

Knowledge and Information Management in the Public Sector

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Executive summary

KNOWLEDGE AND information lie at the heart of the processes and operation of government and the public sector. Yet, the active management of these assets – not to mention the recognition that they are assets in the same way as financial and physical assets are recognised – is a recent phenomenon, still regarded as a niche operation carried out by specialists with little connection to mainstream public administration work such as policy making. The UK government has taken major positive steps in the past three years to improve knowledge management for the public good, but other international governments have also carried out interesting and instructive programmes from which practitioners can learn.

Governments recognised some 25 years ago that information was as important an element of information technology as the technology itself, but for a number of reasons (on which endless speculation is possible), the focus remained resolutely on the hardware and software aspect – the early caveat Garbage In, Garbage Out (GIGO) was largely ignored. Focus was away from information and knowledge in the heads of public servants and filing cabinets being managed by those systems.

Chapter 1 of this report considers the importance of information and knowledge management in the public sector, tracing the emergence of the concept in 1980s initiatives such as the 'IT82' campaign and the work of the Information Technology

Advisory Panel (ITAP). Although these focused on the technological aspects of IT (and were criticised for that focus), they raised the question among information professionals and some other commentators of how the information in the new public sector IT systems was to be gathered, organised and managed. The importance of KM also grew as a result of a growing recognition of the economic value of KM – and that it needed to be managed in the same way as other public sector assets, such as financial.

With the enactment of the Freedom of Information (FOI) legislation, which set an implementation date for England and Wales of 1 January 2005, there was a compliance driver for the public sector to improve management of its information and knowledge resources. New positions were created, as a result, to undertake a range of duties related to the FOI and other compliance issues. However, there was still no vision at this stage to manage tacit knowledge, or create techniques such as communities of practice.

Chapter 2 explores the UK government strategy, 'Information matters', which forms the manifesto of the Knowledge Council as well as charting the initial programme for the government's management of knowledge and information within the public sector. Although it primarily consists of a series of high-level proposals for future action, it also includes elements of a catalogue of current government initiatives (such as

the data mashing laboratory operated by the Department for Transport) that offers a useful picture of current achievements and the rationale for their funding. This chapter also provides an overview of KIM work in the public sector of other countries, including the Australian 2006 e-Government strategy 'Responsive Government' (AGIMO 2006) and the early work of the Canadian government.

Chapter 3 examines ways that knowledge management is defined in the public sector, and some of the issues that have been included or excluded as the subject has developed. This chapter also covers other knowledge management-related activities, ranging from building design to what were, in effect, KM programmes in other government specialist groups such as personnel and human resources (HR) or procurement. Finally, it notes that some other professional groups – such as the Government Communications Network – developed extensive systems that were, in large part, KIM operations outside the remit of KIM professionals – for example, the contents of the Direct.Gov website and its predecessors – UKOnline and open.gov – are, in effect, large knowledge bases.

Chapter 4 discusses the relationship between knowledge and information management, and the business plans of departments, agencies and other public sector bodies. KIM clearly cannot exist in a vacuum and needs to support objectives, in order to be effective (and measurably so). While it might seem that current information on the KIM requirements of any public sector body can be readily established by examining its published business plans, in practice, this simple activity is complicated by several factors, such as overlap of jurisdictions and authority, the planning rounds and political cycles. In addition, there are, at least, three layers of knowledge and

information management strategy to be addressed:

- Departmental (or agency);
- Cross-government; and
- Delegated.

Departmental and sub-departmental strategies must, therefore, be developed not only to meet departmental business objectives as a whole, but to support particular programmes or unit objectives, cross-cutting objectives (such as the now dormant Knowledge Network), and objectives of external bodies with powers delegated from departments (such as the NHS, police forces and emergency planning authorities). All this is further complicated by the so-called 'machinery of government' changes, where responsibilities (and staff) are relocated to other departments, and the policy clock may be reset to zero and work re-starts on developing and implementing policies.

In Chapter 5 the rationale, processes and outcomes of information and knowledge audits are considered. There is a growing body of experience in the UK and elsewhere of conducting these audits both as a tool of discovery – to locate, catalogue and describe information and knowledge assets within public sector bodies (and organisations in other sectors) – and as a means of identifying gaps in the resources considered essential or necessary for the organisation to base its work on high-quality knowledge resources. Claimed benefits include de-duplication, improved sharing of information and knowledge resources, alerting members of an organisation to the full range of knowledge assets that it holds, and reducing the potential conflict between recorded (or explicit) and tacit knowledge in the organisation. The audit can also indicate potential communities of interest and provide

those communities with a catalogue of information resources from which to develop their activities. Several methods are reported as having been used for knowledge auditing, including surveys, competency analysis, process mapping and structured interviews. In the results of the audit, reported gaps are as important as reported resources: the fact that a number of those surveyed comment on having to look externally for a particular type of knowledge shows that investment in an additional resource would be cost effective, or lack of it is having an adverse effect on the quality of policy making. This chapter also looks at efforts to assign value to information resources and assets – the slightly inelegant term ‘valuing information assets’ is encountered in the literature. There is more detailed consideration of the value of asset registers, which seem not to have achieved their potential value. This could be for a number of reasons, among them changes in responsibility for the registers, inertia on the part of contributing organisations, and the failure to achieve a critical mass of either listed assets or contributing organisations.

