Building and Maintaining a Knowledge Transfer Toolkit

Transferring detailed, technical knowledge from one part of an organization to a non-technical audience

By: Keith De La Rue

Keith De La Rue works as an independent consultant in knowledge management, communication and learning at AcKnowledge Consulting in Melbourne, Australia. He previously spent eight years working in Knowledge Management at Telstra, Australia, where he led a team engaged in the transfer of product and service knowledge to Telstra's enterprise and business sales force.

Abstract

Many large organizations have subject matter experts with a deep knowledge and understanding of business-critical information. This knowledge needs to be conveyed to a target audience in another area of the organization, mostly comprised of staff with a lower level of technical expertise. In traditional organizational structures, content management, intranet, communications and training are often located in separate silos. Yet all of these areas provide tools that assist in knowledge transfer – the desired end result is an informed audience. This splitting of functions can lead to inefficiency, duplication of effort, confused messages and errors. Other critical factors impacting effective knowledge transfer are maintenance of the currency and accuracy of content, as well as the problem of knowledge hoarding.

In this article, a strategy for building a complete knowledge transfer toolkit will be described. This toolkit includes a range of individual elements, comprising content management, communications, learning and multimedia elements, coordinated as a managed program. Approaches to maintaining the currency and accuracy of content, dealing with knowledge hoarding and the relevance of social media principles will also be addressed.

Background

The organization where this approach was developed was a large, technical organization, where a problem had been identified in the effective knowledge transfer of product and service offerings from a technical product management group to a (mostly non-technical) business and enterprise

sales force. Similar approaches have also been applied in other organizations.

The Skills Needed to Perform this Best Practice

The effective operation of the knowledge transfer toolkit described here ideally requires a team with a broad range of skills – and preferably multi-skilled individuals within the team. The team Manager needs strong stakeholder management skills and a background in knowledge management. Skills required for the other team members include those listed below, but the actual mix and depth of these will vary, depending on the requirements of the specific business environment:

- Communication.
- Content management, database administration and some taxonomy skills.
- Training and eLearning.
- An understanding of the subject matter (not necessarily to a deep level).
- Understanding of the culture and behaviors of both the knowledge providers and the target audience.
- Change management.
- IT, multimedia and social media technology skills, or an ability to deal with the providers of the technology.

Step 1: Establish a Knowledge Transfer Team

In order to establish an effective knowledge transfer program, a core, multi-skilled team is critical. This team manages the day-to-day delivery of the knowledge program and oversees the maintenance of content. The team needs to embody a set of innovative skills and abilities, in order to embrace the entire spectrum of content, communication and learning tools used to build the knowledge transfer toolkit. The team also needs to have a strong understanding of the content matter and the ability to understand the motivations and culture of both the content providers and the target audience and to work well with them. (The skill-set is described above).

The size of the team will vary, depending on the scope of the work involved and the size of the audience. The team composition will also vary, as some of the actual work such as video or audio production may be outsourced, but it has been found that actual content development is best handled by the subject matter experts, under guidance from the knowledge transfer team. The time taken to up-skill external staff in complex content has not been found to return any effective cost savings.

This team provides a critical function in building a sense of community among content providers and providing all required help and guidance to both the contributors and the target audience. The primary attributes team members should possess are: a passion for delivering learning and knowledge to the audience and a strong desire to work with a diverse team.

Step 2: Build a Program Management Framework

The next critical step in establishing an effective program is to gain agreement with key stakeholders on a program management structure and a schedule for delivery of content. Stakeholders will include the management of the information source organizational business unit, the target audience and other support groups as necessary. In the case of transferring knowledge on product initiatives, this would include the Product Management and Sales teams and also the

Marketing team.

By holding regular program management stakeholder meetings, agreement can be reached on the relative priority of initiatives and endorsement gained on the mix of media used for communicating and documenting each initiative within each cycle. These meetings are also a forum for reporting back on the results of previous initiatives and gaining continuing endorsement on the program.

The program management structure is useful for continually renewing the mandate of the knowledge transfer program, gaining corporate endorsement and budget for activities and ensuring that the program is meeting organizational objectives.

