

Knowledge Management: **The Creation and Foundation of Future Learning for Social Service Agencies**

AMY ROGERS

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

With the impending retirement of the baby boomer workforce and the changes in technology that by definition make some information obsolete, the capture and management of knowledge is an important issue now facing all companies, organizations, and government agencies. While knowledge management has been used for quite some time in industry and private sector businesses, it is a new concept for public sector human service organizations. In the past, the term knowledge management has been used to describe the processes by which organizations tap the expertise of both workers and customers to assure rapid product development, deploy new and best practices, and assure that the expertise individuals develop from experience does not get lost to the organization as they leave jobs or job functions. The public sector human service field is faced with similar challenges. The workforce is aging, regulatory requirements are growing, and the value of empirically based practice is highlighted by the increasing demands for performance outcomes.

On a county level, the idea of knowledge management is a broad one that has a different focus depending upon the county and the resources available. Knowledge management was brought to light for Bay Area counties at the BASSC Knowledge Management Summit held in November 2007. This Summit was convened to begin the conversation and to support local counties in their individual conversations about managing and capturing knowledge.

Santa Clara, Santa Cruz, and San Mateo Counties are all in the process of creating the focus of their knowledge management course, as well as understanding what it is that they don't know yet and where they anticipate they will be in the future. Contra Costa County hopes to learn from their thoughts and processes to date in order to help itself as well as other counties begin to capture the creativity, history, and information in a helpful and useful manner for future generations.

Amy Rogers, Staff Development Specialist,
Employment & Human Services Department,
Contra Costa County

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Background

Although Knowledge Management is one of the newer management concepts, some of the ideals and beliefs surrounding knowledge management have been a part of operating procedures for many human services organizations for decades, without having a formal name for this process.

Knowledge Management is the people, processes, and technologies involved with the creation, dissemination, and utilization of the information needed to create knowledge and wisdom in an organization. The goal of managing knowledge is to create a foundation and a structure for knowledge transfer, productivity, and to create more efficiency in an organization. Given that the definition of knowledge management is very broad and basically theoretical, there is a lot of room for interpretation and definition of relevance to individual organizations. Within social services agencies, the management of internal knowledge, creation of bench strength (or, in other words, the knowledge and experience of the staff who support and are in line for management positions) and the quality of successful employees are all dependent upon many factors, including how the organization views the role of knowledge management in its structure. In researching different counties, it is apparent the knowledge management processes and priorities are dependent upon how the agency views the definition of knowledge, what needs and priorities the agency is focused upon, and the culture and funding available in the community.

In 2007, BASSC held a Knowledge Management Summit for all Bay Area counties to bring to light the importance and impact of knowledge management. This is a comparative case study of how three different counties are viewing and implementing knowledge management strategies into their everyday processes and the lessons that Contra Costa County can learn from their wisdom and experience.

Knowledge Management in Santa Clara County

BACKGROUND

Santa Clara County recognized an escalated need for knowledge management a few years ago after a large number of employees retired. The union had recently negotiated a change in the retirement age, removing five to ten years from the previous retirement age, and a significant number of senior staff and managers, with years of experience, left the agency. This dramatic loss of skilled workers was juxtaposed against the increasing demand for program outcomes (i.e., in child welfare, the focus on the federal performance metrics, and in employment benefits, the increased focus on work participation rates for welfare clients). Also, looking outward a number of years, it seemed that an increasingly tight economy would necessitate a heightened focus on business process review and improvement. Thus, there were multiple important drivers for a focus on knowledge management. Santa Clara County leadership wanted to build the bench strength of its employees before the loss of the workforce to retirement, and they also wanted to begin

to develop transfer of knowledge skills, as well as develop a means to further evaluate outcomes for the community, address organizational performance requirements, and build strong business process improvement tools.

Santa Clara County's Social Services Agency responded in many ways. One of the first things was to create and hire a Director of Development and Operational Planning in 2006. The goals of this position included beginning the process of collecting, disseminating, and managing knowledge as well as measuring the performance of the county and advocating for quality in service and processes. The position was developed to support and enhance the change process that any knowledge management initiative entails. This change process is a multi-year process that must focus on the development of key approaches to practice review and design, quality improvement, the development of tools to capture and define human resource requirements, and the development of planning activities that set the foundation for the knowledge management activities.

VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Santa Clara County views knowledge management as a change process that is specifically tailored to an organization. The basis of their outlook is found in the mission, goals, and objectives that the county uses as a foundation for their services. It is not one person's job, it is everyone's job, and it is intended to enhance everyone's skills and performance.

HIGHLIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Santa Clara County has had many inroads toward their knowledge management goals. They started with focus groups involving supervisors of the four different departments that make up Santa Clara's Social Services Agency: Aging and Adult Services, Employment and Benefits Services (DEBS), Family and Children Services, and the Agency Office (which houses Administration, Financial Management, Governmental Relations & Planning, Information Systems and the CalWIN Division). From this focus group, DEBS took the information collected to the

next step and broke them down into a wish list. The results from the wish list were then split into time frames. From this list, DEBS created CSI or the CalWIN Support Initiative, and teams began meeting twice a month to work on particular goals. Some accomplishments thus far with this strategy have been a Supervisor Appreciation Event, the completion of a proposal of e-Case Review protocols, and a "Working with CalWIN Alerts" guide.

Another component of knowledge management is training. Santa Clara County has also created a Development and Operational Learning University. This university-style learning institute was created in order to cultivate and promote leaders. The university has three successive levels of learning and it is open to any employee. The classes are broken up into the categories of: HR Academy, Soft Skills Academy, Labor Relations, and Equal Opportunity Division and Performance Management. The initial kick-off of the university occurred in March 2008 to great reviews.

Knowledge Management in Santa Cruz County

BACKGROUND

In the past few years, Santa Cruz County has been developing the basis for structures and processes that will facilitate knowledge management. The Executive Management Team recognized the need to make better use of data to inform decision-making, to better facilitate the transfer of knowledge throughout all levels of agency staff, and to document the large amounts of tacit knowledge that otherwise gets lost over time. Recently, the Child Welfare System Improvement Planning Process was used as a testing ground for the facilitation of knowledge management. Through this process the agency used several methods of collecting data and information, interpreting it, and communicating it to all the relevant stakeholders. Last year, this planning process was the focus for the agency's knowledge management efforts.

VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The focus of knowledge management in Santa Cruz County centers on re-framing existing processes, and the process of gathering information. The focus

of knowledge management in Santa Cruz County is on defining the key elements of evidence-based practice and distinguishing between best, promising, and emerging practices. Santa Cruz aspires to create a more standardized agency-wide model for evaluating, refining, and implementing evidence-based practices that will support positive client outcomes across all programs.

Santa Cruz County views the department as a learning community. There is a strong focus on induction training to ensure a well-trained workforce and to aid in staff retention, as well as furthering the strategic direction of the department. The concept of a learning community drives their transfer of learning and how information is taught, as well as how information moves the county forward. Santa Cruz County values and is invested in communication among staff at all levels, and in utilizing knowledge so that it flows from the bottom up, the top down, and the middle out. The county is willing to be intellectually vulnerable and collectively curious.

The county is also moving the Staff Development Department in the direction of a more organizational development role within the county structure. In line with this focus, Staff Development is also engaged in a Strategic Planning Committee, which focuses on professional development and training and information: the goal being to create more efficient and better prepared staff for the various programs.

HIGHLIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT ACCOMPLISHMENTS

Santa Cruz County has done many things toward knowledge management success. Approximately one year ago, the agency hired a new Director of Planning and Evaluation. This person is one of the central hubs of the county's knowledge management structure. An Information Management Planning Council has been created; all of the organization's division directors are invited and the topics of conversation center on the use and dissemination of data and resources. The mission of the group is to discuss and recognize the interrelationship between support and function of information, and how to move this information

in a strategic direction. Further, the county has created a Knowledge Management Team. It includes all members of the executive team, but also includes the directors from Fiscal, Personnel, Information Technology (IT), Staff Development, and Planning and Evaluation. This team focuses much of its agenda on knowledge management topics.

Santa Cruz County is also in the process of putting together a framework for understanding how Knowledge Management will be explicitly implemented throughout the organization. It identifies "pillars" of knowledge upon which the organization's work is built. These pillars represent areas of knowledge and/or expertise that are integral to the effective operation of programs and service delivery. The pillars of knowledge that support agency functioning include: people, practice, technology, and budget. Together, these four areas serve as a focus for their Knowledge Management Leadership Team. The pillars are depicted graphically in a document that illustrates the connection between the pillars and the work of the organization. This document has the mission, services, and pillars of knowledge necessary for each department. There are also Knowledge Management Committees that flow across each of these four pillars.

