

KNOWLEDGE SHARING EBOOK

# The 5 Essential Elements of a Modern Knowledge Base

# Introduction

According to a recent Fierce, Inc. study, 86% of workers believe workplace failures are the result of ineffective collaboration or a lack of communication in the organization (Salesforce, n.d.). However, since effective collaboration and communication are dependent on the quality of the capture, organization, and dissemination of the information that is their object, one cannot realistically discuss solving the former without addressing the latter. Knowledge Management (KM) is the term for the discipline that has been tasked with solving the challenges of managing information assets and information sharing in an organization.

Today KM is sometimes met with skepticism, due in part to the fact that many early KM implementations failed to deliver on all that they had promised. Riding on the back of the technology explosion of the 1990's and early 2000's, early KM implementations were designed around the breakthrough technologies of the day such as semantic search and real-time collaboration (Rozwell, Mann, & Drakos, 2012). As a result they were very "content-centric" in that they focused on the technologies that enabled what one could do with an organization's information assets. Gartner analyst Rozwell

(2012, p. 1) writes, "A traditional knowledge management (KM) project was usually a centralized effort to organize resources and content via taxonomies, cumbersome e-forms and repositories, and complex review processes. It missed the point that knowledge resides with people and, especially in complex situations, is difficult to access and use without collaboration and context."

One example of a popular traditional KM implementation is the hosted intranet. While in theory it is a great idea to have all of an organization's information in one place, this type of set-up typically requires an IT resource to update and configure the information. Updates, as a result, have to happen according to a release schedule, and if you miss delivering your content on time you have to wait until the next release. This can be problematic if the information you need to share is likely to change quickly or if you require frequent updates.

While it is true that the momentum behind some types of early KM implementations has sputtered out and some cynics claim that the function of KM is no longer relevant, according to Gartner analysts there is still significant interest in KM due to the



recorded examples of successful implementations (Rozwell et al., 2012). Prominent universities such as Columbia University, these research analysts point out, offer degree programs in KM, further attesting to its continued relevance. In addition, nearly all large organizations have implemented some form of KM or KM techniques to solve concrete business problems, whether they are labeled as “knowledge management” or not.

It is in response to this continued interest that Gartner analysts have reevaluated KM and today recommend a “demand-centric” approach as the way to achieve a successful implementation (Rozwell et al., 2012). A demand-centric model, Gartner analyst Rozwell (2012) states, is one that places workers and how they consume knowledge at the forefront and helps them to:

- Find existing content easily;
- Organize it according to their own preferences;
- Create, mash up and contribute new content that can be reused in other situations;
- Locate experts to ask "contextualized" questions;

- Measure and reward the expert for being available.

“Advanced technologies are fascinating, but the success of a KM project depends far more on perceptive management and thoughtful, worker-focused design,” say Gartner analysts Rozwell, Mann, & Drakos (2012, p. 4). **Many KM leaders agree that a successful KM implementation is 20% technology and 80% people, and includes management, incentives, culture, and communication.** In addition, they point out, KM will be most successful and provide the most value in the “specific context of a business issue that the organization is addressing”, further reinforcing the point that the core purpose of any KM initiative is to help an organization’s people do their jobs. In addition, Gartner analyst Rozwell (2012, p. 5) writes, “KM initiatives need to shift focus to a demand-centric model that acknowledges the wealth of information that exists in people and networks. This shift will increase knowledge reuse and will make organizations better prepared to meet the challenges of medium- and high-complexity situations.”

A knowledge base is the most basic type of KM implementation and indeed, the easiest and most cost-effective type to put in



place. However, keeping in mind the deficiencies of the content-centric KM implementations of the past vs. Gartner analysts' current recommendation to follow a demand-centric approach, it is clear that a knowledge base must be more than a repository of documents (Rozwell, 2012). An effective knowledge base should include social collaboration functionality that streamlines communication by allowing users to take a piece of information that originates in one place, such as a 1:1 conversation in an email or a piece of data in a web application, and inject that directly into a one-to-many, or in some cases many-to-many, communication channel. This creates an opportunity for both richer and more efficient communication experiences that improve communication itself, but also help drive productivity and collaboration (Gartner, 2013).

