Knowledge Management Best Practices for Service and Support

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Contents

ServiceWare
Technologies

Abstract

The successful implementation of any new business process requires foresight and planning. It also requires perseverance on the part of both employees and managers, as well as an understanding of how the new process will affect corporate culture. And most importantly, project success is always more attainable if there is a tried-and-tested set of procedures to follow.

Executing a knowledge management (KM) initiative is no different. True, creating a KM system that encourages the flow of knowledge throughout the company may seem overwhelming to some organizations. However, it needn't be. With a proven set of best practices, organizations can successfully integrate a KM system into their workplace -- and ensure its continued viability and growth for years to come.

The best practices ServiceWare outlines in this white paper will help you ensure KM initiative success in the call center or help desk. The paper explains:

- What "knowledge management" is, as it pertains to customer service and support

- Whether your organization could benefit from KM

- The factors that can make or break successful KM execution

- How your organization can ensure the ongoing success of its KM initiative

Finally, this paper also discusses how to measure the success of a KM initiative by using benchmarking, reporting and ROI metrics.

The Four Components of ServiceWare's Knowledge-Powered Support

Knowledge Management
- Structured and Unstructured Knowledge
- Experience-based Relevance
- Knowledge Sharing and Contribution
- Process Workflow and QA Engine
- Knowledge Segmentation and Visibility Control

Performance Management
- Reporting and Analytics
- Metrics Measurement

Interaction Management
- Case Management
- Integration with Existing CRM/CMS Systems
- Collaborative Support through E-mail and Chat

Resource Management
- Expert Location Based on Areas of Expertise
- Collaboration with Colleagues

Over the years, a number of vendors and industry professionals have offered their own definitions of what, exactly, knowledge management (KM) is. The one thing most can agree on, however, is what KM is not - a technology or set of methodologies. Instead, KM is a true practice; one that involves people, process and technology.

Gartner, in a July 2003 Management Update[1] , provided one of the most simple yet straightforward explanations when they defined KM as "formalizing the management of an enterprise's intellectual assets." This definition provides a fundamental explanation of KM; in other words, it recommends that companies see the "big picture" of what KM entails.

For instance, in the report, Gartner adds: "Enterprises look to manage their intellectual assets because of the capital embedded in them. This embedded capital is not financial - rather, it is human, organizational and relationship capital."

When applied to a company's service and support initiatives, this statement rings especially relevant. In any company, much of the organization's "intellectual capital" is locked inside the minds of its employees; companies that find an efficient way to mine, share and manage this intellectual capital will likely improve employee productivity, increase customer satisfaction and retention, and position themselves at a distinct business advantage over the competition.

Therefore, utilizing the intellectual capital through a formal KM initiative is imperative for any successful support organization. In fact, KM is one of the four components of Knowledge-Powered Support (KPS).

ServiceWare characterizes KPS as the use of an organization's knowledge to provide efficient and cost-effective customer service or IT support. This keeps the customer at the center of the support process. The other three components of KPS are Interaction Management; Resource Management; and Performance Management. For the purposes of this white paper, we focus only on the first component - Knowledge Management - since a successful KM initiative is the foundation of any solid KPS Solution.

Can Your Organization Benefit from Knowledge Management?

While ServiceWare is obviously a KM advocate, its years of experience in the field have shown that not every company is a prime candidate to use KM for service and support. Based on this experience, ServiceWare has found that organizations that typically benefit the most from KM share certain characteristics. For instance, they:

– **support complex products or services and require agents to continuously deliver consistent, accurate answers.** In other words, if your call center deals mainly with problem resolution, an efficient KM system can help your agents answer questions and solve problems quickly, accurately and cost-effectively.

– **often find agents collaborating to resolve customer problems.** This primitive type of KM can be siphoned into a shared knowledge base to improve customer problem resolution.

– **usually train agents using a "master apprentice model."** This training method, which uses a more seasoned agent to train newer agents, can be quite expensive. Using a KM system to train agents can save time and money, since a knowledge base allows agents to share and reuse knowledge. Select several agents to learn the system early on, so that their ease of adaptation will influence their peers.

