

# Knowledge Management made Simple

By David Brewster

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'Knowledge Management' is Big and Now. The wide coverage of 'KM' in the management literature could easily give you the impression that it is a 'big business' issue requiring expensive, technology-based solutions. In truth, knowledge management is a new name for an old challenge facing businesses large and small.

So what is 'Knowledge Management' and what are its implications for people in smaller businesses?

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To understand 'knowledge', we need first to define its off-sider, 'information'. Information, simply put, is anything that has been documented. Books, manuals, the world wide web, databases, software help files - all these contain information. Information is tangible, but it requires conscious effort to access it.

Knowledge, by contrast, is information that has been embedded in our minds and which can be drawn on virtually instantly. Knowledge gives us the capacity to act - without reference to external information.

Lets look at gardening as an example.

There is limitless information out there designed to make green-thumbs of us. But 'knowing' how to be a good gardener cannot come from a book. It comes from a combination of hands-on experience, information and drawing on the knowledge of others.

Diagnosing the problem with the sick plant in the back corner can be a bit like negotiating a maze. Information gives us lots of potential paths to follow, and may get us there in the end, but we will encounter a number of dead-ends along the way. Knowledge gives us the ability to ignore the false paths and take the shortest route to the answer.

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For business, the challenge of 'Knowledge Management' is all about trying to capture the knowledge of our people and embed it within our organisation. This reduces reliance on key individuals and makes the business more 'scalable'. It also saves time and effort as identical problems aren't solved and re-solved over and over again.

Knowledge sharing is the ultimate 'win-win'. No matter how many times we share our knowledge with others, we still get to keep it for ourselves.

This doesn't make knowledge management easy to do. There are no short-cuts. It takes time and effort. (That's why apprenticeships take three or four years.)

While technology may have a role to play in enhancing Knowledge Management, it is ultimately a people issue. It needs trust, an open environment and plenty of direct interaction. It needs forums for people to share their experiences and perspectives.

The growth of the Knowledge Management industry has occurred in part because organisations are realising that the knowledge of their people makes up a large part their value. The starting point is creation of the time, space and environment for knowledge sharing to happen. It may be no more than a loosely structured version of Friday afternoon drinks.

(For further reading and five thoughts on how to promote knowledge sharing, visit <http://www.businesssimplification.com.au/km.htm> )

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