Introduction

Australian Government departments and agencies use a range of new technologies for information provision, service delivery and administration. These technologies provide opportunities for government to better manage knowledge within and between organisations to improve outcomes.

A key role of the Australian Government Information Management Office (AGIMO) is to identify and promote ‘Better Practice’. This checklist has been created to help agencies enhance their use of data, information and knowledge to improve productivity and service delivery.

This checklist suggests a number of issues that may be considered when managing knowledge in agencies. The items in the checklist are, however, not mandatory.

This checklist is intended to be a guide to staff responsible for managing information and knowledge in agencies. IT managers may also find the checklist useful in dealing with contractors, or where this function is otherwise outsourced. This checklist focuses on non-technical issues.

It should be noted that the checklist is not intended to be comprehensive. Rather, it highlights key issues for agencies. The checklist is iterative and draws on the expertise and experience of practitioners. The subject matter and issues are reviewed and updated to reflect developments.

Comments about the checklist and suggestions for additional checkpoints can be directed to:

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Copies of this and other checklists are available at www.agimo.gov.au/checklists.

Acknowledgments

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13. KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

What is knowledge management?

Many government departments and agencies have considered ways to best use knowledge resources to improve their business. Knowledge management (KM) builds on earlier approaches of data management and information management and adds a higher level of complexity with the inclusion of meaning, networking, collaboration and business process improvement.

KM has also emerged as an inter-disciplinary framework to assist organisations to engage in the wider information/knowledge economy. Technology is only one element in this engagement; content, process and people aspects also need to be considered. The information economy has a strong focus on networks, which requires organisations to focus on knowledge creation, values, ethics and cultural drivers to optimise the use of their knowledge resources.

Public sector agencies throughout the world are at the forefront of implementing KM. Closer citizen engagement, cross-agency collaboration and efficiency dividends are driving agencies to adopt initiatives that focus on making the best use of knowledge within them.

While many organisations may not use the term ‘knowledge management’ to describe their activities in this area, many relevant activities are undertaken to enhance organisational learning, improve service delivery, and build capabilities and flexibility.

The checklist provides an insight into some of the issues agencies may wish to consider as part of their KM activities.
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CHECKPOINTS

FOSTERING KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

☐ Conduct a knowledge audit

Knowledge audits involve collating an inventory of available knowledge assets and resources in order to examine the gap between the ideal or desired knowledge environment and the existing knowledge environment. Gaps may impede innovation, block opportunities for business improvement or hamper technology implementations.

Knowledge audits can be conducted through a variety of means, including surveys, process maps, structured interviews and analysing competencies.

A key facet of a knowledge audit involves understanding the context and strategic intent of the organisation or area audited. Audits can be conducted at an agency level, business group level, section or team level, or even the level of the whole public service. The strategy, outcomes and drivers of the area considered are analysed, reviewed and examined.

Particular questions that a knowledge audit could ask include:

- What knowledge does the organisation need to acquire or develop?
- Where are knowledge flows impeded?
- How can knowledge be better shared and organised?
- What knowledge resources are currently in use?
- What are the current and future benchmarks for knowledge use?

☐ Develop a knowledge strategy aligned with the goals of the organisation

Increasingly, organisations are developing KM strategies to support their higher-level strategic documents.

Effective knowledge strategies generally focus on the issues that drive the organisation. These issues may include customer relationship management, service delivery, risk management, policy excellence or strategic advice.

Knowledge strategies aim to develop the organisation’s core capabilities through the conduct of various KM initiatives. Knowledge strategies are often derived with input from the conduct of knowledge audits.

☐ Ensure that appropriate KM activities are officially sanctioned

Good governance arrangements require that activities conducted by an organisation and its staff are directed towards the achievement of organisational goals and in accordance with stated values and codes of conduct. Any KM activities should similarly be directed towards the fulfilment of strategic and business plans.

Some KM initiatives, such as those directed at bolstering requisite diversity within an organisation, could be viewed as slightly out of balance with the strategic directions of the organisation. Agencies may wish to consider the implications of the conduct of KM activities ‘by stealth’ without the approval or oversight of an executive arm.

☐ Consider the organisation’s culture

An organisation’s culture has a profound impact on its capacity to produce knowledge-related outputs. KM initiatives may aim to change an organisation’s culture for improved knowledge sharing and knowledge creation. This often entails shifts from internal competition to collaboration, risk taking, and building trust within and between organisations.
Consider the various stages of the knowledge process (create, capture, share, revise)

There are many sub-elements to knowledge processes. Historically, KM activities focused on identifying and implementing initiatives to assist in the capture, storage, sharing and distributing of knowledge resources. These initiatives included the development of technology tools such as intranets and groupware and forming communities of practice.

KM activities are now increasingly focusing on techniques to assist in the creation of new knowledge through innovative activities such as visioning exercises, process improvement workshops, and research and development activities.

In addition, effective KM also needs to cater for the revision of older knowledge stocks and, potentially, for older knowledge objects to be archived or destroyed.

Identify and consider ways to manage knowledge risks

Many agencies have developed approaches to identify and assess the major risks that could affect their functioning. Similarly, effective KM approaches consider the organisational risks that could affect their knowledge assets.

Risks can occur in the loss of knowledge that is critical to the performance of an organisation – loss through technological malfunction, disaster striking records holdings or the departure of long-term employees with extensive corporate memory. Significant knowledge risks are arising in many APS agencies due to large numbers of staff nearing retirement.