– **are already using a CRM or call-tracking system.** A company can greatly improve agent productivity and efficiency by integrating a KM system into its existing CRM or IT help-desk applications.

– **track and measure agent productivity on an ongoing basis.** A KM system provides an easy-to-use method to measure agent productivity and efficiency. Managers can view reports that explain whether answers are found (if not, knowledge objects are written to solve unanswered problems). A KM system also enables agents to easily add new knowledge during their usual workflow.

[1] See Gartner's Management Update: "A Guide to Key Knowledge Management Terms and Concepts," by K. Harris, July 16, 2003.

Best Practices, Part 1: Pre-Implementation

Locate your knowledge sources.

Every company, no matter how big or small, has endless amounts of information that can be accessed only through a central, ineffectual repository. Even worse, the knowledge may not be shared at all because it's stored inside employees' minds.

Once you've decided you're ready to implement a KM initiative, the first thing to do is to identify knowledge sources - prior to KM system implementation. Moreover, it is critical that companies identify "project champions" - i.e., those who are willing to identify sources, examine knowledge usefulness and ensure that it is suitable for the initiative. Again, it is imperative that your champions are identified, and your sources located, before implementation begins.

So where should your champions look? To start, in places where informal knowledge management exists. For example, there are usually certain people within an organization who are "keepers of the knowledge." Many times, finding a source of knowledge management is as simple as knowing who to ask about a particular problem.

Sounds simple, but asking team members to share their knowledge can be a challenge. Employees are often the most difficult sources to document; perhaps they feel that sharing what they know will make them expendable, or that their knowledge on any given subject is what makes them unique. Once you've identified these knowledge keepers, sift through e-mail and internally-created documentation, such as that which is found in binders or hyperlinks to industry-specific "brain dumps."

Know Your Corporate Culture

Understanding your corporate culture is perhaps the most critical success criteria for a KM initiative. Rampant layoffs, budget cuts and an ever-struggling economy have significantly reduced the amount of loyalty employees have towards their employers. Unfortunately, each time employees leave their jobs, they take what they know with them. A KM system encourages the sharing of knowledge among employees, and this ensures that pertinent employee knowledge will stay around long after the employee leaves the company.

To better comprehend your company's culture, ServiceWare suggests you consider the following points:

- Understand how your organization identifies and solves problems, and harness this style. Your knowledge management process should reflect this style.

- Identify language style to ensure that the knowledge is consistent with the culture

- Identify existing knowledge repositories, and determine whether they contain knowledge or mere data. To be considered knowledge, the information must have context.

- Identify a thorough and formal process for rolling out knowledge management to agents. Take into consideration agent work style, attitude and personality.

Conduct a Knowledge Audit

Once you've identified your knowledge sources and defined your corporate culture, the next step is to conduct a thorough knowledge audit. The knowledge audit should be the first step in the implementation of a KM initiative. Often, a consultant affiliated with your chosen KM vendor will conduct the audit. (ServiceWare's consultants are Knowledge Management Consultants, or KMCs.)

During the audit, the consultant will assess the knowledge needs and existing knowledge sources within a company, to determine your level of readiness. For instance, when preparing for an audit, one of the most important steps is to determine whether you know how a company's agents solve problems. If not through a central knowledge base, then how do your agents come up with their answers? Is it through trial and error? How are the answers validated? How are they shared with other agents?

Be certain that your company is ready to create a process to manage the knowledge. Processes are necessary to ensure that the knowledge's meaning is unambiguous and sound. This process does not have to be multi-faceted or difficult; it just needs to conform to the way your company organizes and uses knowledge.

Pinpoint Existing Collaboration Patterns

During the audit, consultants will interview agents and support team members to determine collaboration patterns and identify trends based on employee feedback. Because every corporate culture is different, the interview process varies between companies. This is why it is important to have an experienced, professional consultant from a reputable vendor conduct the interviews. The best KMCs know which questions garner the most useful information from support agents.

