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Knowledge sharing is caring

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National University of Political Studies and Public Administration

This knowledge pill examines the issue of knowledge sharing within organizations.

What is knowledge sharing?



Source: Pexels
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/group-of-people-studying-together-5676744/>

- Activity that involves multiple processes in a community of employees and professionals by which:
 - Elements of knowledge and information are exchanged
 - Elements of knowledge become commonly available, accessible, and usable
 - Mutual learning becomes possible
 - Common language and references are created

This is a very important activity for knowledge management and, actually, it involves many different processes:

- a process of exchange or transfer of pieces of knowledge and information from someone to someone else
- a process by which elements of knowledge, about a technology, a market, a customer, a project, a solution to a problem or even about a more general issues, become available and easily usable to all interested people in the organization
- a process of mutual learning, where people learn together and learn from one another
- a process of creation of common languages and references that help the people interact and communicate

Why it is important?



Source: Pexels
(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/value-text-in-frame-9016994/>)



- To find collective solutions to crucial problems
- To facilitate transfer of experience from senior to junior employees
- To help senior employees keep the pace with innovative modalities or use of technologies
- To develop a common vision of the company's strategies and working approaches
- To facilitate a culture of collaboration
- To facilitate transfer of tacit elements of knowledge
- To promote organizational learning



Knowledge sharing can be critical for any organization and especially for KIBS, regardless of their size, small or big.

Employees and managers need to work together to find collective solutions to crucial problems. In today's competitive environment, a company organized in separate parts may develop into «knowledge islands», where each employee or office possesses and uses its own knowledge, which can lead to less responsiveness and insufficient capability to innovate.

Also, there is a need to transfer the experience of senior employees to new hires, and conversely the older generations may be helped to keep the pace of innovations by interacting with young employees.

Knowledge sharing can also help to develop a common vision of the company, in terms of strategic goals and working practices or approaches.

A culture of collaboration is also considered important, given that, today, the work is generally organized in projects carried on by teams where participants need to collaborate.

Knowledge sharing is especially important because it refers to human beings who, by interacting with one another, can more easily exchange elements of tacit knowledge that are otherwise difficult to transfer.

By sharing knowledge, we may say that not only the single employees but the entire organization can learn.

How to share knowledge?



Source: Pexels
(<https://www.pexels.com/photo/women-and-men-standing-near-table-3205568/>)

- Regular or occasional meetings where people can be updated on issues of common or special interest
- Project, technical, and commercial documentation, freely and easily accessible
- Communication technologies used in a way that helps people to establish socially engaging connections
- Special publications or other materials («pills») on topics of common interest
- Direct interactions between «sharers»



There can be many methods and practices to share knowledge and, in general, a company may consider a mix of these.

Meetings are an important practice. These can be organized on purpose, for specific issues, or can be a regular activity where employees get updated on general topics, discuss issues of common interest, or are trained on a special theme.

Sharing documentation – in any format – is also important. This means that, in a company that adopts a «culture of knowledge sharing», documentation must circulate as much freely as possible, and everyone must be encouraged to read documents of others and to share their own.

Technology can facilitate knowledge sharing: common repositories, easily accessible, can be created and everyone can upload and download materials. Also, the new web 2.0 technologies and their «social-interactiveness» can facilitate quick exchange of knowledge, even in the form of «questions and answers» to colleagues.

Sometimes, a company may issue special internal publications in the form of «pills», where essential information about some practical aspect of common importance is collected and delivered in a fast-accessible form. Sort of short manuals about something that must be easily shared in the company.

Finally, in general, knowledge sharing is easier when employees and managers can interact directly. So, any opportunity to facilitate interactions becomes essential.

What can make sharing effective?



Source: Pexels
(<https://images.pexels.com/photos/3280130/pexels-photo-3280130.jpeg>)

- Promotion of a «culture of collaboration» and mutual trust
- Adoption of an informal and non-hierarchical style of communication
- Assimilation of a company «common language»
- Implementation of user-friendly inter-company communication systems
- Creation of internal groups or «communities» for employees working on common topics or using shared practices
- Promotion of cross-company knowledge exchanges
- Promotion of cross-cultural connections



To make knowledge sharing effective, the top management must promote a culture of collaboration and mutual trust. Everybody should be encouraged to share what they know and to ask to others. A non-formal and non-hierarchical communication approach may be important, as even the younger or bottom-level employees should feel free to ask the help of others or to contribute with their potentially important ideas. A common language (for example, a shared dictionary of terms used in the company, or other common references) can also help interactions and avoid non compatible approaches to communication.

