



ENTERPRISE KNOWLEDGE

Global Knowledge & Information Management Services

Why KM Efforts Fail

Zach Wahl



In my career as a KM Consultant, I've often worked with organizations who have previously experienced failed KM initiatives and want to avoid repeating past mistakes. I've worked with an array of organizations spanning industries, size, and geography, yet the tales of Knowledge Management woe I encounter tend to be quite similar.

Too many of these organizations and their people say the same things: They've tried KM before and it didn't work. They made large investments, only to have people revert to the "old way" of doing things. They got

everyone excited about the prospects, only to disappoint with underdelivery. These issues tend to be consistent regardless of the scope of KM efforts as well, and on projects focused mainly on process and people changes, as well as those that have a more technical focus.

1. Lack of Leadership Support - One of the most common reasons KM efforts fail is that they don't possess the appropriate level of support from leadership. This doesn't just mean a lack of funding or prioritization, though those are certainly dire issues. In order for KM efforts to succeed, they need active support from leadership, with executives modeling and reinforcing the behavior changes that must occur for the KM effort to truly stick. Leadership support is also critical to remove project blockers and resistors throughout the organization. The most effective means of engaging leadership

is to tie KM effort to business value and, wherever possible, hard return on investment. KM plans must be put in terms of benefits to the business in order to generate and maintain leadership support.

2. Lack of End User Engagement - Many KM efforts have fail because they don't engage the very people who are supposed to get value out of them. Too frequently, KM efforts are designed without sufficient engagement from end users and business stakeholders. This commonly results from KM practitioners and project owners making too many assumptions about what the end users really want, what troubles they're having, and how they'd like to see things change. Even if the practitioners "guess" correctly, end users typically revolt against change when they haven't had a seat, ensuring their voices have been heard. At EK, we focus on a workshop-heavy strategy and design approach to ensure appropriate user-centricity. If we can't say what's in it for the end users associated with each recommendation we're making, we know we have more work to do. From strategy, to design, to implementation, and long-term iteration, a key success factor for KM is to ensure users are engaged and empowered to guide the effort.

3. Missing Vision - Another primary reason for KM efforts failing is a lack of definition and consensus regarding where an organization wants to go. For many organizations, the KM transformation journey will be a multi-year effort. These efforts fail when not everyone is

aligned around their destination. Without a clear vision, organizations end up with internal competing priorities and misaligned expectations as to what the end state looks like. It is notable that most organizations believe they possess a shared vision, but once we start asking individual sponsors and stakeholders what their definition of success is, the answers can be dramatically different. At EK, we counteract this misalignment by putting a great deal of energy into defining, socializing, and periodically revisiting the target state. We'll use personas, journey maps, and user stories to make the target state for KM feel real, and allow stakeholders to truly visualize the impact. Coming back to the target state over time to check-in and ensure no major priorities have changed is also a key component to maintaining alignment.

4. Too Much Theory, Not Enough

Business - At EK, we focus on practical KM that will solve real business needs. Too much work in the KM field is based in academic theory and involves an exceedingly painful amount of discussion about KM best practices and academics, instead of focusing on real business value to address actual end user pains. Too many KM projects fail simply because they're placing too much stock in KM theories and have not focused enough in what their users want, what the business needs, and what will drive stakeholders to embrace real-world KM.

5. Excessive Complexity - Yet another major reason for KM project failures is that

they are designed in an overly complex manner. This is not only a reason why many KM efforts fail, it's also the reason many never move past the planning phase. KM, as a field, has always suffered from struggles regarding complexity and clarity. When you consider the many definitions for KM itself, and the vast array of topics, processes, and technologies that can fit within the KM bucket, it isn't surprising that many organizations end up with a confused and overly intricate KM strategy. To counteract this, EK focuses on agile design for KM strategy, identifying pilots and other foundational efforts that can show real value, measured in weeks and months instead of years.