Chapter 6 discusses the relationship between, and the integration of, knowledge management, information management and records management, to which should be added the business of managing departmental (or agency) information resources such as library and enquiry services. This chapter also considers other programmes and activities that are considered in other sectors to be knowledge management techniques, for example, the use of building design to foster knowledge sharing as exemplified in the design of the new GCHQ building in Cheltenham, a particularly interesting case since the organisational culture needs to combine the need to know with the need to share, and

balance the need for openness to support problem solving, against the need for appropriate security to avoid compromising sensitive information and intelligence. However, there are expressions of the view that KM is a passing (or past) fad, and that improved records management in the public sector is the enduring skill that has delivered real benefits and positive change at a credible cost.

Chapter 7 provides an overview of the shared corporate knowledge management tools generally found in the public sector. These are naturally similar to those found in other sectors, including intranets, collaborative workspaces and, to some extent, wikis. However, the requirement to retain a public corporate record that will be transferred to a record office such as TNA creates an additional overhead that is not always present where public record keeping is more restricted (such as in the corporate sector where reporting may be limited to the deposit of an annual report and accounts). As a result, effective KM solutions may be secondary to the need to improve record keeping and compliance.

Chapter 8 considers the problem of knowledge retention that is beginning to affect many organisations as the so-called demographic time bomb begins to kick in and the post-war ‘baby boomer’ generation reaches retirement. Coupled with the normal turnover of staff, it is becoming a challenge for organisations to retain the tacit knowledge present in the day-to-day experience that staff bring to their work. Knowledge harvesting is discussed as a possible solution.

Chapter 9 presents accounts and commentary on how KM can be marketed in public sector organisations. Staff seminars, site visits, management buy-in, directories and department-wide initiatives are outlined

as methods than can help to raise the profile and highlight the value of KM.

Chapter 10 considers a newer area of concern: information assurance and information security. Recent high-profile data losses and the challenge of complying with Freedom of Information legislation have led to a need to address these two issues. This chapter looks at the technological and cultural challenges that will need to be tackled in tandem to implement an effective solution.

Chapter 11 looks at KM 'on a shoestring' and how organisations have achieved KM improvements and effective KM initiatives at low cost or even without formal funding.

Chapter 12 considers the recent growth of so-called Web 2.0 tools – both the ability to combine data on public-facing websites to create added value and the use by the public sector of tools such as blogging, social networking or instant messaging. Social networking tools offer departments and public bodies a means of reaching a wide audience. Further benefits are considered, along with the limitations and drawbacks of exploiting new media.

With one of the major concerns about the use of social media being possible leaks of information, Chapter 13 goes on to address the issue of reputation management. The public sector has over a long period managed reputation through the communications function, but the availability of social networking tools on every internet connection has radically altered the equation. How far should individual employees be allowed to share knowledge in order to defend the organisation in the forums that they visit? Are codes of conduct enforceable in practice as well as in theory?

Chapter 14 looks at the use of communities of practice (CoPs), which have become widespread and valuable. CoPs

are, simply expressed, groups of individuals or workgroups who have a common interest in a business activity, process or responsibility and who come together to develop good, better and best practice that can be implemented for the benefit of their customers. Existing public sector use of CoPs is discussed, with suggestions of how CoPs can benefit knowledge sharing within the organisation and even beyond.

Chapter 15 addresses the challenging issue of measuring the contribution and value of KM to the organisation. Measures are often concerned with avoidance (measures of reputation or of mistakes not made through learning from others) and require savings to be calculated for costs not incurred in practice.

About the author

PETER GRIFFITHS was formerly head of information in the Office of the Chief Information Officer (OCIO) at the Home Office. He had previously been head of information services unit with responsibility for libraries, knowledge management, intranet and websites. His earlier career was at the Department of Health (where he was one of the team involved in the Cumberlege initiative to improve knowledge and information management in the NHS) and the Foreign and Commonwealth Office. Peter qualified as a professional librarian and as an information scientist; he is a Fellow of CILIP, the Chartered Institute of Library and Information Professionals, and is the Institute's President in 2009. He has written and presented on a range of topics related to knowledge and information management. He now describes himself as an independent information specialist, undertaking library reviews, working on information audit, and continuing to write and present on topics in the field of KIM.

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Peter Griffiths
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