The frequency of meetings will depend on the subject matter – in the case of complex products and services, a ninety-day cycle has been found to be effective.

Step 3: Start Small; Think Big

It is helpful to start building a knowledge transfer toolkit in a contained environment – a "grass roots" or prototyping approach. This can be achieved by initially identifying a narrow scope for the content or starting with a subset of the audience. This approach will allow gradual development of the contributor community and adaptation and expansion of the knowledge transfer tools to meet emerging audience needs.

While management endorsement of the knowledge transfer toolkit is critical for long-term success, it has sometimes been found that a "big-bang," top-down approach to implementation of similar initiatives can fail, due to resistance of the initiative by disengaged stakeholders. A more gradual introduction allows time to tailor the approach to suit organizational culture and provides better engagement of stakeholders. This will also allow "safe-fail" experiments in individual elements of the program at a low cost.

To ensure long-term success, there is a need for scalability with any technologies used, and continual management endorsement of the toolkit is critical to ensuring long-term viability.

Although a program may commence on only a small scale, it is important to publicize and promote the program widely and to highlight all successes along the way. Further aspects of this will be discussed in the next step.

Step 4: Deal with Knowledge Hoarding

All content that is provided through the knowledge transfer toolkit should aim at meeting the understood and agreed upon organizational objectives. Content contributors need to be able to understand the importance and value of sharing their knowledge with others within the organization. This value should be explained to contributors in terms that will make sense to them.

It has been found that some knowledge hoarders will often complain about the number of times they are contacted by those needing access to their knowledge. Their email inboxes and voice mailboxes will be frequently overflowing. In many cases, merely explaining to these people that they can reduce these demands by explicitly sharing as much of their knowledge as possible will encourage better knowledge sharing.

The use of a coherent rewards and recognition program is useful, provided that rewards are clearly linked to the objective value of the contributions made. Rewards may be linked to salary packaging or bonuses, but financial rewards are not the only relevant motivator. As much as possible, contributors should be given some sense of community, where recognition of key contributions can be made publicly through group communications or meetings.

A rewards and recognition program may also be linked with an internal branding campaign. The commencement of a new knowledge transfer program is a good opportunity to hold some formal launch activities on a fairly broad basis, to ensure that all stakeholders are aware of both the benefits and requirements of the program.

One approach to linking the rewards and recognition to clear deliverables is to use a "knowledge points" system, where each person's contributions to the knowledge transfer toolkit made over a period of time can be aggregated. The total points earned by each contributor can then be translated into a component of his or her salary package. Rewards can also be non-monetary and may include a range of gifts, vouchers or branded merchandise. A community newsletter can also be used to announce achievements. The intent is to develop a strong community spirit. One personal instance displayed that even after organizational change and a formal branding campaign ended a readiness to share knowledge continued, as a cultural pattern had been developed and embedded in the organization.

Statistics on content use and other helpful information should also be provided to contributors. A clear expectation should be built from the outset that knowledge sharing is a fundamental part of each contributor's day-to-day job, and the business need of the audience to access this content should be stressed.

Access to all knowledge transfer tools should be made as easy as possible, to ensure that no barriers are placed in the way of knowledge sharing. Wherever possible, the provision of content should also become part of standard business processes; for example, the provision of information to a sales force should be a required step in product development prior to the launch of new products. This will require strong management support of the knowledge transfer toolkit.

Step 5: Provide a Central Knowledge Library

The central element of the knowledge transfer toolkit is an online knowledge library. This knowledge library provides a "pull" reference source for the target audience. In order to ensure that audience members have easy access to all needed information, a single, central repository that includes all required content is important. (In a sales environment particularly, where time is of the essence, it has been found repeatedly that having content accessible in a single location is vital.)

The library should be capable of storing audio and video, as well as conventional documents of any format, to ensure that all audience needs and learning styles can be catered to from a single source. The library should include content intended for the use of the target audience members personally, as well as collateral for presentation to customers. The content needs to be reliable, accurate and kept up to date (this will be further discussed in the step "Maintain Content Accuracy and Currency" below).

In order to provide information in a predictable format, standard templates can be provided in a defined range of content types. These templates will be structured into sections to assist the content

authors to document technical content in a consistent way that will meet the needs of the target audience. Sufficient information on structure and formatting should be included in the templates, and additional documentation should be included in the form of guides, as required.