6. Insufficient Marketing and Communications - Another major reason for failed KM initiatives is the incorrect assumption that "if you build it, they will come." In short, "they" won't. Good KM efforts require a significant, early, and consistent investment in change management, communications, and marketing to ensure all potential parties (everyone you're asking to change and everyone you're hoping will get value out of KM) will understand not just what KM is, but why they should care. In other words, KM communications need to be about the personal and direct value to the end users and stakeholders. These communications should be in clean and direct business terms, avoiding KM jargon wherever possible, and instead speak in terms of what the end users

care about and what they'll get as a result of embracing the change. As an important note, good KM communications aren't just something that happens at the outset or endpoint of a project release. Instead, they should be consistent and ongoing in order to continue driving the change and engaging end users.

7. Missing "Celebratable Moments" - Too often, KM projects talk in terms of features and functions, instead of business outcomes. In addition, overly "big-bang," sprawling KM projects wait too long to demonstrate value to their end users by showing them something real that they can use. Projects that take too long to show value often struggle to get or maintain the necessary traction and buzz to keep going. To that end, at EK, as we're developing KM Roadmaps for organizations, we often talk about the Celebratable Moments. These are seeded throughout an initiative to deliver periodic communications to stakeholders to ensure they see progress and have real elements to which they may react. Moreover, these moments become a key component of the aforementioned marketing and communications, as it allows the KM team to show progress and demonstrate the practicality of the project approach and KM in general.

8. Mistaken Faith in Technology - We are at an incredibly exciting time in KM technologies, where many of the promises from a decade ago are finally reality. Auto-tagging tools are much more accurate than they used to be, ontologies and the semantic

web are creating functional webs of structured and unstructured content, and enterprise search tools are making it easier to intuitively find and discover what you care about. However, KM initiatives frequently fail when technology is regarded as the KM solution. While technology plays an important role, at EK we talk about KM in terms of People, Process, Content, Culture, and Technology. We always list technology as the last factor as a reminder that technology alone doesn't make KM work.

9. Forgetting About the Content - As a corollary to the last point, KM initiatives also fail when organizations avoid what, for many, is their number one issue: old, incorrect, and outdated content. In fact, in many organizations, 4 out of 5 documents/pieces of content would fall into this category of disrepair. Ensuring the quality of your content is the most critical foundational element for KM success. At EK, we often prioritize an assessment of the current state of content and the development of an ongoing roadmap to prioritize the NERDy content for cleanup.

10. Lack of Sustainment - Even projects that experience initial buy-in and success still run the risk of failure if not properly sustained. A client recently asked me how long they'd need a head of KM and my answer, quite seriously, was forever. Organizations and their priorities are constantly in flux. Technologies, customer drivers, brand strategies, and user demographics are all dynamic. An organization must assume their KM strategy

and approach will be as dynamic as the rest of their organization. To that end, organizations that don't make a long-term investment in the communications, iterative adjustments, updates to processes and technologies, and continued engagement efforts for their KM strategies will quickly see the interest and support for such initiatives wither.

11. Lack of Governance - Though governance is much more tactical than most of the items above, I've seen many KM efforts fail as a result of poor or nonexistent governance that it must be included in this list. Efforts that have not put a long-term plan in place for KM Strategy, System, and Content Governance may see initial successes, but will turn into failures over time. Indeed, early KM successes that don't have the benefit of effective and comprehensive governance will quickly turn into failures, as systems and content trend toward chaos. Governance may not be the most exciting element of KM, but in order to achieve sustainable evolution of your KM programs, it is absolutely critical. At EK, we define KM Governance to include Vision, Roles and Responsibilities, Policies, Procedures, Communications, Education, and Analytics. Together, these elements will define a KM ecosystem that will yield continuous improvement instead of system entropy.

Want to ensure you avoid these major KM effort failures? We're here to help.

Enterprise Knowledge (EK) is a services firm that integrates Knowledge Management, Information Management, Information Technology, and Agile Approaches to deliver comprehensive solutions. Our mission is to form true partnerships with our clients, listening and collaborating to create tailored, practical, and results-oriented solutions that enable them to thrive and adapt to changing needs.

Our core services include strategy, design, and development of Knowledge and Information Management systems, with proven approaches for Taxonomy Design, Project Strategy and Road Mapping, Brand and Content Strategy, Change Management and Communication, and Agile Transformation and Facilitation. At the heart of these services, we always focus on working alongside our clients to understand their needs, ensuring we can provide practical and achievable solutions on an iterative, ongoing basis.

info@enterprise-knowledge.com | 571-403-1109 | @EKConsulting