There are basically 2 types of knowledge bases: public and private. The type of knowledge base you decide to construct depends on whom you need to share information with. A private knowledge base is one that serves your internal customers or stakeholders such as your sales team, marketing team, etc... In this way a private knowledge base is a close ally to sales enablement and employee engagement initiatives where only

internal members of your company have access. With sales enablement, a company is trying to get the information that a sales team needs to sell effectively into the minds of each of their representatives. This poses many challenges when you have a disparate team, global sales representatives and team members in varying tenure. With employee engagement, a company is working against the tidal wave of disengagement to keep their employees involved and invested. Both initiatives are often aided by an intranet type of solution, though as discussed previously most existing intranets have been designed to follow a content-centric model and therefore lack certain features that are critical for success in today's modern and evolving work environments. A public knowledge base, on the other hand, stems from the need to share information with people outside the company. Examples include a public portal or a customer community. A customer service type of knowledge base works two-fold to help companies: first, to educate their customers; and second, to alleviate low-level or first-tier support requests for their support team and allow them to focus their efforts elsewhere.

Any organization seeking to create a knowledge base for private or public consumption (and contribution), or both, should start by



asking critical, people-centered questions such as: Who needs this information (Rozwell, et al., 2012)? Why do they need it? How will they use it? When considering a knowledge base from a demand-centric perspective and asking those kinds of questions, it is apparent that knowledge sharing is inherently a social activity. Therefore, a knowledge base is inherently a social community, and the best way to share information in a social community to achieve maximum value is by using social technologies to create a socially enabled knowledge base.

There are several ways that a socially enabled knowledge base can add value to an organization above and beyond that which can be achieved by a basic document or content repository. First, a socially enabled knowledge base can increase productivity. **According to the McKinsey Global Institute, using social technologies will increase productivity by 20-25% by improving collaboration and communication among and across teams** (Malloy, n.d.). Information can be disseminated throughout an organization instantaneously. For example, by using a Facebook/Twitter like platform, a single post can be set to appear in the news feed of everyone in the organization or select groups as needed. In addition, geographical barriers of globally

distributed teams working in different time zones are broken down as everyone in the organization can access real-time information anywhere, anytime, and on any device.

In addition to breaking down geographic barriers and improving productivity, a socially enabled knowledge base offers an easy, efficient solution for getting information that you would not otherwise have access to. Today, according to E-learning guru Jay Cross (2011), less than 10% of the knowledge you need to do your job is in your head. The other 90% is in other peoples' heads. A knowledge base that features social tools gives us a tool by which to access the information that only resides in someone else's brain or memory. Social tools also allow your knowledge base the ability to combine the knowledge of all participants in one place that is updated in real time, essentially creating a one-stop-shop for all your company's information needs. All of us is smarter than any one of us. A socially structured knowledge base can have a one-to-many or many-to-many structure, which allows an organization to tap into this collective intelligence in a way that was not previously possible with traditional one-to-one communication. In addition, having social tools as part of the knowledge base allows it to be an information incubator, as



opposed to just an information organizer. The cross-pollination of thoughts, opinions, history, and data all in one place and accessible in real time creates endless potential to generate new ideas that can solve problems and add value to an organization.

Another benefit of a socially enabled knowledge base is improved efficiency. Traditional methods of sharing knowledge are inefficient. Consider even the relatively modern tool of email. When using email to communicate with more than one person, problems often ensue. The email is not forwarded to the correct person, someone is left off of a thread, or the wrong person is copied. The result is an email avalanche, as the originator of the message has to spend time correcting the communication malfunction by replying to multiple one-off emails from individuals trying to get clarity. This could all be avoided if the organization has a socially enabled knowledge base platform that allows one to send a single communication to all intended parties instantly.

In addition to the inefficiencies of email, no one would deny that identifying and utilizing the information we need from the mountains of data available to us is equally stressful and time consuming. **Today, employees spend as much as 26% of their**

**time managing information overload (Bridge, 2012).** A socially enabled knowledge base addresses this incredible time suck by giving you access to all the information you need in one place. Frustrating searches for files with unintuitive names will be a thing of the past, and employees will no longer have to sift through unorganized inboxes searching for one-off conversations containing a nugget of needed information.

