

The New Edge in KM

Carla O'Dell, Ph.D., President, APQC

By: Noreen Kelly

Carla O'Dell, president of APQC and longtime thought leader in knowledge management (KM), kicked off APQC's 13th annual KM conference, "The New Edge in KM," with an informative and energizing presentation.

Informing the audience that the Weather Channel is her favorite TV channel, O'Dell began her keynote by using the unpredictability of the weather as an analogy for the unpredictability of the "new forces" in KM. According to O'Dell, the new forces of social computing and networking are challenging the fundamentals of KM and revolutionizing the way in which people collaborate and share knowledge.

Before launching into her thoughts on the future of knowledge management, O'Dell pointed out that the last few years have been good ones for KM. She shared trends in KM usage and satisfaction from a 2007 Bain & Company survey that measured the percentage of companies using KM and user satisfaction with KM tools. The following are a few highlights from the survey results.

- For the first time since 1998, KM ranked among the top 10 "most used" management tools.¹
- The survey showed a dramatic increase in the number of organizations using KM: 75 percent of firms in Asia Pacific, 66 percent in North America, and 65 percent in Europe.
- The survey indicated that executives will continue to use and invest in knowledge management—which is good news for KM in the coming years.

The downside of the Bain & Company survey results is that, in terms of user satisfaction, KM ranked 22 out of 25 management tools.² Although KM is growing in popularity, KM tools consistently receive low satisfaction scores.

O'Dell stressed that an effective KM program is critical to becoming a global organization and commented that even small organizations need KM. Next, she introduced APQC's KM Capability & Maturity Model, a five-stage tool that lets people know what to expect at each level of KM maturity. The categories are:

- Level 1—initiate (growing awareness);
- Level 2—develop (localized and repeatable practices);
- Level 3—standardize (common processes and approaches);
- Level 4—optimize (measured and adaptive); and
- Level 5—innovate (continuously improving practices).

"It's important for a company to be realistic when identifying its level of maturity," O'Dell commented. "Companies may say they are at Level 5 when they are actually building support and results (Levels 1 and 2)."

¹ www.bain.com/management_tools/mt_detail.asp?groupcode=4&id=25728&menu_url=articles_overview.asp (retrieved May 2008).

² www.bain.com/bainweb/PDFs/cms/Public/Management%20Tools%202007%20BB.pdf (retrieved May 2008).

In discussing the new tools and methods that are pushing KM to the “edge”—including social networking, wikis, and blogs—O’Dell asked whether these forces are going to change some of the enduring truths we know about KM. She began by listing what she sees as the enduring lessons about KM and then opened up the discussion to the tables to identify other enduring truths. Some of the ideas and themes mentioned were:

- the importance of senior leadership and management support,
- the fact that behavior change must precede culture change,
- the need for motivation (i.e., what motivates people to connect with others?),
- the role of reward systems and incentives,
- the pitfall of confusing the tools with the enabling processes,
- the need to constantly refresh knowledge,
- the importance of measurement and the need to spend time proving the value of KM, and
- the fact that success usually depends on a core group of committed people—usually approximately 5 percent of the organization (this is true even with Web 2.0).

O’Dell proceeded to offer a quick look at what’s hot in KM, offering her thoughts on the emerging forces that will change the fundamentals of the knowledge management industry.

1. Social Computing and the Wisdom of Crowds

“The locus of control is moving from institutions to individuals, communities, and self-organizing networks,” O’Dell said. “Blogs and wikis enable social computing, giving people more control. With these free tools, users can pick and launch the tools they want and invite whom they want to collaborate, coming and going as they please.”

O’Dell continued, “Social computing offers many potentials for KM: linking people to others with similar interests and knowledge, including experts; sharing relevant and useful content and sources based on user feedback; and providing user-driven content that is less dependent on content managers.”

Social computing is pushing KM to the “edge” by reducing the barriers to use, giving users more control over the tools, and being more “fun” to use than enterprise applications.