Templates can be provided not only for written documents, but also for audio or video presentation scripts and face-to-face or online training material.

A standard set of documents for product information may include the following items:

- Brief overview product information document;
- Detailed product sales guide, highlighting features, functions and benefits;
- A more detailed technical guide, if necessary, describing technology details;
- Pricing guide;
- List of key contact people;
- Customer presentation;
- Customer Proposal supporting information;
- Application form, if required, or links to online application.

The primary information that a sales person will need on a product set is focused in two key areas:

- **Business drivers**: What are the customer needs that this product will address?
- **Value Proposition**: What does this product offer (over competing products) that will be of interest to my customer?

The technology chosen for the library should provide the capability of indexing and searching content and building workflow rules for loading and maintaining content (described further below). Depending on the nature of the target audience, remote access to the library may also be important. If the workforce is mobile, access via handheld devices has been found to be highly valuable.

Step 6: Develop Content Access Methods and Taxonomy

Content should be accessible via a simple taxonomy addressed to the needs of the target audience. As the major purpose of the content is to inform the audience, the taxonomy structure needs to be aligned with the audience's view of the content, which may differ from the view of the information providers. It is important that the knowledge transfer team has the authority to structure content in the way that best suits the audience's needs.

A faceted taxonomy is useful for providing different methods of access for different needs within the target audience. Trees may be used for grouping content where required. For example, a sales team will want content to be grouped in a way that aligns with customer demands, even though products meeting those demands may be provided on different technology platforms that are provided by different product teams. Some key indices that may be used in this environment are:

- Product name (simple list, for quick access, where the product name is known);
- Business solution (a shallow tree, used for grouping products to meet known customer needs, where a specific product name is not known);
- Content type (simple list, as per document type list above, plus others as required).

A comprehensive search function is also important.

The needs of the target audience are paramount; a sales audience requires rapid access to content, in order to meet customer demands. Accordingly, the taxonomy and search functions must be simple and fast. Access should also be fast and transparent to the audience. If the security policies of the organization permit, then anonymous reader access is recommended.

The provision of alerts on new and updated content is also helpful to the audience. This should be provided on an opt-in basis and can use an email subscription service or RSS feed, depending on available technology. Audience members should be able to select content categories of interest by using the same audience-focused taxonomy to select topics for alerts.

Step 7: Provide other Tools

To supplement the "pull" nature of the central repository, another important element of the toolkit is a simple, regular, "push" newsletter. This provides regular updates on new initiatives and activities that are relevant to the audience. This may be weekly and would be most appropriately delivered on a standard intranet site. A summary of each week's issue should be displayed on the front page, with links to click through for more detail on each article. Earlier issues should be accessible via an archive on the site, for later historical reference if required.

The audience's attention can be drawn to each week's issue, via a simple email or RSS feed focused on the main topics of the issue. This should provide sufficient information for audience members to determine if topics relevant to their role appear in the issue. If not, then they will have no need to click through to the site.

The newsletter is distinct from the subscription service on the central library; the subscription service only provides an alert that a new document has been loaded, whereas the newsletter provides high-level information on new initiatives in line with the priorities determined by the program management framework.

The newsletter site should focus only on overview and transitory information; content is written once and archived after use. It is not updated. All details and changes should be updated in reference material on the central library, which can be linked to from the newsletter.
Other tools in the toolkit can vary from time to time, depending on audience needs, available technology, cost/benefit and other factors. Some suggested tools include:

- Regular combined web and audio conference briefing sessions, using scripted presentations by subject matter experts with accompanying slide presentations. Provision can be made for questions and answers to be included in the program. The sessions can be recorded and edited for later access (as audio only or video files) via the central library. Used with the subscription service mentioned above, this can also provide a podcast or vodcast function.
- An online quiz, providing a high-level overview of a topic in a fun learning environment. This would be supported by summarized source materials, and provide prizes for speed and accuracy in answering a range of simple questions. This approach is effective for desk-based staff.
- Pre-recorded, scripted audio or video information sessions. These should be fairly brief and ideally professionally-produced for optimal impact. They can be provided via the central library or by using other platforms to suit the audience. Compiled programs could be provided

on audio CDs for field staff on the road or as audio podcasts for playing on mp3 devices.
- Fully-integrated e-learning modules can also be used, but these can be very resource-intensive to develop to an adequate standard.
- Face-to-face training sessions, with a brief, focused delivery of key content that includes some form of knowledge reinforcement activities, such as a role play, quiz or question and answer session.
- Mobile phone SMS broadcasts, for brief staff messages.
- Blogging by key subject matter experts.