The first element to consider when setting up a knowledge base is the people. A company's knowledge lies in its people and consequently those people (all of them) should participate in building and curating your knowledge base. In addition to having technology that enables the sharing of knowledge and collaborative building of a knowledge base, it is critical that the culture and leadership of an organization are aligned in such a way that encourages and ideally incentivizes those behaviors. It is the responsibility of management to help everyone in the organization find each other and to create connections between them regardless of titles or geography.

It is for the purpose of connecting people in such a non-hierarchical way that social knowledge sharing tools, and those knowledge bases similar to Enterprise Social Networks (ESNs), are especially useful. In fact, Gartner predicts that by 2016, 50 percent of large organizations will have internal Facebook-like social networks, and that 30 percent of these will be considered as essential as email and telephones are today (Gartner, 2013). Adopting a knowledge base with social features, especially ESN like capabilities, will ensure the long-term viability and adoption

of your tools. In addition, Gartner has cited specific advantages of an ESN over email and more repository-based collaboration including information capture and reuse, group organization, and social filtering (Gartner, 2013).

Another people-centered advantage of having social tools as part of your knowledge base is that it allows an organization to leverage "tribal knowledge" in a way that traditionally repository-based KM implementations do not. Tribal knowledge, according to Altus Research, is defined as "any unwritten information that is known within an organization but often unknown outside of it (Altus Research, n.d., p.1). The concept of tribal knowledge considers corporations (and large organizations) to be modern tribes, and holds that the most useful and actionable knowledge is not 'handed down from on high', but is instead dynamically created and updated in real-time as contributors from all corners of an organization contribute to a shared vision." Having the ability to tap into that tribal knowledge opens up an entirely new universe of information that you can then make accessible to your organization.

Consider that 70-90% of corporate learning is informal, with the vast majority occurring within local workgroups and never shared across multiple inter-related functions (Altus Research, n.d.). Many of these learnings are developed incrementally as employees tackle and resolve challenges as they encounter them, achieve that knowledge for themselves and maybe their teams, but typically don't capture and make available that knowledge to other employees in a systematic way. If someone does share an "FYI this is what I figured out" email to a group of colleagues, it is a rarity, and still limited to that small group where the proverbial buck then stops. As a result, multiple groups and individuals throughout an organization spend time solving the same problems that another group or individual already solved, which leads to varying degrees of success and an overall loss of productivity. A socially enabled knowledge base allows you to help your employees learn from each other organically, tapping into those previously unknown frontiers of knowledge and improving efficiency at the same time. In addition, tapping into that tribal knowledge allows the organic creation of new knowledge. "Systematic knowledge capture and sharing, coupled with user ratings and usage reporting, can trigger a self-rating, self-generating cycle of knowledge generation among

employees throughout the company," resulting in benefits that include increased productivity, fewer missed opportunities, increased revenue and a self-sustaining culture that promotes education and attracts high quality employees (Altus Research, n.d.).

Another value-add of having social capabilities as part of your knowledge base is that they facilitate open communication and improve employee engagement (Nazarian, 2012). **The cross-communication structure of a native social network creates a more efficient flow as information can move in multiple directions instead of top-down.** Employee engagement is improved because people now have a platform where they can literally see their ideas and the ideas of others influencing decision-makers in the organization. In addition, questions can be answered in real-time with no lag, and multiple individuals can provide input rather than deferring to a single "expert".

# Content Curation

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The second essential element of a knowledge base is content curation. A knowledge base needs to be able to learn what you want, and serve you the content you need, when you need it. It needs to be an active and dynamic system of both information capture and generation, as opposed to a passive engine that waits for you to type terms into a search box. Of course, search functionality is essential. But having a static knowledge base that only delivers when you type search terms into a box isn't pulling you into the learning process. **A knowledge base with the ability to learn and adapt as you search, indicate items of interest, and 'follow' people can serve you information you are unaware of.** Static search is more content-centric in that it allows you to find content based on what you type, and matches the most relevant content to your query. However, there is information out there that you don't know about that will likely be helpful to you in your job. A demand-centric knowledge base should be able to learn and record the types of content you typically search for. When something new and relevant to your interests is added to the database, it should serve that up to you as soon as possible, whether you ask for it or not.

