How to motivate people to contribute to a Knowledge Sharing System?
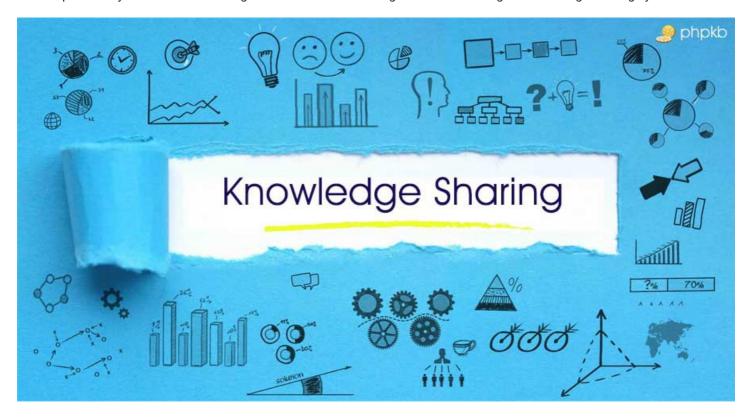
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These seven practical tips show how to get people to willingly contribute to building your organization's fund of knowledge.

Motivate People to Share Knowledge

These tips are very effective to encourage users to share knowledge with others using the knowledge-sharing system.

Why Knowledge Sharing?

Knowledge is no longer a new concept to many businesses, partially due to the rise of the corporate portal as the latest must-

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have application. The portal has become synonymous with knowledge management. The problem is that technology by itself often doesn't solve a company's inherent problems with intellectual capital, knowledge, and information management. Simply put, every solution takes people. Here, a knowledge management practitioner suggests seven strategies for getting people to open up and share what they know.

Is knowledge-sharing a natural act?

Traditional thinking holds that knowledge sharing is not a natural act. Many KM initiatives focus on how best to persuade unwilling participants into providing information. But how would it change things if we were to start from the premise that knowledge sharing really is a natural act? Just look around. People do it all the time - in the halls, over the phone, through e-mail, at the pub. How could anything that happens so frequently and easily not be a natural act? Perhaps it is our organizational structures that get in the way.

> Take our school systems, for example. John Keeble, a colleague from Enterprise Oil in the UK, says, "*Western society's educational systems don't condone knowledge sharing - they call it cheating.*" I think John is right. Most of us have been raised on the power of individual effort and encouraged to keep our mouths shut and our pens still. We have carried these values and belief systems into our businesses and incorporated them into our management styles.

Awareness is the first step to overcoming this reluctance. Understanding that we carry this baggage with us and recognizing the need to unlearn and rethink our models and paradigms is an essential skill. Ultimately, it doesn't matter whether **knowledge sharing** is natural or unnatural; it just matters that we do it. Resist the urge to over-analyze or over-plan, and just get on with it. Perhaps the process of simply doing it (albeit with some regularity) makes it part of the knowledge management culture and ultimately makes your KM mission a success.

Knowledge Sharing Strategies

There are 7 strategies listed below to encourage knowledge sharing among people that are found to be very effective.

1. Show people, how knowledge benefits them personally.

It's true! Knowledge does equal power. But there's a new caveat. Knowledge is only powerful or valuable when it is continually refreshed and used. Knowledge sitting idle is worthless. Knowledge has an increasingly short shelf life, and if it's not used, it quickly loses value - period. It is up to us as managers and practitioners to help people understand the new value proposition in which knowing something is at least as important (if not more so) than established knowledge. What we need to know changes so quickly that what is valuable today may be worthless tomorrow.

It's important that people understand how knowledge sharing can benefit them personally. Show them examples of how access to others' knowledge can improve their performance and how sharing what they know makes their knowledge more valuable.

Consider this: If I share a product idea or a way of doing something with other people, just the act of writing it down - of putting it into words - improves it. And verbalizing it enables other people to access it, add to it, and further improve it. In the end, I end up with a better idea.

2. Revamp reward and recognition systems.

Most reward systems still reward individual effort and knowledge. If we want to create a culture that supports knowledge creation, sharing, and re-use, we must reward those behaviors. It's that simple.

There is no one way to structure compensation to support knowledge sharing. It depends on your business strategies and objectives and where you are in your cultural development. It also depends on the people involved and the things that motivate

them. The knowledge economy is no different from past economies in that there will be some people motivated by money, others by knowledge, some by power, some by freedom, and so on. Good reward and recognition systems recognize that different people are motivated by different things, and they take advantage of that fact. A few specific techniques can help in this area.

Personalize knowledge studies have shown that one of the best ways to increase the value of knowledge and the likelihood that it will be used is to link it to a real person. For example, put the contributor's name on it: "George Bailey's Guide to Resolving Well Problems," "Tom Browne's Sales Techniques." If you don't want to recognize individuals specifically, you can do the same thing for a team: "Singapore Refinery's Safety Process," "The Everest Team's Guide to SAP Implementation."

This subtle addition can make a huge difference. It increases the credibility of the work, gives users someone to contact, and dramatically improves the odds that the information will actually be used. And it makes those who contributed the knowledge feel valued and appreciated. It maintains their sense of ownership and accountability and solves the "who gets the credit" problem.

Reward valuable knowledge: One of the mistakes we often make in knowledge management is leading people to believe that simply contributing knowledge or information is enough, and sometimes even worthy of reward. Just the other day, I heard about a firm that paid a flat fee for submissions to their knowledge system, regardless of the quality or relevancy of the submission. Although this may be a way to fill up a database, what you are likely to end up with is a database full of worthless information that no one can (or wants to) use.