Step 8: Maintain content accuracy and currency

The most critical issue in ensuring content currency is ownership. Each entry in the central library should have the name of one owner clearly – and publicly – recorded. The accountabilities of ownership include content accuracy and timely updates. To this end, the owner of each entry is ideally a subject matter expert on the content of the entry. This may be the original author of the content or another expert as appropriate. All owners are also responsible for ensuring handover of their content to other relevant owners at times of staff movement.

To enable content owners to take full accountability, access to the content library should be made as easy and simple as possible. Owners should be able to access all features necessary for loading and updating their content, along with managing the status of their entries – uploading drafts, publishing and deleting at end of life. Relevant metadata should be entered at the time of entry creation and kept as simple and automated as possible.

A key requirement for content currency maintenance is an agreed upon window for review of entries. For consistency and ease of management, a single window for all content types is preferable. Aligning this with the schedule of the program management framework provides consistency. (In the example mentioned above, a 90-day window was used.)

Also critical is the ability to make available workflow capabilities so that automated reminders can be sent out to owners of entries that require updating at the end of the review window period.
It is helpful to make a distinction between the database entries in the content library (which include the metadata) and the attached content stored in each entry in the form of a document or multimedia file. For effective management, each entry should contain only one attached file.

Each entry should be reviewed at least once in every review period, even if the attached content may not require updating. Owners should be given at least two reminders to review entries by the due date. After the review date, the attached content in unreviewed entries should be "hidden" or archived, so that it cannot be used in error.

Workflow tools can provide for multiple levels of checking – for example, if an attached file is unchanged after two review periods, the owner may be prompted to enter an assurance that the content has been reviewed but that updating is not required. The owner's line manger can be sent a copy of this assurance for their information.

Further controls may be introduced to ensure that content is updated regularly and existing business processes should be used to support this where available. In one case, an existing management "scorecard" process was used to report on residual content within the process mentioned above that still remained unmodified for over 12 months. The introduction of this approach produced a marked

improvement in content currency.

Senior management endorsement of this process is critical to the success of this approach. Management reporting can also be provided to track overall progress.

In order for the target audience to be kept fully informed of the status of content, both the date of last review of the entry and the date the contents were last updated should be displayed.

The needs of the audience should again be paramount; a sales audience requires access to accurate, reliable content, and staff in this role have been found to have a low tolerance of content that appears to contain inaccuracies.

Step 9: Engage the audience as part of the maintenance process

While content owners have key accountabilities, the ability of the audience to support this role should not be overlooked. By providing key information to the audience, such as entry status and review dates and a simple feedback form on each entry, audience members can play an important role in overall content quality by providing feedback. This is particularly relevant when some of the audience members also have some amount of relevant subject matter expertise.

Entries for content that have not been reviewed by the required date should be accessible (but the actual content hidden), to enable audience members needing the content to request that it be reviewed and made available. All comments on the accuracy and quality of entries should be sent directly to the content owners, and the knowledge transfer team should be able to monitor all comments.. Readers may also be provided with a "rating" facility (for example, a one to five star rating), to provide public feedback on content quality.

While anonymous read access is desirable, as mentioned above, the identity of all readers providing feedback or ratings should be captured – preferably in the background through the use of a single sign-on or similar system – for later follow-up by the knowledge transfer team if required.

It is important that the knowledge transfer team provides oversight of review activity and all exchanges on content, and also that the team ensures that all issues are followed-up on and entry update requirements are adhered to. This team would also be charged with ensuring that all necessary help and guidance is provided, intervening whenever required.