In addition, static search functionality is dependent on the quality of the search terms you type. Have you ever had a fuzzy idea of what you were looking for, but weren't exactly sure what it was called or what related keywords might be? According to Altus Research, knowledge workers spend 15 - 30% of their time seeking specific information and these searches are successful less than 50% of the time (Altus Research, n.d.). These fruitless searches and wasted time create a tremendous productivity problem, costing the Fortune 500 between \$60 and \$85 billion in directs costs and twice that in opportunity costs according to research firm IDC (Altus Research, n.d.).

The content curation requirement of a knowledge base also tends to make the case for a SaaS-based solution as opposed to a hosted platform. SaaS software is constantly being developed and updated to reflect the most current trends and features. Hosted software conversely tends to be behind the curve in terms of development. In addition, your costs of switching service to another provider are typically much lower with SaaS because you don't have to invest in any kind of infrastructure, giving you more options and leverage for pricing negotiations.



In-house built knowledge bases are also likely to be behind the times in terms of the newest capabilities, and also cost time and require development resources to build and to maintain. However, if you have the resources and prefer to go the custom-built in-house route, make sure your knowledge base is physically adaptable and supports the ability to embed other technologies as needed.

Finally, a critical feature that will drive adoption of your knowledge base is the ability to be accessible online, offline, and from any mobile device. In the United States alone, 75% of the workforce is already leveraging mobile technology, and by 2015, projections indicate that 37% of the entire global workforce will be mobile (Ferriman, 2013). In fact, **65% of workers in 2012 claimed that their mobile device was their “most critical work device”**.

Smartphones are the leading mobile technology, with an estimated 2.4 billion enterprise smartphone users globally by 2017. In light of these statistics, it is clear that the ability to adapt to any learning environment and type is imperative to the success of your knowledge base. In addition, studies are showing the benefits of mobile learning. A recent survey of mobile learners claimed a 45% reduction in time spent in training on average

with no loss of comprehension, and 100% of participants said they would be willing to complete more training in a mobile format (Ferriman, 2013). Ensuring that your knowledge base is accessible via many different devices will therefore make it easier and more convenient to access whenever and wherever they are, which will not only increase utilization rates, but also give workers access to the information it contains, where and when they need it.

# Content Creation

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The third essential element of a knowledge base is the ability to create content. A knowledge base isn't just a document repository. It should be a creation space, enabling users to create whatever type of content is best suited to their information capture and sharing needs including documents, web links, videos, et al. Having native tools for content creation within the knowledge base reduces barriers to adoption. The fewer the number of tools employees need to use to achieve their immediate objectives means less resistance to adopting the knowledge base.

In addition to having native content creation functionality, your knowledge base should allow virtually all types of content to be uploaded, stored, and shared. Some information is better suited to a spreadsheet, while another works best as a video. If a worker has to spend hours reformatting something best delivered in another form, you are going to find people sharing content roguely and your efforts will fail. Ensuring your knowledge base allows for the sharing of all types of content will help drive adoption and encourage continued participation.

Further, Gartner analysts Austin and Silver (2012) have identified that every organization has specific needs that require certain features to meet those needs. Social collaboration is an example of an organization's need and content creation functionality features meet that need. In fact, three of the six core features that the Gartner analysts identified as critical to achieving social collaboration success are content creation capabilities. They include the ability to:

- Create a single instance of rich office content with zero-effort sharing and consumption;
- Attach a range of artifacts, not just discussions;
- Ensure visibility and a persistent record of changes.

The fourth essential element of a knowledge base is analytics. Analytics are important because they allow you to manage your knowledge base from the top. To maintain usability and relevance, you need to know who is active, what content is popular, and have the ability to display the information people need to know with beautiful graphs and charts. In addition, you need to be able justify knowledge management budget to your executives. Analytics are your key to all of those requirements.

**Analytics give you the tools you need to keep tabs on the health of your knowledge base community and let you see what content is getting traction.** You should be able to get information not only about the number of users and their levels of activity, but also qualitative information about what kind of content is in demand and being shared. However, being able to see who is sharing, who is viewing, what is being shared, what is being viewed, how often and how much people are contributing is only the beginning. This information can also be used to encourage engagement. For example, you could implement a friendly competition for the most shared piece of content or a rewards-based recognition program. The important

thing to remember is that there is not a one-size-fits-all approach here and the way in which the data is leveraged to encourage engagement can and should be unique to each individual organization.