The county has also created a new employee orientation to the department, in addition to the regular orientation that the county offers. This orientation familiarizes new staff with the divisions, what they do, and the interconnectedness between divisions.

Knowledge Management in Santa Mateo County

BACKGROUND

About two years ago, San Mateo County's Human Services Agency's Financial Director announced that he would retire in the next few years. At that time, the Executive Team decided they needed to do some problem solving on how to capture his knowledge and plan for his successor. The county wanted an outside perspective on capturing knowledge and hired a consultant to help obtain the "softer" knowledge. The "softer" knowledge has been defined as the creativity, experience, and wisdom of those

employees retiring. San Mateo County wanted to capture the story behind the information, not just the information.

VIEW OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

From San Mateo County's perspective, the concept of knowledge management goes beyond basic information to the story behind the information; with the understanding that not all information is knowledge. They view knowledge as the story behind the information, the experience behind the knowledge and the creativity around the decision making. How does a person and/or agency capture knowledge? What information is needed to capture in order for an organization to thrive? There is a historical component to the information, as well as a technical component as to how the information is captured. And, what do each of us do daily to contribute to the knowledge capture pool? What is it that employees are doing to share and communicate their knowledge to others within their work environment?

The county has also focused some of their resources toward rebuilding their intranet, which they view as their content management system. They are in the process of deciding to expand their software and capabilities for future use on their system. The IT department has also discussed creating an Intranet Change Control Board and an Intranet Content Manager. The goal of these building blocks is to create an intranet system that employees will use and find helpful, rather than just being a place to store "stuff."

HIGHLIGHT OF KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

ACCOMPLISHMENTS

San Mateo County's biggest accomplishment with capturing knowledge has centered on the Finance Director's retirement. The retiring director worked with a consultant for one year prior to his retirement. Together, they worked to create tools for his successor, as well as for others in the department to use as information and historical knowledge for the reasons behind his decision-making. Out of this process, there were three main products: First, training was created through DVD's that included Power-Point slides and the director's voice-over to explain

different processes and procedures, and his mindset while making decisions. This knowledge tool was kept to a language that would be understood by a small, intended audience. The second tool included conversations around how this knowledge fit into the vision, mission, and values of the county. These conversations were documented. The third tool included exercises used during an analysis of the current budget. The county also hired his successor before his retirement so that he would be on board and fully understand the business, the processes, and the budget from the retiring director.

The county also tried this process with another retiree who was an eligibility manager. They realized early on that this process wasn't useful for this position due to the highly structured and regulatory standards in eligibility. San Mateo County realized that this type of knowledge capture is useful with certain positions and in certain capabilities but not necessarily with every retiring employee.

Eighteen months ago, the county also set up a Knowledge Management Steering Committee. This committee focuses on the knowledge capture of information and the future of knowledge management in the county. On the staff development side of knowledge management, San Mateo County has also created individual employee development plans that center on the eighteen competencies that they wish their employees to possess. The staff calendar or development directory also links trainings to the eighteen competencies.

Lessons Learned and Future Challenges

Many of the lessons learned are the same across the three counties highlighted in this case study. First, beginning the capture of knowledge as soon as possible is an essential element of success. Time lost is information lost. Whether the county is experiencing a retirement, implementing a new process, or a new training element, the county should start gathering the information and creating workgroups as soon as the idea sprouts. Second, it should begin to build an awareness of the implications technology has on knowledge and capture the limitations, as well as

the astronomical amounts of information that exist. It is easy to think that a technological tool will be the respite of information, but at the same time, someone needs to be able to find the information and know how to use it in the future. A technological repository of information is only as useful as its intention and parameters for future use. Third, there is no right or wrong answer when it comes to managing knowledge, although there do appear to be a lot of questions surrounding how to capture it, what to capture, and how to share it. How do we share this knowledge with those staff at the direct contact level? Is this information relevant to them? How do we create a process to transfer knowledge back up the chain to management? The answers to these questions are county-specific and dependent upon many different factors.

Within each county there is also the element of control. Several questions arose around this topic, such as: Who should have access to the information? How should the county control the parameters of the technology? Should this information be shared outside of the county with stakeholders, community members, as well as other counties? As technology becomes more of a storage container and mode of disseminating knowledge, these questions will become more of a concern that will need to be addressed down the line.