Secure Management Buy-In and Support

During any new business process implementation, managers want to know one thing above all: how the certain initiative will affect the company's bottom line. They're looking for greater ROI and TCO metrics. They want to know how the initiative will improve efficiency, increase productivity and reduce operating costs. The KM initiative's champions must be prepared to educate their executive team regarding the system's ability to save the company money, pure and simple.

At first, it may appear difficult to define the amount of money they will save by implementing a KM system within a call center or help desk. However, as long as the average cost per service transaction is known (i.e. - cost per phone call or e-mail transaction), then it is possible to determine how a KM initiative can reduce the cost per transaction. For instance, Web self-service solutions can literally reduce a company's transaction costs to pennies.

Identify Integration Needs

Often, a company that is considering implementing a KM system already has applications in place that support their call centers or IT help desks. These can include a call-tracking system, an IVR system, e-mail or remote diagnostic systems. As a result, integration with these existing applications is almost always necessary.

Your KM vendor should have an open architecture that allows for seamless integration with existing applications. It is important to choose a vendor that has a proven process for integration into existing tools. Since KM implementation will affect business processes already in place, a plan for how your business will adapt to integration with reporting and/or measurements systems will be required.

Best Practices, Part 2: Ensuring the Ongoing Support of Your KM Initiative, Post-Implementation

The care and feeding of your KM system does not end after implementation. Rather, ongoing practices are required to maintain the effectiveness and readiness of the system. For instance, the knowledge base must be kept up-to-date and agents have to be encouraged to not only use the system, but also, to contribute to it and refine the knowledge in it.

Handle Redundant Questions Efficiently

Statistics show password resets account for 30 percent of calls to IT help desks. Likewise, many support organizations receive a number of calls about the same subjects, over and over again. As such, it is important that a company develop a reporting practice that provides the highest degree of knowledge base usage. In other words, processes should be created that allow agents to answer these types of redundant questions with a minimal amount of effort.

One way to reduce the quantity of these repetitive yet "low-maintenance" calls is to make the frequently asked questions (FAQ) features of the knowledge base available to end users via Web self-service. Often, using a knowledge-driven FAQ, end users will be able to find answers on their own, freeing agents to resolve more complex issues. It bears noting that FAQs driven by a knowledge-powered system can be much more effective that static FAQs as found on many Web sites. When the FAQs are dynamically updated by the knowledge base, the most current and relevant issues rise to the top of the list without manual update.

Promote an Environment Where Agents Contribute Knowledge

ServiceWare recommends that companies encourage and allow agents to contribute knowledge to the system during their typical daily workflow. Again, this practice reminds us how important the understanding of your corporate culture is to KM initiative success. Encouraging agents to contribute knowledge can foster innovation and team building. Develop a simple reward system - it does not have to be a monetary one - to motivate agents to contribute and share knowledge.

Invensys Wonderware

Best Practices at Work: Invensys Wonderware [2]

Based in Lake Forest, Calif., ServiceWare customer Wonderware is the world's leading supplier of industrial automation software.

Wonderware, which is an operating unit of Invensys, launched ServiceWare's system in April, 2002. Only nine weeks into the system usage, they measured a 34-percent reduction in calls and 17-percent decrease in caseload.

Wonderware says that cultural acceptance is one of the main reasons the system continues to not only work, but also thrive. The company encourages agents to use the knowledge base for every call. They also made it mandatory that agents contribute new knowledge each time they close a case.

[2] For an in-depth look at Wonderware's success with ServiceWare Enterprise™, visit http://www.serviceware.com/successes.

Define a Formal QA Process

While today's KM systems allow agents to contribute knowledge during their workday, problems occur when that knowledge is added in an inconsistent or unqualified format. That said, ServiceWare recommends that companies create a formal QA process to ensure that the knowledge being contributed by agents "on the floor" is consistent and accurate.