Step 10: Use Social Media Principles

Knowledge management as a discipline has been with us for some time, while social media is a relative newcomer. However, many of the principles at the heart of social media underpin an effective knowledge transfer toolkit. Some of the important aspects of community have been discussed above. The fundamental basis for all this is trust.

To this end, contributors must be allowed to take as much control of their content as possible. When the toolkit is created, the more open all the elements can be made, the more effective the sharing will be. While audit trails should be kept, they should take place in the background, to allow contributors direct access to content without separate logins or authentication. In this author's experience, where this trust has been extended, it has been overwhelmingly honored.

In addition, social media tools make a valuable contribution as knowledge transfer tools. Podcasting and vodcasting were mentioned above. The central knowledge library discussed above should also to be built using open principles – access should be available to anyone to load or update content. Again, experience has shown that this trust is honored in practice. To this end, it is possible that a wiki platform could be used for this purpose, provided that the required supporting workflow tools can be made available.

With blogging and other social media approaches, audience engagement can be further increased, empowering the audience to have an increased impact on content quality and accuracy.

Step 11: Review and refresh

Continual measurement and improvement of the entire knowledge transfer toolkit is a vital step in ensuring that business objectives and needs continue to be met, particularly during times of organizational change.

The audience and contributors should be continually engaged and their feedback monitored and reported on. This can be done with a range of survey and measurement tools, including social media tools and periodic direct feedback should be provided to all stakeholders on the actions taken.

Use of the tools should also be measured using relevant approaches – hit counts on the knowledge library entries and newsletter articles, use of video and audio programs, attendance and feedback at face-to-face training, etc. It should however be borne in mind that pure hit counts and attendance are not the primary measure of effectiveness. The aim of a broad-based knowledge transfer toolkit is to provide tools to meet each learning style. Thus, not all audience members will use all tools.

Also, with targeted newsletter content, if a distributed summary includes only topics that are not relevant to an individual audience member in a particular week, then that person should *not* be clicking through to the newsletter site to read the detail. In this case, the *absence* of a hit is success. To this end, other assessments of the usefulness of the tools should be given greater weight than the mechanical quantitative measures.

Outcomes of regular reviews may include improvements in individual tools, the termination of tools that are no longer meeting audience needs or the introduction of new tools. The regular program management stakeholder meetings should be used as a forum for providing reports on the review and refresh process and seeking endorsement of changes to the toolkit as required.

Summary and Conclusion

From the experience gained in this environment, a number of key principles of successful knowledge transfer programs have been distilled:

- Build a highly capable, multi-skilled team.
- Develop a strong program management framework, with strong endorsement.
- Know the business and meet real organizational needs.
- Start small; think big.

- Know your audience and contributors, their needs and how they operate.

- Build a broad-based toolkit, ignoring traditional distinctions between disciplines.

- Manage currency and accuracy through clear ownership.

- Address accountability, behavior and engagement.

- Make it "the way we do things around here."

- Exercise trust, and make it as easy as possible to share effectively.

- Human issues come before technology!

About TIMAF

Information? Manage!

Information is the term we use to stand for all the forms of preserved communication that organizations care to produce, store and distribute. Anything from sales figures in a database to a video on philosophy can be considered information. We define information management as the organized collection, storage and use of information for the benefit of an enterprise.

Information Management? TIMAF!

The field of information management is currently fractured and incoherent. Each sub discipline (content, document, asset, records, data management to name just a few) has its own practitioners, applications and professional communities. We believe that behind the seeming differences between these 'managements' there is a deeper unity that will eventually define a strong clear foundation for all of them. TIMAF, the Information Management Foundation, provides this foundation.

Best Start? Best Practice!

With 'Information Management - Best Practices' we provide a yearly compilation of high quality best practice guidance, written for and by experts in the Information Management field around the world. It will help professionals overcome their information management challenges. It brings complex models down to earth, with practical guidance on day-to-day problems and issues.

Join the TIMAF Community

Interested in sharing your ideas and experiences online with the TIMAF Community? Visit www.timaf.org and join the discourse.

Buy the book!

You can now order the 'TIMAF Information Management Best Practices – Volume 1' edition for EUR 39,95 in the 'TIMAF Library' at http://timaf.org or by sending an e-mail to info@timaf.org.