

Kate Pugh: Sharing Hidden Know-How

Three business issues are on Kate Pugh's mind:

1. Can we grow revenues by entering new markets or scaling up the successful parts of our business?
2. How do we make mergers and acquisitions add value out of the gate instead of just being disruptive?
3. What should we do about the know-how we will lose when the baby boomers retire?

Pugh (pronounced Pew) is author of *Sharing Hidden Know-How*, and as you might suspect from the title, the new tool she brings to each of those issues is a way to effectively share knowledge.

The last issue, retiring boomers, is obviously about knowledge sharing, but what about the other two? Pugh explains:

When you plan to enter a new market, you'll want to tap the know-how of people who have entered new markets before, as well as the know-how of people who have some experience in this particular market. Across the organization there is a lot of relevant know-how, but you need a mechanism to channel it to those people who are actually on that initiative. Revenue growth can be fuelled by effectively transferring know-how.

The second issue on my mind is acquisitions. If you've experienced acquisitions you've probably seen them fail to live up to their potential because the acquiring firm was never able to surface and integrate the know-how of the firm they acquired.

Let's get really specific here. Pugh isn't talking about know-how as some rarefied concept. Know-how is nuts and bolts stuff like what particular customers want or how to prepare successful sales pitches in a certain market. It's stuff like how one manufacturing line cut waste better than anyone else, or how a group reduced cycle times in their part of the business. Knowledge is the stuff that someone desperately needs to know to get their job done, whether their job is integrating two businesses, improving production processes, or selling more to existing customers.

In recognizing the need to share knowledge, organizations have tried different approaches.

Companies might put an MBA on a dash to do a research project. For example, the MBA might go in and do a study of how the marketing department in an acquired company functions or what goes on in manufacturing. The trouble is that they often miss the core know-how because no one ever talks about it; or pockets of real cleverness are missed because they just don't know who the really smart people are. There needs to be some Facilitation to get at the know-how that is really valuable.

I've capitalized Facilitation because it's one of Pugh's key ideas, but before we get into that I'll let her finish:

Another tactic organizations have tried is telling a manager to “document what you did.” No Conversation is occurring; they are just trying to guess what might be useful to someone, someday. What happens is they leave out essential context, or skip over important stuff on the assumption that everyone will recognize that it's just the “XYZ model”. You end up with a document that is not particularly helpful to the person who needs the knowledge.

A third knowledge management technique has been to create a large repository of documents. But even if you tag documents to death, you run the risk of it being irrelevant or out of date. It's what I call “knowledge jail”. The knowledge is stuck in the repository because there is no Translation of what is in the repository into something valuable for the consumer of the knowledge.

Pugh has a better way which she calls a “Knowledge Jam”. It puts in place Facilitation, Conversation and Translation to make knowledge sharing effective.

There is one fact that leaps out about the knowledge jam—it's duration. A knowledge jam only lasts for 90 minutes and is typically done face-to-face. It is not a massive, expensive, or disruptive process. Pugh explains how it works.

First a knowledge jam takes some planning because all good meetings do. The facilitator makes sure the right people are there and figures out what topics will be really useful to the knowledge brokers. The knowledge brokers say “I'm going to be trying to do X” and that is what guides the knowledge originators into providing really useful knowledge.

The knowledge originators (or the originating teams) are the experts: that's straightforward. The knowledge brokers are there to represent the people using the knowledge. If the issue is in manufacturing, the brokers might be an engineer and production supervisor from the area that wanted to learn from the originators. Their role is not just to learn, but to spread that learning to their group; I'll get back to that brokering step in a moment.

The centre piece of the knowledge jam is a 90-minute facilitated meeting where the knowledge brokers have a conversation with the knowledge originators to pull out what is useful to them. This conversation is key; it is where the brokers' questions drive the originators' recall and explanations. The brokers focus the 90-minutes on what is new to them, what is most helpful, and what they don't understand. If the facilitator did their job in getting the right people in the room and identifying the right topics and guiding the tone of the meeting, then they'll hit the ball out of the park in surfacing the really useful know-how.

The brokering step is critical. The brokers are tasked with taking what they learned back to their part of the organization and disseminating it in a way that ensures the knowledge is put to good use. The idea is not to “capture” knowledge, but to put knowledge to use. They need to translate what they learned into something

valuable in their business. Maybe it ends up in new processes or part of a training program. Maybe the outcome is something getting done or something being improved.

If you have ever been in a situation where you said “We really need to clone Cindy” (or more commonly, “I wish I could clone myself”) you have identified a need for knowledge sharing. You probably know that to have an MBA interview Cindy, or asking Cindy to write down what she knows, won't do the trick. What you need is the knowledge jam where the organizations who will be applying Cindy's knowledge have actively participated in a facilitated meeting with her.

There are many things we have to get right for organizations to be effective; learning is clearly one of the most important. Knowledge jams use a format that promises to be not only effective but efficient. It's that efficiency that is of particular interest in a world where there are many things to get right over and above knowledge transfer.

Knowledge management programs have often been disappointing; but that's not surprising for a new field of endeavour. Pugh has distilled, then combined the three elements needed for practical knowledge sharing. The knowledge jam is a technique every organization should have in its back pocket. It's a practical management tool that will make the organization swifter.

You can learn more at

http://www.wiley.com/WileyCDA/WileyTitle/productCd-0470876816_descCd-description.html

David Creelman writes and speaks on human capital management (www.creelmanresearch.com)