In addition, knowledge risks can occur if organisational knowledge is not effectively used. Organisations may have the relevant information, but it may not reach decision makers.

Managing knowledge risks may not require the large-scale documentation of knowledge holdings, but it may involve initiatives such as mentoring, staff retention and the development of informal communities of interest around particular topics.
OTHER KEY ISSUES THAT AGENCIES MAY CONSIDER

☐ Consider the balance between people, process, content and technology issues


The inter-disciplinary nature of KM requires a balanced view of these elements to be undertaken in building organisational capability. For example, focusing strongly on technology or content issues while limiting consideration of people and process issues may not be effective, as cultural issues, if not addressed, may undermine technological solutions.

Finding an appropriate balance for these four elements depends on the context of the organisation and on the nature of the gap between the vision and the current state.

☐ Consider how progress towards KM goals can be measured

While there are numerous accounting and benchmarking standards for measuring the financial performance of an organisation, there are few recognised standards for measuring intangible or knowledge resources. However, some measurement tools are emerging, such as the Balanced Scorecard, Knowledge Capital and Economic Value-Added systems, and some of these are gaining popularity in government agencies.

Tracking improvements in key performance indicators and outcome/output indicators are other methods to monitor progress in how KM initiatives have impacted upon organisational performance.

KM ENABLERS – DISCIPLINES, TOOLS AND TECHNIQUES

KM initiatives are implemented through the use of particular enablers. Enablers range from recognised disciplines that complement KM, such as records management, to specific practices and tools, such as electronic collaboration software and intranets.

As part of their KM activities, agencies may like to consider their use of the following.

☐ Communities of practice

Communities are often considered to be the lifeblood of KM programs, as they facilitate knowledge sharing and offer opportunities for novel viewpoints and innovation to be considered. Many KM initiatives are aimed at the establishment and facilitation of communities of practice that investigate particular topics of interest.

More information on communities of practice that have been developed to support e-government is available at www.agimo.gov.au/resources/cop.

☐ Story telling or scenarios

Simply stating the facts of a situation will impart information to another party, but more effective communication places these facts within a structure that is most appropriate for the intended audience. Story-telling approaches have been drawn into KM to facilitate the communication of knowledge between parties.

The development of scenarios – short stories that describe a situation – is also useful. Scenarios can be particularly helpful when describing processes. The use of scenarios to describe content management needs as a part of the selection of a content management system is covered in Better Practice Checklist 9, Selecting a Content Management System.
New KM technologies are continuously being developed to foster collaboration within workgroups across distance and time.

Existing technologies are available that enable remote technology users to participate in real-time online forums, including on-screen updates to information and simultaneous access to files.

The provision of higher-bandwidth networks is permitting video-conferencing facilities to become more widespread, enabling more effective knowledge communication and collaborative efforts to take place.

Social network analysis is a recently developed KM approach that maps the major information flows within an organisation. Key nodes that aggregate and disseminate information are identified, along with their connections to others.

Network maps can be developed from interviews or from analysis of electronic mail traffic and process flows. Social network analyses can pinpoint the location of critical information flows and areas where little interaction is occurring.

Many technological solutions are available for helping to share knowledge within an organisation. One of the most commonly deployed technologies are organisational intranets that enable staff to easily find common information on a range of corporate matters, from human resources policy to finance systems, as well as descriptions of key business processes.

Some organisations are extending the capability of their intranets by adding automated process workflow that can undertake and monitor the progress of tasks to completion – for example, enrolling a new starter and organising access to all applicable services automatically.

Effective document management enables knowledge sharing by allowing staff to easily access, update and save information into electronic files in a controlled manner. Version control, naming conventions, directory structure and the archival of documents are important to ensure that the latest information is available and to facilitate effective retrieval. Workflow software can assist in managing the creation and processing of important documents that may be used for Ministerials or for customer relationship management.

Records management is an important aspect of KM as it ensures that the evidence of business is documented and preserved. Records and documents can be retained in paper or electronic form and increasingly are taking the form of multimedia files embracing voice and audio. Records and document management is especially important for new staff, to enable them to quickly become effective members of the workplace.
Mentoring

Mentoring programs are growing in number as an effective mechanism to impart knowledge throughout organisations.

Mentors impart their tacit knowledge, as well as demonstrate their skills and exemplar behaviours. Mentoring programs can be likened to old apprenticeship schemes and can be used for succession planning. Mentoring helps less experienced staff to learn how to learn from others and to foster attitudes of cooperation and support.

Reflection and evaluation

All projects should have an evaluation period allocated for understanding the lessons that can be learned from what worked and what failed. Evaluation can also provide an important mechanism to document and record all the necessary actions and to close off any loose ends.

Further information about website usage evaluation is available in Better Practice Checklist 11, Website Usage Monitoring and Evaluation.

With knowledge work, reflection is often required for the effective assimilation of new perspectives. New knowledge is sometimes difficult for people to absorb, as it may conflict with previous knowledge embedded in their beliefs and values systems. Keeping an open mind in relation to new ideas, and being prepared to change outmoded approaches if they have outlived their usefulness or applicability, can often help unleash the transformative power of KM.

Other resources


Australian Public Service Case Studies in KM at www2.dcita.gov.au/ie/environment/km/case_studies

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7. Archiving Web Resources
8. Managing Online Content

SERIES TWO, VERSION 1 2004
9. Selecting a Content Management System
10. Implementing a Content Management System
11. Website Usage Monitoring and Evaluation
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13. Knowledge Management
14. Designing and Managing an Intranet
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