When building a QA process, make sure it is based on your organization's unique needs. Do not make the process difficult to master, or have too many steps - this may discourage your agents from adding new knowledge at all! However, if the QA process is too simple, added information may be inconsistent, inaccurate, or incomplete. ServiceWare recommends that the ideal system include four steps - Knowledge Submission, Technical Review, Style Editing and Final Review. This four-step QA process is recommend for all information that will be shared with the public.

For information that is to be shared with internal audiences only, a two-step process including Submit and Final Review is usually adequate. This two-step process allows team members to submit and finalize new content without having to be concerned with too many authoring standards.

Finally, ensure that invalid contributions are communicated back to the contributor, with an explanation as to why they are invalid. Be sure that the explanation's tone does not discourage agents from submitting knowledge in the future.

Knowledge Reuse

Knowledge reuse is tied to an organizations willingness to invest in its intellectual assets and is a significant component of a KM system. Knowledge reuse can help reduce the amount of time agents spend on calls, saving your company money and increasing productivity.

Knowledge reuse also increases the productivity of employees who have answered the same or similar questions for customers in the past and simplifies the problem resolution process for new agents or customers using Web self-service.

ServiceWare defines knowledge reuse as the addition of knowledge to the system once, followed by the repeated use of that same knowledge by multiple agents. A robust KM system should enable agents to share and therefore, reuse, information that has already been stored in the system. Not only does this method of reuse allow agents to share knowledge, but also, it enables the system to learn through successful interactions with the knowledge base. ServiceWare's search technology, the Cognitive Processor®, enables a knowledge base to adapt, learn and organize, based on the reuse of knowledge.

If You Build It, They Will Come - Or Will They?

You built the system. You know it can help your agents be more productive in their jobs. You know it can save your company money. But now, you have to convince your agents to use it. In any company, employees will resist change. Therefore, getting your employees to believe that the system will make their jobs more productive requires a change management plan.

A change management plan specifies how you expect your agents to accept the knowledge management system within the organization; discuss how the initiative will benefit every group in the organization. For instance, consider that you are a call center manager and that you currently measure your employees' performance based on their call handling time and the number of cases they close. Now, as a result of the KM system implementation, you are requiring them to use the knowledge base on every call. In other words, you are asking them to not only change the way they perform their job, but also, the way their performance is reviewed.

ServiceWare Recommends a Four-Step Knowledge QA Process:

Knowledge Submission → Technical Review → Style Editing → Final Review

Employees may become resentful if you change their job requirements but do not review their compensation and/or benefits. As part of an overall change management plan, ServiceWare recommends updating your employees' job descriptions, feedback sessions and performance reviews to reflect the new workflow. Neglecting these issues may create friction among team members. Establish new performance metrics that apply to use of the knowledge system.

As mentioned above, positive rewards can motivate agents to contribute knowledge and use the system. Rewards can include car washes, movie tickets, lunches or time off with pay - whatever is an appropriate level of reward for your organization.

Promoting a Self-Service Knowledge Base to Customers/End Users

You've successfully launched your KM initiative internally, initiated a plan to foster cultural acceptance and trained your agents. Now, the next step is to educate your users on how to use the system for online self-support.

ServiceWare recommends that traditional marketing techniques, such as direct mail, e-mail campaigns or online newsletters be used to promote your new and valuable service to the public. These methods should promote the online system's efficiency and ease of use, and should also encourage users to visit the new online support site. The promotion should include the site's URL and instructions for logging in, if necessary. Once visitors visit the URL, the support site and knowledge base should be easy to find and access.

You can encourage your agents to help you promote the site before they complete their calls. Agents can give out the site's URL and recommend that they try self-support before calling the help desk for faster resolution. In addition, you can promote your self-support site to callers who are on hold in your queue; a recording could instruct that users search the knowledge base as an alternative to phone-based support.

Moreover, you can offer rewards to incent customers to use the self-service system. For instance, you can offer prizes to customers for using the Web site for the first 30-60 days after launch, and then publish the winners on an internal Web site.

