industry

Construction work is project-based, short-term and task-oriented, promoting a culture where continuous learning is inhibited. The industry needs to promote a wider understanding of itself rather than focus all the time on specific training. An industry culture of learning and knowledge management would assist the lower levels to undertake it.

2. Company

Sharing experience and knowledge is not part of most jobs, thus it is not appraised and so not taken seriously. Knowledge in companies currently relates closely to power and job security. People working in construction are happy to talk to outsiders (like in this research) about their problems, but many of them are reluctant to do so with their own managers or someone from their own company.

People can learn more from mistakes, but due to the rigid management processes, people are not empowered to try new things and learn. The blame culture is pervasive in construction industry. Companies can start to remove the blame culture and to value knowledge sharing.

Thus, senior management in the company and practitioners should realise the importance of knowledge management practice and put it as at least one of their priorities, and allocate specific time.

ENABLERS FROM BARRIERS

3. Project

Constant time and cost pressure causes people to search for quick fixes to their problems and then move on to the next problem. They do not have time to slow down and reflect on their experience to establish root causes. In the end, the same mistakes are repeated. This Knowledge Management Approach overcomes this barrier and the participants agree that it is a good way to learn by reflecting their own experience and discussing it with others.

4. Individual

Knowledge management is not just the duty of knowledge manager but needs to involve all members of an organisation. Valuing each individual's unique experience and skills in handling their day-to-day work is an enabler of knowledge management. Everyone has something to share and to contribute in the knowledge management practice. Individuals benefit from learning to take a wider view of their work and the development of skills in debriefing encourages this. Senior individuals can encourage others through their practice to do knowledge management and they present the model for effective participation and action. Without proper procedures and sufficient training and practicing, it would be difficult to achieve the expected results. In order that companies can operate by themselves, some simple and concise operation manuals and training packages need to be designed and provided.

To implement knowledge management, an organisational culture and environment should be created to promote openness and trust and encourage people to innovate and learn from mistakes, and share their experience and learning.

THE PROJECT

This leaflet is part of a DTI funded project to test and improve an *Approach* to Knowledge Management for construction SMEs

The *Approach* is a simple and low cost technique for Knowledge Management using; Dictaphones to **Capture** Knowledge from events, Debriefing to **Transform** the Knowledge, and visual communications to **Disseminate** Knowledge within the company and the industry.

People have **Knowledge** when they can make use of information from the past events for a current situation.

Tacit Knowledge is personal knowledge in people's minds including know-how and intuition.

Explicit knowledge is generalised knowledge that can be put into documents or databases.

Knowledge-Management involves appreciating this Knowledge base and actively collecting it, sharing it and creating new knowledge within an organisational setting.

For Information on the Project
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THE PARTNERS

This is a DTI funded project that involves 12 construction companies, 3 construction networks and 2 universities. The companies involved are part of the new progressive thinking in the industry and demonstrate their own willingness to be the champions of change.



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