When technology is used to support knowledge sharing, applications should be user-friendly and support interactions between human beings rather than adopting too heavily structured procedures and datasets.

Sometimes, special groups or communities of interest may be created in the company. These can focus on a specific theme or problem, but can nonetheless involve people of different offices or working approaches. These communities can be particularly effective when there is a need to find collective solutions to particularly hard problems or innovative issues.

But in any case, also cross-company communication between parts of the organization which don't work on the same project or task can be of great use to stimulate new ideas and open new perspectives. The same can be for companies with employees from different cultures: their interaction can favour new views and open new directions to the business.

Who has a role in knowledge sharing?



Source: Pexels
<https://www.pexels.com/photo/here-to-help-lettering-text-on-black-background-5697255/>

- Everyone! But especially:
 - Those who need to work together in common project
 - Those who can benefit from knowledge transfers across the different company offices
- Some employees may be assigned a role of «supervisor» or «facilitator»

In general, all employees and managers should be involved in knowledge sharing, but especially those who need to work together (for example, in a project team) or can learn from knowledge exchanges with other company offices.

Knowledge sharing can be let «free to happen» spontaneously, but to promote this activity some employees may be assigned a role of supervisors, facilitators, promoters, or advisors. For example, they can have the task to organize meetings, to issue company's publications, to stimulate sharing by colleagues, etc.

Challenges



Source: Pexels
(<https://www.pexels.com/it-it/foto/uomo-che-cammina-sulle-formazioni-rocciose-2968723/>)

- Remote work or environments where people «don't know each other»
- Attitude of closure and seclusion of single employees
- Knowledge and work asymmetry
- Too strict hierarchies
- Time limitations
- Too sharply focused tasks
- Too complex technologies
- Too much sharing



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Since direct interaction is important, remote work or organizational environments (where people «don't know each other») can lead to less effective or difficult sharing. Similarly, too many employees having an attitude of closure, privacy and seclusion in their working approach may hinder collaboration.

Asymmetry and difference between the knowledge possessed by single individuals and between the working approaches can also hinder sharing. In principle, the more distant are the people the more beneficial is – but also the more difficult – knowledge sharing. Also, as mentioned, a too strictly hierarchical organization may reduce sharing effectiveness, because the people may not feel free to interact informally.

Time limitations can also be a problem, especially for those who don't see sharing as a value and may feel they don't want to «waste time» in interacting with others, or think they need to focus just on their own task. Furthermore, adoption of too complex communication technologies may not be compatible with effective sharing.

Finally, although we have seen that knowledge sharing can be important, it should also be effective and efficient. In other words, spending too much time for sharing «anything» can be a problem, and a selection of the important elements of knowledge whose sharing the company should invest in is important.

Final tips



Source: Pexels
(<https://images.pexels.com/photos/5676744/pexels-photo-5676744.jpeg>)

- Make your company's «sharing philosophy» explicit
- Encourage participation and time investment in sharing activities
- Favour a climate of trust
- Engage people socially
- Assign roles of «knowledge sharing facilitators»
- Combine use of communication technologies with in-person meetings

Let's conclude with some final suggestions. First, the approach to sharing can be different from a company to another. In any case, it is important that a company make its sharing philosophy explicit to old and new employees. Second, engagement and time investing in sharing activities must be encouraged, and the effort of those who are active should be recognized.

Another important point is the creation of a trustworthy organizational climate, where people feel comfortable to share their knowledge. In addition, interpersonal connections are important, and these should be facilitated. Furthermore, sharing may not occur spontaneously, and some activities may need to be organized. For this, some employees or managers may be assigned the role of facilitators or organizers of sharing activities. Finally, it is important to recall that technology is important but is not enough. A combination of technology with traditional interpersonal interactions remains important, because knowledge sharing is substantially an activity that involves humans.

Sources and find out more!

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