

From concept to business as usual: from buy-in to ownership

Unless you're in the questionably enviable position of only needing to implement one knowledge management initiative, which will be your one and only task for the rest of your career, you're going to need to make that initiative able to keep going on its own whilst you're doing other things.

Some talk about achieving 'critical mass', others give lists of things you have to do to keep your initiative running, but none of this really resonated for me. For one thing, I've seen online communities with thousands of members, seemingly at 'critical mass', which over time just became quiet, unused and eventually irrelevant. For another, lists of things to do implies that I'm going to have to do those things, or I'm going to have to get someone else to do those things; I have two problems with that: Firstly, I'm only one person and can't afford to be dragged into micro-managing, and secondly, they all seem to introduce a potential single point of failure, by creating a role that is essential to keep the initiative alive.

So how can we possibly have successful KM initiatives, that continue to run and don't require constant maintenance from an individual? My belief is that group ownership is the key and it needs to be ownership that is taken by the group, not forced upon it.

I think that we all accept that to get a new project off the ground, we have to get buy-in. Whether that means buy-in from the management that controls activity and finance to get their permission to proceed, or buy-in from the end users to get them to believe in the product or service that you're offering.

Getting management buy-in often means justifying any time and/or financial expense to the company by showing a zero cost/effort plan, showing projected returns on the investment, or by showing that what you're proposing will replace something more expensive and thereby generate more saving than it costs.

Demonstration of ROI/zero-cost

As an example of this, I recently needed to expand a server's storage to allow for the expansion of a SharePoint site. Despite it being a relatively small cost to the business, there was no budget for it and therefore, there was no way that I could have it. For quite a long time, I had various managers, directors and financial controllers agreeing that it was really important to do so, but there was still no budget. That was when I decided to be a little more clever about it. I did a bit of digging and found out how much time and money was being spent on keeping old legacy servers limping along, including licensing, depreciation of assets, time for administrators to fix problems and so on. It turned out that the annual cost of maintaining these systems was more than double the one-off cost of replacing them. In our somewhat unusual situation, we also had the ability to pass on the maintenance costs and responsibilities to our parent company too. This was the argument that got me the budget to expand our server storage.

Group psychological ownership

So I got management buy-in and I got finance, and anecdotally I already had buy-in from the end users – They were sick of their knowledge being spread out across multiple sites and had wanted it all brought together for a long time. But that wasn't enough to make it successful and also allow me

the freedom to move on and do more great things. And as I mentioned earlier, I wasn't keen on having any single points of failure, whether that be me or someone else.

This was when I began to think about group ownership as a practical solution. It's not a new discovery by any means. In the 1920s, Spedan Lewis (John Lewis' eldest son) recognised that when people felt that they had a stake in a thing, they worked harder for it and took more care of it, and as a result he formed the John Lewis partnership. Still to this day, employees of John Lewis are shareholders in the company and receive company dividends. But still, that and a lot of research that has been carried out since, focuses on physical ownership. When we're talking about KM initiatives, there is no scope for physical ownership. What we're looking for is psychological ownership, that is to say the feeling that something intangible belongs to you or your group.

I think that there is an element of common sense about the owned vs not-owned considerations, for example, I think we all know that people tend to look after things better if they own them rather than borrow/rent them. I'm sure that everyone has heard someone talk about driving more aggressively in a courtesy/rental car than they ever would in their own. Or for example if you're renting a flat and the landlord hasn't responded to you telling him that there's a minor leak from a water pipe, you'd be forgiven for thinking 'not my problem', however, I doubt you'd do the same for a flat which you owned.

Jon L. Pierce et al² stated that psychological ownership 'is likely to lead to assumption of responsibility, caring, protection, nurturance, stewardship and a willingness to make personal sacrifices and assume risk on behalf of the target'. This is the behaviour that I would like to see from the participants in our knowledge sharing systems each time we introduce a new one, which will allow me the freedom to be able to think of new systems and new improvements. If I can achieve this, it means that a one man team can make quite a difference.

An added benefit that I hadn't considered, is the effect upon users' memory that is conferred by ownership³. In an experiment to test whether ownership made any difference to participants memory or not, Sheila J. Cunningham and team showed that subjects remembered items that were assigned to them, better than the items in their list which were not. Whilst they did not give conclusive reasons why this behaviour appeared, their tests did give an interesting and possibly useful insight into another result of ownership.

There's quite a lot of research into the positive and negative outcomes of psychological ownership, so it's important to take that into account, but it's also important to note that to this date, I have yet to find any such research that applies to group ownership. I would consider that group ownership is a quite different thing to individual ownership and whilst some of the outcomes are comparable, others are not, but when designing your new KM system or initiative, if you can account for as many of them as possible, you stand the best chance of being successful.

Negative considerations for a new system/initiative

One of the common negative factors discussed in research, is that of territoriality as a negative outcome of psychological ownership^{1,2}, so we felt it was important to address that from the start in our new system.

One of the considerations which particularly affected us, was that people are naturally reluctant to move to a new system when they have one that they think works perfectly well. We were operating in an especially fragmented system, where each team had their own places and ways of doing things and we want everyone to be working in the same place and sharing with everyone else. The proposed solution to this, was to take each team in turn and migrate all of their content to the new system and close down their old system so that they had no choice. Of course, those teams were involved from the start to make sure that they understood why.

Understanding why the new system is being implemented, how to use it and how it will benefit them is very important, and so as each team was brought onto the new system, the whole team was given a demonstration, examples of situations and how they use the system, plenty of time for questions and answers and a contact for the coming months in case they have any more questions.

We didn't want the teams to ever feel like anything was being done to their system in the future which might make them feel like they weren't involved, and that their possession was being changed without their consent, so we formed a group of Champions. Each team, as they came on board, was to nominate a Champion. That Champion becomes the team's main point of contact for the system, responsible for reminding their team to use the new system, and involved in any modifications and decision making for the system, through a quarterly Champions meeting. The meeting also serves to help to make sure that the Champions don't begin to suffer from responsibility over load² by giving them a group of their own with whom to share the responsibility.

Results so far

The first system implemented companywide using the methods and considerations discussed in this article was introduced to a group of teams in 2013 and so far has been effective and matched expectations of being owned, managed and run by the end-users. This early group was approximately thirty percent of the company, by the end of the next financial year, it is expected to include ninety percent. It has also been suggested that parts of the parent company may be interested in using the same system. Using the current model, there is no reason why they couldn't without putting any additional stress or workload upon the few KM resources that we have.

References

1. James B Avey (2009). Psychological Ownership: Theoretical Extensions, Measurement, and Relation to Work Outcomes. University of Nebraska Management Department Faculty Publications. Paper 18
2. Jon L Pierce (2002). The State of Psychological Ownership: Integrating and Extending a Century of Research. Review of General Psychology – 2002