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Knowledge management is one of those terms you have probably heard but dismissed as something only big companies do. Michela Ledwidge introduces the concepts behind it and some low-cost (or free!) tools with the potential to make radical improvements to your business.

Knowledge is at the heart of every business. Managing that knowledge and keeping it within the organisation, particularly as people move on to other jobs, is critical to ongoing success. This tutorial will introduce the concepts behind knowledge management and give you some ideas to start your own journey.

The good news is, knowledge management practice has an increasingly low barrier to entry. Behind all the hype about Web 2.0 lies an astonishingly useful array of productivity tools and free resources you can employ for knowledge management. The bad news is that there is no magic button for strategising how to deal with exploding quantities of information, which may or may not be relevant. Knowledge management is a set of actions, nothing more.

Online knowledge management for small business

Online knowledge management is a set of activities dealing with knowledge in three dimensions: people, subjects and time.

- **Know the people behind your business.** Company knowledge walks out the door each day and may never return. Identify who provides your knowledge and how you retain it. This is the first step towards developing a knowledge management strategy. Your staff and contacts directory remains arguably the most useful knowledge management tool.
- **Knowledge is irrelevant without context.** Knowledge management is ensuring you keep abreast of your subjects. Terminology changes. Markets evolve. Articulate a problem or question and you can find solutions online. Maintain a glossary of terms for new starters in your business.
- **Keep track of time.** Don't forget this third dimension. Any business that cannot quickly re-order knowledge and sort chronologically is in trouble. Leave sorting to computers. Online document repositories can save time. Start small. Get the ball rolling with a private business blog. Formal knowledge management can lead you to focus too much on people and information at the expense of time. You do not have that luxury.

If your mission is to stay knowledgeable and convert endless data into real wisdom, how you deal with knowledge is just as important as what you know. What processes do you have in place? What processes should you have? Set yourself these as your tasks:

- Identify – what knowledge is the lifeblood of the business?
- Create – what knowledge is missing and must be created?
- Represent – what concrete form should this abstract knowledge take?
- Distribute – how does knowledge get shared?
- Enable adoption – how do you make it stick?

Knowledge management in 2008 is big business, but I'm assuming your starting budget for these activities is close to nil.

If you don't have a chief knowledge officer or an organisation chart, put an hour aside to answer these questions and sketch out your business social network. The responsibilities of a chief knowledge officer need not come with fancy titles or degrees, but someone should be thinking about strategy – how to maximise your company's return on any investment in knowledge.

Strategy for small business

Knowledge management has to deliver sustainable results. Are employees better informed? Is the business learning from errors? Is productivity increasing? The knowledge management challenge is to convince people to accept practices and processes that may provide little value to them in the short term. Prioritise quick wins to build morale. Focus on the naysayers and put time into selling them the personal benefits of working in a more empowered business.

Here are some key activities to consider:

- Induction – prepare a pack of key information and train new starters to adopt your business practices around knowledge management
- Filing – create efficient processes for recording digital information in a central location
- Reporting – create key metrics for your knowledge enabling systems, such as staff feedback, frequency of posts and updates, and a feedback loop that involves your people
- Archival – ensure information is preserved, especially data collected on external systems which could disappear tomorrow
- Exit – prepare a standard process for exit interviewing staff and ensuring they pass on their knowledge, contacts, emails and other documents
- Review – review any key process list every six months to validate your priorities.

Online enablers

There is a glut of services and software to enable your knowledge management processes online. Many of them are free. Email, mailing lists, forums, blogs, wikis, instant messaging, social networks... The important thing is leave your preconceived ideas behind. Your knowledge management strategy is tactical, not academic. Use it to explore the relevance of any, and all, online channels to knowledge.

Business blogs are a cheap and cheerful starting point for filing. Over seven years, my consultancy's 'sysadmin' blog has grown into a valuable knowledge base on IT tips and troubleshooting. It costs next to nothing and allows us to engage freelancers and remote staff with greater ease.

No tool alone can convince people to share knowledge, but barriers to publishing are coming down. Witness the explosion in microblogging such as Twitter and Facebook status updates. Your staff will feel more valued if encouraged to contribute to company knowledge. Take advantage of your smaller scale and exploit personal publishing tools. Prolific posting does not necessarily lead to greater knowledge but one-line updates, automatically indexed and distributed around your business network can be most effective. Formal emails have their place, but ignore emerging back-channels at your peril.

A wiki is an incredibly powerful knowledge management tool, especially for IT savvy professionals. Twiki is free software used by many Fortune 500 companies like Disney and Motorola. trac, an issue tracking system with built-in wiki, works great for small teams. MediaWiki is another popular choice given the runaway success of Wikipedia.

Wikis are often introduced gradually into organisations allowing non-technical users and management to appreciate the benefits of collaborative working. Local software developer Atlassian sells a more business-friendly wiki product called Confluence for those unwilling or unable to make the most of open source software. wikimatrix.org provides a useful tool for comparing features of wiki products.

Rich media alongside text can often represent your knowledge more effectively. Snapshot diagrams with a digicam and

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