In addition, budget for anything is difficult to come by these days and new projects and initiatives are likely to be especially under the radar. To satisfy all of your stakeholders' preferences, you should use both top down quantifiable data and bottom up anecdotal stories to paint a complete picture of your results (Bloomfire, 2013). Analytics are critical for defending your knowledge management budget to your executives by providing you with the quantitative data. Favorable results that you may see as part of your top down data set include lower travel costs due to fewer in-person meetings, increased productivity resulting from the self-serve functionality of a knowledge base, and shorter production times due to less time spent collaborating on documents online instead of in person or via email.

Finally, you should manage the problems you seek to solve with your knowledge base like you would any other complex pilot project. Identify the business problem you intend to solve. Assign



a project manager and select a test group of participants. Start small and set specific achievable goals that can be realized in a short period. Prove them out and iterate. The key is to start small, prove your success, and then grow (Malloy, n.d.). After you've successfully proven that social collaboration as part of your knowledge base can tie back to business benefits, there will be ample opportunity and resources given to broaden your efforts. A gradual approach like this also gives you the opportunity to learn and make modifications along the way. Once you start proving success with your knowledge base among your test group, you'll likely be tasked with expanding the footprint within the organization.

# Gamification

The fifth and final element that will help drive adoption and continued participation in your knowledge base is gamification. Gamification features are important for keeping your community alive and engaged. Moreover, **Gartner predicts that by 2017, gamification will be one of three key features sets that dominate all new user-facing applications** (Gartner, 2013). Keeping up with application trends as much as possible is important to keeping employees interested. Your knowledge base should therefore include elements that compel people to contribute what they know with a little friendly competition and rewards fanfare.

Fortunately, there are a number of strategies that can help keep the excitement going and the participation happening. Gamification strategies aimed at motivating your employees to continue interacting and contributing are one place to start. Ideally, your knowledge base platform will already have some built-in gamification features. Features resembling Facebook “likes” and Twitter “re-tweets” are good examples that encourage engagement by showing contributors (as well as

the rest of the knowledge base participants) which contributions are the most popular.

Another way to use the analytics provided by your knowledge base is to have contribution competitions taking place outside the confines of the actual tool while still leveraging the tool’s analytic capabilities. While prize winning competitions are old-school practices, they would be virtually impossible without a knowledge base that provides participation and achievement analytics. So, you can still use your tried and true basics for inspiration. The familiar Employee of the Month is a tried and true recognition program that can be customized to work with your knowledge base. Other ideas for awards that can leverage your knowledge base’s analytics include “Contributor of the Month” or “Most Shared Piece of Content”.

Finally, social recognition has long been considered a strong motivator, often even more so than monetary awards. Make sure to reward your employees for contributing valuable information so they feel ownership of the content they contribute to your knowledge base, just as they would when they contribute to a meeting or project. Recognition is the number one way to satisfy



an employee, so give them a shout out in front of the entire company. If you give your team members credit for their ideas, they will reward you by continuing to share them, which will allow your knowledge base to grow and update itself organically.

# Conclusion

While there are many different types of KM implementations, the simplest and most effective route to achieving success is to set up a socially enabled knowledge base with the 5 essential features discussed above. **A knowledge base with these traits has the potential to increase productivity and collaboration and improve efficiency. It lets everyone in your organization tap into the vast pool of tribal knowledge that contains over 70-80% of an organization's informal learning.** It not only allows your employees to find and share existing content, but also helps them find relevant information that they didn't even know existed, and fosters the creation of entirely new knowledge as well. Finally, a demand-centric knowledge base as described in this guide also drives reuse of information and the increased efficiency and productivity can result in significant overall cost savings for your organization. By making sure your knowledge base has these 5 essential features, you will avoid the pitfalls of low adoption and ensure you can achieve and measure the success of your knowledge base.

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# About Bloomfire

Bloomfire simplifies knowledge management by unleashing the knowledge that is locked within people and organizations. A socially-enabled knowledge base application, Bloomfire accomplishes this with easy-to-use content creation and curation tools. Connect people who have knowledge with those who need it – when and where they're ready to learn.

Start a free trial today at <http://www.bloomfire.com>.

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