Knowledge management: Evolution from theory to practice

A Google Internet search for the phrase "knowledge management (KM)" on any given day will display over 50 million links. While this phenomenal interest comes as no surprise today, it has not always been that way.

Many definitions of KM exist. These definitions include terms that range from citing wisdom and sharing to technology transfer and data mining. One common characteristic of these definitions is the need for KM to be "translated" or demystified by a technical expert on the subject. An approach that acknowledges the theory of KM but focuses on the practical applications was therefore needed. This type of approach can be embraced by all members of an organization, regardless of size, geography, or complexity.

In establishing a baseline of thinking for the introduction of the KM concept in Thailand, the Thailand Productivity Institute (FTPI) chose Xerox Corporation for a case study (Figure 1). Xerox, along with well-respected corporations such as IBM, Nokia, Accenture, Microsoft, and Siemens, was in the earliest years of KM recognized as a pioneer in internalizing and promoting knowledge.

It should be noted that Xerox first initiated the concept of benchmarking in the 1970s, which is now another well-recognized, pervasive management tool and arguably a key component of an effective KM strategy. What began as a simple practice of cost comparisons for machine components between Japanese and US photocopier manufacturers evolved into a 10-step, structured, systematic approach to identify and codify best practices for use by other organizations as varied as private industry, healthcare institutions, and governments.
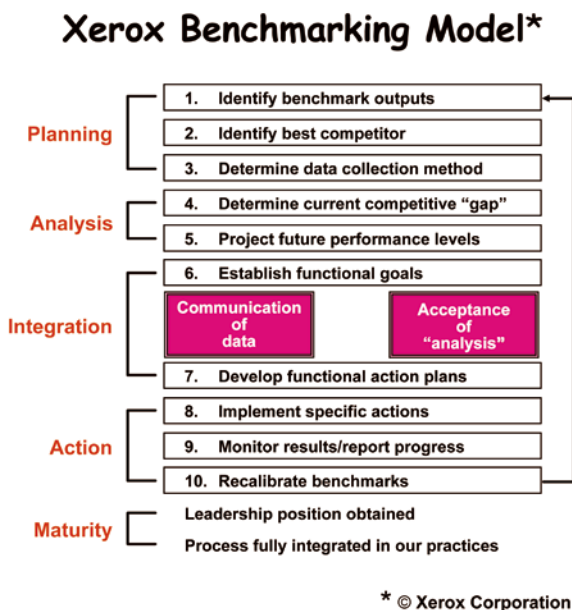

Figure 1. Original Xerox benchmarking model.

Through its revolutionary benchmarking efforts, supported by its innovative Leadership Through Quality Program, Xerox successfully reinvented its business in the 1980s and 1990s and went on to achieve recognition as a recipient of the Malcolm Baldrige National Quality Award in 1989 and 1997. Building on those approaches, it was initially intellectual curiosity combined with the constant need for "smart products" that led to advanced research into KM. But one premise was always foremost in the minds of Xerox management: How do you conduct empirical research (then supported by the company-initiated, California-based Institute for Research on Learning) and balance that with common-sense implementation within the company?

The thought process of the FTPI closely mimicked the previous Xerox experience as a basis for applying KM. With the Xerox approach as a baseline, planning was begun in mid-2002 to begin pilot implementation of a KM strategy within selected Thai enterprises. After thorough screening by the FTPI, four pilot sites were chosen: Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital; True Corporation Public Company Limited; Spansion (Thailand) Limited; and the FTPI itself. Supported by the APO through a Technical Expert Services (TES) assignment, the implementation was launched by the FTPI in February 2003. A six-step model was used in the launch as a roadmap for implementation (Figure 2); each pilot organization was requested to select at least one project on which to focus using KM-based tools identified in the model. Project-based KM application was chosen to allow for gradual "learning by doing." For example, the Faculty of Medicine, Siriraj Hospital decided to use communities of practice to create a knowledge-sharing network in clinical continuous quality improvement to facilitate best practices in patient care.
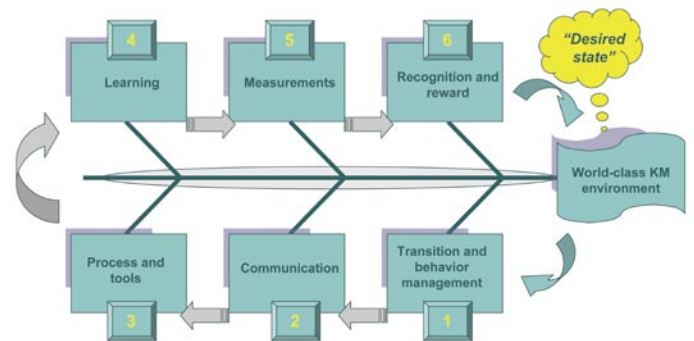

Figure 2. KM pilot project model developed by the FTPI.

The initial launch of KM was anything but smooth, although setbacks were anticipated. Many obstacles to successful implementation were cited by the pilot sites, including "It's the Thai culture"; "We don't have time"; and "It's too complicated." Although the list of potential roadblocks was lengthy, the benefits of trying to apply KM, such as increased knowledge sharing and employee learning soon began to outweigh the obstacles. As people understood KM better and grasped how it was relevant to the daily processes of their enterprises, the project was successfully completed in 2004. As a result, at least three KM books were published to disseminate the concept, implementation steps, lessons learned, and case studies from this project.

In 2005, the FTPI assisted the Thai Office of the Public Sector Development Commission to train and plan for KM implementation in all government offices

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nationwide covering all ministries and provincial offices. The FTPI has also provided public and in-house KM training as well as consulting services to state enterprises and private companies since then.

During the same period, the number of organizations embracing the Thailand Quality Award (TQA) framework as a means for organizational improvement has continued to increase. The importance of KM is recognized as it has been explicitly included in one of the seven TQA criteria requirements and implicitly embedded in other categories. Therefore, the FTPI decided to start a project on the Development of Knowledge Management Assessment (KMA) Methodology in which the seven categories of the TQA, a Malcolm Baldrige-based assessment system, were used as a framework to construct pertinent questions to validate the effectiveness of KM within organizations.

With APO support through the TES Program, a four-year pilot project (2006–2010) was initiated to develop and evaluate the effectiveness of KMA methodology involving 10 pilot organizations, four in the government sector, and three each from the manufacturing and service sectors. Seventy percent of the participants were Thailand Quality Class winners. A public forum is planned later in 2010 to disseminate the lessons learned from this project.

With over seven years of implementation experience, five "lessons learned" so far are:

- Keep implementation simple and evolve rapidly from theory to relevant practice.
- Emphasize that KM does not have cultural barriers and can be implemented in Thailand or any other country.
- Start small; think big. Select an initial KM application where there is a great likelihood of success.
- Develop and use a means of assessment. Be prepared to answer the fundamental question, "How are we doing?"
- Be patient and keep trying. Implementing KM is not a quick activity and needs to evolve over time.

While the seven-year KM journey in Thailand continues, another fundamental lesson learned from the FTPI experience was that the sharing of knowledge among organizations clearly provides an invaluable tool to improve productivity.

Photo courtesy of FTPI

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