Budget and Fiscal Implications

Given the grim situation of our current budget year, a full discussion of the financial implications of additional knowledge management resources is difficult. The other counties mentioned in this case study have used combinations of county general funds and administrative overhead costs to fund their initiatives. The costs of lost productivity during the transition between employees, and the replacement costs associated with hiring, training, and the years it takes to get to the same level of knowledge as the retirees, would outweigh the costs associated with knowledge management initiatives given the expected turnover in employees over the next ten years as the baby boomers retire.

The projected costs associated with knowledge management resources are employee time, an increase in available resources for employees from already existing avenues of support, and possibly the costs of the contract associated with a consultant. If we ask a consultant for 10 hours of time a week for a year, this may add up to \$25,000–\$50,000 for the year, depending upon the services and number of people involved. The projected costs of possibly renovating the existing content management system could range from IT employee time (possibly 10 hours a week for 6 months, plus on-going management of the system) over the course of the project to the acquisition of a new learning management system, which could range from \$55,000 to \$125,000 depending upon the capabilities and information needed for the system to be effective.

Conclusions

Knowledge management is just beginning to get its bearings within the county structure. Given that the baby boomer generation will be retiring over the next ten years, county service agencies are beginning to get a grip on the implications for lost information and the best strategies, processes, and needed translations for capturing, storing and sharing this knowledge. But where do we start and how do we know if we are capturing and sustaining the right information from the right resources and for the right audience?

As stated at the beginning of this case study, depending upon resources, priorities and outlook, each county highlighted appears to have a different outlook on capturing knowledge and knowledge management. Is it necessary for all of the Bay Area counties to have the same understanding and definition of knowledge management? Is there one definition of what knowledge management is or isn't and is this relevant to how knowledge is captured? Although this case study may have created more questions than answers, it shines light on the fact that knowledge management is in its infancy on the county level, and some counties have begun the process of understanding the relevance and importance of knowledge management.

Recommendations

Contra Costa County is highly encouraged to explore the following opportunities:

- 1 Create an extended Executive Team (ET) that includes all members of ET in addition to the Supervisor of Staff Development, IT, and Finance with the mission to provide leadership around operational, development, and knowledge management goals for the department.

- 2 Create a Leadership University for all levels of staff in order to begin the process of succession planning within the department, with the intention to provide 'soft skills' classes, in addition to project management and knowledge management concepts. This project is currently in the planning stages through Staff Development, which is also the unit that would provide the resources for the University in terms of instructors, facilities, and the evaluation process.

- 3 Elevate the Knowledge Management Ad Hoc Committee to a more established planning team which would include creating Contra Costa County's definition of knowledge management, clear goals and objectives, as well as strategic directions for the future of knowledge capture in the county. The team would include members from each bureau and administrative function, as well as from all classification levels. The team would meet monthly and form committees to address strategic initiatives.

- 4 Begin the knowledge capture process at the Division Manager level retirees. In lieu of involving a consulting firm, given the current budget climate, a less costly plan would involve the use of current retirees. Through a job-sharing program, Contra Costa County would involve retirees from a neighboring county in a knowledge de-brief with current staff who plan to retire. The services would then be repaid in kind to the county providing the service. This would allow an outside person, without historical or institutional knowledge, to do a knowledge de-brief from an outside, objective perspective. This process would allow a more complete knowledge capture with a less costly price tag.

- 5 Explore our current content management system (Shared Text Automated Retrieval System or STARS) with the intention of cleaning, updating and improving the functionality. With the help of IT and program analyst staff, delete information from STARS that is outdated, irrelevant and not needed. In order to improve the use of the STARS system, the team of analysts and IT staff, along with the Knowledge Management Planning Team, would work toward creating a more user-friendly repository of information and resources for staff.

Acknowledgements

I would like to give sincere appreciation to Gina Sessions, Director of Development & Operational Planning in Santa Clara County. She was a wealth of information about knowledge management and management theory. Without our conversations, discussions and enlightening talks, this case study wouldn't have developed as it did. I would also like to thank Will Lightbourne, Marlene Vidal, and Frank Motta of Santa Clara County.

I would also like to thank John Joy, Sharif Etman, and Ken Kong from the County of San Mateo for their time and creativity.

I would also like to express appreciation for their time and enthusiasm to Ellen Timberlake, Madeline Noya, and Evelyn Hengeveld-Bidmon from Santa Cruz County.

Finally I would like to thank Dennis Bozanich, Lynn Yaney, Judy Dias, Judy Olcott and Joe Valentine from Contra Costa County for giving me the opportunity and the time to participate in BASSC.

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