Rewarding people for simply contributing - for putting knowledge down on paper or into a database - is not enough. I'm not sure it even qualifies as knowledge. It's kind of like getting an award for showing up at work every day.

We need to redefine knowledge sharing credit to apply only to knowledge that's worth something. And who decides the value of knowledge? How about letting the user decide? Let the internal market determine and regulate value. If no one uses your contribution, you don't get paid. If lots of people use it and do lots of good things, you get paid a lot.

Reward both sender and receiver: The second aspect of redefining credit is to reward both the contributor and the user. Reward the user for re-use, for building on existing knowledge, for not re-inventing the wheel.

3. Show people what knowledge sharing looks like.

There are "knowledge naturals" in every organization. These are people who live to learn new things and share what they know with others. It is their purpose in life. Identify these people and establish semi-formal roles that recognize these activities as valuable. Elevate the status of informal experts. Give people role models they can pattern their behaviors after.

4. Let people know that it's OK to make mistakes.

In many company cultures, mistake-making is not allowed, or at least it's not admitted. People are brought up to believe that they are always supposed to have the answer. This approach leaves very little room for learning and growth and shuts the door to knowledge sharing.

Sharing best practices is popular these days, but what about sharing worst practices or lessons learned? Wouldn't this approach provide some essential learning?

With best practices sharing, you run the risk of squelching innovation and creative thinking. People think: "That's how it's supposed to be done, so why should I bother to look for new and better ways?"

Worst practices sharing or lessons learned leaves the door open for generating new ideas, and it provides people with valuable information about what to avoid. Another thing you can do to help create a knowledge-sharing culture is to celebrate mistakes. Make it fun. Give awards for the best mistakes. You'd be amazed at how much learning can come from exercises like these.

Celebrating mistake-making can increase knowledge and help build trust and a sense of community. When people are willing

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to admit their mistakes, those around them will feel closer to them and encouraged to share their learnings as well. And the exchange creates a bond between sharers.

5. Make knowledge sharing a job requirement.

Of all the reasons people don't share knowledge; not having enough time is probably the most common. People are just too busy to attend to what looks like an additional work requirement added to an already busy work schedule.

But we absolutely must integrate knowledge sharing into everyday work processes and job requirements. Knowledge activities must not be perceived as additional chores to complete at the end of the day.

By making knowledge sharing a formal part of job responsibilities, including it in job descriptions, and using it in appraisal programs, we begin to create a real knowledge culture.

6. Educate people about what knowledge is valuable and how it can be used.

This may sound ridiculous, but one of the reasons people don't share is that they don't know that they have anything to share. Here's an example: Suppose I'm a customer support agent on a help desk, helping customers resolve PC problems. The knowledge of how to solve a particular problem, the cause of the problem, and a host of related information about the customer and product are all extremely valuable bits of knowledge that could be shared and produce a great benefit.

It's not that I don't want to share; it's that I don't really understand what I have or know and how it might be useful to other people in the organization.

I might not know that 68% of all calls are repeat problems or that the other 35 people on the help desk get many of the same calls. It hasn't occurred to me that the things I learn about the customer and how they use the product might be valuable to the product development or marketing people.

Part of building a knowledge culture means making sure that everyone understands the knowledge value statement. And in order to do that, people have to have both an understanding of business strategies, objectives, and interrelationships within the company and be able to recognize what knowledge is most valuable and how it is (or could be) leveraged.

7. Make sure the technology works for people, not vice-versa.

Sometimes IT-driven knowledge management initiatives take on an "if we build it, they will come" attitude. We erect huge knowledge management systems that are not integrated with how people actually work. We are far better served by including users in the development of knowledge tools and building on everyday technology that we already have in place (such as e-mail systems, groupware, and the Internet).

Technology can be a double-edged sword. It can connect those who need expertise to those who have it. It can facilitate communication and information exchange across organizational and geographical boundaries. It can improve our ability to find what we need, when we need it, and enable us to control the way information is presented back to us.

However, technology can also be an obstacle that keeps people from sharing knowledge. If the technology is too complex, too difficult to learn, or requires too much time and effort to complete tasks, then chances are it is an obstacle rather than an enabler. It is essential that we use technology to reduce complexity and save time, rather than add to it. Knowledge management is about people, processes, and technology, but it's mostly about people. I suggest you check **knowledge management software**. Personally, I believe it's one of the best. With a massive list of unrivaled product features, it is a continuously developed product & the GUI is just simple & great. Its powerful, collaborative functionality allows your customer support teams to easily share knowledge among team members and users which lower customer support costs, helps juice SEO, create engaged & loyal customers, increases lead generation and offers personalization.

Integrated Processes

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Culture change is neither quick nor easy, but as noted earlier, it is no longer an option if you want to be successful in the knowledge economy. The first step is identifying and removing obstacles and impediments. Culture creates itself, but we can do a lot to help the process along.

One thing I would caution against, however, is expecting your KM programs to carry the full weight of cultural change. Culture is critical to KM, but is equally critical to related processes such as learning, innovating, and achieving peak performance. The same type of open, responsive, and trusting environment is needed to support all these processes. You are better served by combining initiatives wherever possible and presenting a common vision and focus that integrates knowledge processes with learning, innovation, and performance improvement.

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