Learning to Share

Knowledge-sharing is on the rise across corporations today. According to a recent survey conducted by IDG Research Services with Cognizant, nearly two-thirds of the 156 respondents said that their companies foster a culture that encourages knowledge-sharing across organizational areas. Companies that promote this kind of sharing and collaboration are finding that increased information flow helps employees do their jobs better, faster and less expensively, leading to productivity increases and competitive advantages.

There is a second layer of benefits to knowledge-sharing that are less tangible, but also important. Encouraging collaboration and information flow works toward breaking down the information silos often found in corporate environments. Removing these barriers not only gives employees in any department greater access to information, it also helps employees feel their employers trust them with information and value their contribution. This feeling is empowering, deepening an employee’s sense of commitment to the company and encouraging even more sharing across the organization.

What’s more, fostering effective knowledge-sharing enables an organization distribute its employees geographically to take advantage of overseas talent and round-the-clock work days, because an employee needn’t be located at headquarters to be well-informed.

“We all know that the more we share, the more we gain,” says Jayachandran Chittenipat, director of social enterprise programs with Cognizant. “Organizations that foster this knowledge-sharing really make their employees feel closer to the organization. And minimizing barriers helps improve employees’ problem-solving capabilities and increase expertise.”

The benefits of knowledge-sharing can also come from customers, partners and service providers. Such collaboration enables companies to incorporate customer feedback into their offerings more quickly and to treat partners as an extension of the company, with communication regarding business-process changes and workflow improvements reaching them as needed at the moment of engagement.

The Right Tools

Knowledge-sharing is most easily achieved through technology tools that allow employees to exchange ideas, find answers to questions, and offer their opinions anytime, from anywhere. Tools including instant messaging, video conferencing, virtual meeting technology, virtual team workspaces, and enterprise wikis and social media platforms—once largely relegated to personal use—have become strategic enablers of collaboration to boost corporate productivity, enhance efficiency, and promote innovation. Social networking tools, however, also breed enterprise concerns about security, privacy, and productivity in large organizations.

“Sharing is about power,” says a survey respondent and director of services based in Boca Raton, Fla. “The more information you have accessible the better, so that anyone can answer a question or tackle a project.”
Still, companies often fall short when it comes to promoting collaboration, and in particular aren’t taking full advantage of technology tools. According to the IDG survey, knowledge-sharing is promoted more in companies with less than $500 million in annual revenue (77 percent) than those with $500 million-plus in revenue (51 percent). Perhaps because larger enterprises tend to operate with top-down infrastructures that don’t allow for information to cross functional lines or hierarchies as easily as less-structured, smaller organizations. What’s more, larger enterprises typically have greater concerns about security and productivity.

Across all company sizes, more organizations rely on complex, often expensive technology tools such as video conferencing and virtual meetings to achieve knowledge-sharing. Fewer rely on simple, familiar tools such as microblogging platforms and other social media tools. The survey indicated that many organizations question the productivity and return-on-investment benefits of these tools, still believing employees will leverage them for personal use. Yet, as with the introduction of the telephone in the workplace, social networking platforms are proving to connect people in ways that advance the business, contrary to what some managers may fear.

And across the board, fewer companies (60 percent) are encouraging external knowledge-sharing—with partners, service providers, and customers—than internal collaboration. Security, corporate policy, and compliance concerns play a role in limiting the amount of information corporations are comfortable sharing with external entities. Yet these companies are missing crucial opportunities to collect insight from external sources that could improve their products and services.

Open Up

Companies can improve knowledge-sharing both internally and externally by taking a few crucial steps toward collaboration. One is integrating knowledge-sharing platforms seamlessly into business processes in a manner that people will actually use. Getting people to use these knowledge-sharing platforms is often the biggest hurdle; few workers are eager to enter a description of how they accomplished a task, if it requires extra time. But if the knowledge-sharing mechanism is seamlessly integrated into the work being done to present insight in advance of actual needs, the idea of collaboration becomes much more appealing.

“Knowledge-sharing should never have to be done in a centralized place; knowledge grows where the work is getting done,” explains Chittenipat.

To foster greater knowledge-sharing, companies should also be sure that people are comfortable using the tools made available. For example, a corporate blogging platform might intimidate some users concerned about saying the wrong thing in a forum that’s open to the entire company. Establishing noncorporate blogs—about music, sports, local events, etc.—that people can start off contributing to will eventually make them more comfortable posting to work-related blogs. Affinity blogs can also have the effect of introducing coworkers across departments and locations, which organically promotes knowledge-sharing across functional lines—initially networks may develop around music, but could grow into work relationships.

The quality of the information shared has a direct effect on how many people will contribute—if employees look to a knowledgebase to find answers and come up short, it’s unlikely they’ll access that knowledgebase the next time. Therefore, companies can promote quality knowledge-sharing by offering recognition when an idea is shared, consumed, or reused.

Another way companies can encourage knowledge-sharing is by setting an example.

Perhaps our survey respondent said it best: “Knowledge-sharing is encouraged and expected; in our business where client projects are our livelihood, sharing information is vital. Management uses the tools and expects others to follow.

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Steps to enhancing knowledge-sharing:

- Encourage use of systems of engagement that deliver a user experience that is intuitive, interactive and anticipatory
- Seamlessly entwine these systems with established workflows
- Model usage with highly visible senior management commitment and participation
- Promote consumption and knowledge re-use through industry best practices and specific organizational policies
- Focus on user engagement, not mere adoption; promote consistent and frequent system use