The “wisdom of crowds” theory, based on James Surowiecki’s book *The Wisdom of Crowds*, addresses prediction markets, not crowd-sourcing, but has been co-opted to refer to wikis. An often-cited example of the wisdom of crowds in social computing is the online encyclopedia Wikipedia, which relies on its large user base to supply a more comprehensive and accurate version of “truth” than would be possible in an encyclopedia compiled by a small group of experts.

“Value is shifting from expertise to experience,” O’Dell said. “Networks of people are expected to monitor and vet content as well as experts. Additionally, the wisdom of crowds is considered adequate to handle most problems.”

2. Multiple Generations at Work

In discussing the importance of knowledge retention, O’Dell cautioned, “It’s not just about retirement anymore.” Five years ago, the issue facing organizations was the looming retirement of the baby boomers who entered the work force en masse during the 1970s and 1980s. Today, the risk and reality of knowledge loss has become a pandemic in modern organizations.

O'Dell asked, "Are the barriers to knowledge transfer generational? What do Millennials want?" She contrasted baby boomers' attitudes toward knowledge and knowledge sharing with those of younger workers. According to O'Dell, common themes among baby boomers are:

- "Keep it simple;"
- "Help me save time and do my job;"
- "Don't change to new tools;"
- "If I have time, I'm happy to share what I know—just ask;" and
- "Who are these people, and why are they editing my stuff?"

By contrast, common themes among Generation X, Generation Y, and Millennials are:

- "Put it on my fourth screen;"
- "I don't know what to ask these old guys;"
- "I don't want to look stupid;" and
- "I'm happy to share what I know—ask me on Facebook."

O'Dell posed the following generational questions: How do we mitigate the risk of lost knowledge? How do we attract and keep the next generation? How do we build bridges to enable knowledge to flow?

The reality is that the length of time that an average employee spends at a company has decreased in recent years. Younger workers are changing jobs more frequently than baby boomers did. It's critical for boomers to change their paradigm; otherwise, they risk isolating their work force.

O'Dell pointed out that data overload is another factor. In a world where millions of resources are just a Google search away, how do we turn information into knowledge?

3. Social Networking

O'Dell shared the statistic that, as of December 2007, there were 1.3 billion Internet users worldwide. As an outgrowth of this Web usage, social networking continues to explode. One-fifth of the world's Web users have profiles on at least one social networking site. According to April 2008 data, My Space boasts 100 million registered users, and Facebook boasts 69 million users. "People want to connect with each other," O'Dell said. "The question is: How do we harness that?"

O'Dell talked about three ways of finding someone who knows something. The first—expertise locator systems—represents "old school" KM methodology. The other two are social networking and communities of practice.

The results of APQC's 2007 consortium benchmarking study "The Role of Evolving Technologies: Accelerating Collaboration and Knowledge Transfer" revealed the following.

- At leading organizations, there is a growing focus on connecting people to people and a decreasing emphasis on collecting and managing content.
- Today's business community is witnessing a convergence of expertise locator systems, "people finders," and social networking applications.
- Companies are starting to emulate Web-based social networking tools in their corporate expertise location and profiling systems.

The recent advances in expertise location and social networking prompt new questions. For example, how do we differentiate between experts, expertise, and advice? What motivates people to connect with others, and what makes them pull away from such interactions? How can we effectively connect people who need knowledge or expertise with those who have it? How do



we identify experts or those with necessary expertise to staff projects or programs? Who will pay for their time? APQC is continuing to explore these and other questions through its ongoing research, including its upcoming consortium benchmarking study “Using Knowledge: Advances in Expertise Location and Social Networking” (click [here](#) for more information on this study and how you can get involved).

O'Dell concluded by emphasizing that it is an exciting time to be involved in KM. She stated that it would be a mistake to assume that social networking, blogs, wikis, and other Web 2.0 tools are fads. She asked the audience to consider these questions: How will the two worlds connect or collide? How will we combine the new forces of KM with the “enduring truths”? What does the truth look like? We have to be ready and ahead of the game.

Adapted from Carla O'Dell's presentation “Forces at the New Edge in KM,” delivered at APQC's 13th annual KM conference, “The New Edge in KM,” April 28–May 2, 2008.

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