Best Practices, Part 3: Measuring Success: Benchmarking, Reporting and ROI

Reporting Tools Can Help Quantify Efficacy

ServiceWare's KM applications contain reports that enable call center and help desk managers to assess knowledge base usage. If a support team is using the knowledge base to find answers for every call, then using the reporting system will produce true metrics that measure the initiative's success. Reporting can also assist with gap analysis by identifying whether there are any gaps in the knowledge base.

Organizations with smaller product lines and redundant types of calls to the help desk can often achieve 100-percent knowledge base usability. Companies who have more complex product lines can use the reporting tools to monitor which agents are contributing knowledge, identify the most frequently asked questions, and track the most successfully utilized pieces of knowledge.

Benchmarking

ServiceWare recommends beginning an ROI calculation with a solid baseline assessment of your current and historical performance measurements. How often you choose to measure is up to you and depends on available information and whether the timeframe is subject to cyclical or seasonal variations. Periodic reviews should be established to identify improvement opportunities and enhance ROI metrics.

The Three Types of Knowledge Management ROI

Efficiency
- Average Handle Time
- Talk Time
- After Call Work

Effectiveness
- First Call Resolution
- Escalation
- Repeat Calls

Innovation
- Self-service
- E-mail, Chat
- Sales Churn
- Customer Satisfaction
- Employee Turnover

The Bottom Line: Measuring ROI

ServiceWare identifies three types of knowledge management ROI: Efficiency, Effectiveness and Innovation.

Efficiency includes issues like decreasing average handle time; minimizing talk time and reducing after-call work. Effectiveness includes an increase in first-call resolution rates, shrinking call escalation percentages and reducing employee turnover. Innovation includes providing self-service for Web users; rerouting calls to e-mail or chat, and increasing satisfaction.[3]

KM vendors should have a proven methodology to assist in the financial analysis of your KM initiative. After all, a KM initiative takes time, money and commitment; ongoing measurement of the program's achievements will show that it can pay for itself and even start driving revenue to the company. As previously mentioned, a thorough financial analysis can help you achieve ongoing executive-level buy-in for your KM initiative.

About the Author

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Jonathan Doctor is the ServiceWare's primary knowledge management consultant in the Midwest. He has been involved with enterprise-level technologies since 1997 and has worked specifically with call center applications and knowledge management for more than 4 years. Prior to ServiceWare, Jonathan worked with Peregrine, implementing their ServiceCenter call tracking and problem management suite. For Pactiv (formerly Tenneco Packaging), Jonathan was the day-to-day manager of a large knowledge management implementation, which comprised of as many as 15 authors contributing to the effort at any given time. In addition, Jonathan has managed projects in numerous verticals, including health care, financial services, technology, and telecommunications.

Jon earned his Bachelor of Arts in Industrial Organizational Psychology from DePaul University.

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[3] For more information and knowledge management ROI, see ServiceWare's white paper, "The Insider's Guide to Knowledge Management ROI: Quantifying Knowledge-Enabled Customer Service and Support." You can download the paper by visiting http://www.serviceware.com/whitepapers/

About ServiceWare Technologies

ServiceWare is a leading provider of knowledge-powered applications for customer service and IT support -- empowering organizations to deliver superior service while reducing costs. ServiceWare's problem resolution software, ServiceWare Enterprise™, enables agents and end-users to quickly find accurate and consistent answers to even the most complex problems – in the call center, help desk or via Web self-service. ServiceWare's self-learning and organizing search technology, the Cognitive Processor®, adapts based on usage and its easy-to-use knowledge management tools allow agents to access both structured and unstructured knowledge sources and contribute new solutions in the workflow, ensuring a robust knowledge base solution.

Leading organizations have implemented ServiceWare software including EDS, H&R Block, AT&T Wireless, Cingular Wireless, Fifth Third Bancorp, Green Mountain Energy, Reuters, and QUALCOMM. Learn more today by visiting www.serviceware.com or call 1.800.572.5748. Outside North America, call our international office at +(44)(0)1280.826345.

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