

# **You can't manage knowledge**

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No matter what the Knowledge Management (KM) vendors say, you can't manage knowledge. To manage something you need to know what you've got and you need to measure it in some way.

You can't do either of those things with knowledge. The vast majority of knowledge is inside people's heads. The technical term for that is "tacit knowledge." And there's no clear way to evaluate how much there is or how well you're using it.

So, forget Knowledge Management and think about helping people solve problems. After all, that's what knowledge management is supposed to do. Design your support systems so they help people do what they already do naturally. If you're like most people, you probably use four sources of help to solve problems.

You probably start to solve a problem by mining your own mental resources. Have you dealt with something like this before? Does this problem remind you of another problem or situation? Do you know anyone who might be able to help you?

That takes us to a second source, your buddies. How often have you faced a problem and thought, "Who do I know that might know the answer to this?"

Most often, the first person you call or email won't know the answer you're after. But he or she can put you on the trail of someone who does. Psychologist Stanley Milgram studied how this works. In his "small world experiments" he determined that you can find someone who can help you within six contacts. In popular jargon that's "six degrees of separation."

There are several technology tools you can use to help your people do this more efficiently. Social networking tools will help you identify connections.

Simple discussion groups and wikis help people get to know other people with specific expertise. Set up discussion boards or email discussion lists that help your people share shoptalk. In shoptalk groups, people learn about both their work and their peers. Both kinds of knowledge help at problem solving time.

Traditional databases can help your people solve problems. Use your formal databases, but supplement them with databases that can do free text searching so your people can search resumes and project reports for key words.

In today's world, you'll almost certainly look online for problem-solving information. In the Google Age, many people use the net as a main source of answers.

But Google should be just the start. Mine the web sites that you find with Google. Use Google to find experts that you can contact directly. Go a step farther. Visit Amazon and search for books on your topic. Note the authors. Search for them on the web. Read their books.

That's another source, printed material. Books and journal articles are great sources of information. Don't neglect them just because this is the "Digital Age." And don't forget that many older journals and books may not be online at all.

None of these sources stands alone. The magic is in the mix.

Your brain may call up the memory of your friend who is an engineer and who may be able to help. He or she may recommend a journal article that you find online or a book from Amazon or your friend's library.

In the real world, Knowledge Management isn't all about fancy technological systems. Effective knowledge management is a collection of tools that help your people discover and use their knowledge and the knowledge of their peers to do a better job of solving problems and building profits.