

Migration – KM to HR

“Our lives must be much more and deeper than what we see on the surface. When surface appearances become all we see, then they will become all we know.” – Sidney Poitier, Keynote speaker, Society for Human Resources Management Conference, June 2008, Chicago, Illinois, US

By Noreen Kelly

Like any good KM conference, this one touched on all the key themes: leadership, learning, culture, innovation, communication, collaboration, relationship building, team building, storytelling, trust building, integrity, credibility and accountability. Yet, it wasn't a KM event.

It was the 60th Annual Conference of the Society for Human Resources Management (SHRM), held 22-25 June, 2008 in Chicago, IL, US, offering a comprehensive lineup of sessions, workshops and continuing education programmes liberally salted with KM and KM-like topics.

Many more knowledge-related topics were explored as challenges that are at the top of every HR department's list: employee engagement and retention; creating a motivating work environment; talent management; succession planning and workforce challenges, including the impending retirements of baby boomers and the shortage of high-skilled workers; multi-generational differences; managing strategically/transforming HR into a strategic partner; competing in the global economy; and new technology.

The gathering of 14,000 delegates, representing 245,000 members in 130 countries, was quite a showcase for KM and convincing evidence that knowledge management is migrating from its core to the front lines of business enterprise.

HR helps unleash power of human capital

Though the topics skirted the KM label, SHRM President and CEO Susan Meisinger made it clear: “HR professionals help their organisations unleash the power of *human capital*.”

The highlights of conference presentations that follow offer clear evidence that human resource professionals are interested and most likely engaged in KM approaches and techniques.

Doris Kearns Goodwin, one of the keynote speakers at the conference and author of *Team of Rivals: The Political Genius of Abraham Lincoln*, talked about presidential attributes exhibited by Lincoln that can be described as knowledge management. Some of these traits include: the ability to learn on the job and learn from mistakes, sharing credit for success, sharing blame for the failure of subordinates, going to the battlefield (management by walking around) and communicating goals to his countrymen.



Patrick Lencioni, keynote speaker and author of *Three Signs of a Miserable Job*, talked about rooting out the three signs of miserable organisations: anonymity (employees need to be known and individually appreciated by their managers); irrelevance (to be fulfilled in their jobs, employees need to know how their work impacts the lives of others); and immeasurability (inability by employees to assess their own level of performance and success).

Leadership as collective genius

Linda Hill, PhD, Harvard Business School professor and author of a forthcoming book, *Leadership as Collective Genius*, shared the results of extensive research that she and several of her colleagues have conducted on leadership, creativity and innovation, and globalisation. During her thought-provoking session, Hill shared examples of leaders who have learnt how to “lead from behind” and to cultivate what she calls a “collective genius.” Her model includes the real art of leadership (creating a world that other people want to belong to); putting employees first and customers second; building partnerships; giving people the resources they feel they need to do their job; centralising information sharing; and identifying sources of extrinsic motivation (monetary rewards, status, perks, recognition).

Model: purpose, brand, culture and opportunities

Another model that Hill described is based on ‘promises made/promises kept’, consisting of four quadrants:

purpose, brand, culture and opportunities. In this model, the individual employee is the brand and delivery on promises creates the culture.

Additional learnings from Hill's research offer further support for knowledge management principles: increase efficiencies through transferring best practices; grow revenue through shared expertise; and develop new opportunities through cross-pollination of ideas. On innovation, Hill commented that large companies have trouble innovating because they work with cross-functional teams that have not broken down the layers. "It's hard to have candid discussions and conversations across levels to deal with issues of innovation which are high risk," Hill commented. She stated that leading for innovation involves unleashing and harnessing diverse "slices of genius".

ROPI: Return on people investment

The ROPI Effect [return on people investment], presented by Scott Cawood, vice president, Worldwide Human Resources, Synergy, Wilmington, Delaware, US, touched on many knowledge management themes and approaches. Cawood's main point was that HR oversees the largest expense category, and, therefore, companies should be focusing on people as their competitive advantage.

Cawood talked about the economy of exhaustion. "With our increased dependence on technology," Cawood said, "it is not true that the knowledge worker has more time. The reality is quite the opposite – our workloads have *increased* by five hours/week."

Key components of the ROPI effect that are also KM-related include: focus on customers, employees, and stakeholders equally and equitably; look at what is going well in the company and replicate it, rather than focusing solely on what is going poorly and eliminating it; encourage teammates ranking each other's performance; cultivate trust, not compliance, and look for ways to extend, not get trust; create a healthy culture in which managers share consistent values; and offer more freedom and innovation when things are going wrong, not more rules and regulations.

Keith Caver, practice leader and manager, executive development, Development Dimensions International, Inc., Charlotte, North Carolina, US, explored HR's role in inspiring senior leaders to create an environment that makes executives want to learn, based on insights gained from a survey of 800 leaders. Caver posed the question, "In a world that is flat, how will your company adapt?"

Getting the knowledge out

To create a culture of learning, Caver stressed that the transitional challenge is for the leader to move from the operational to strategic level. To get the knowledge out, "Caver stated, "make sure that the tools and processes are relevant to *your* business issue, then relevant to *your* company."

He concluded, "To really transform the organisation, you have to speak the truth."

Karl Ahlrichs, principle, ExpertSpeaks, Carmel, Indiana, US, defined a 'lean' culture and looked at HR's alignment of strategy and values with culture. "We want to have exactly the right people, in the exactly right amount, in the exactly right place, at the exactly right time, with the exactly right skills," Ahlrichs said. This statement is strikingly similar to the definition of knowledge management that Davenport and Prusak coined in *Working Knowledge* back in 1988.

Randy Pennington, president, Pennington Performance Group, Addison, Texas, US, offered a wealth of practical ideas to positively and proactively influence an organisation's culture. Pennington remarked, "A compelling culture is the intangible that separates you from your competitor in a world where products and services are interchangeable." The common element across all of these culture- building ideas is a focus on results, relationships and accountability.

S. Jeanetta Darno, associate vice president of a certification program for senior HR professionals, talked about the need to build awareness and leadership capability to leverage multiple generations. Attracting a diverse, multi-generational workforce is a key KM issue as many companies struggle to promote knowledge transfer from retiring employees to younger workers. To help prepare for workplace changes, Darno commented, "Companies need to understand the four generations in the workplace (Traditionalist, Boomer, Generation X, and Generation Y).

The underlying factors companies need to be concerned about, from a HR perspective, are driven by the market (growing generational diversity of clients and customers); 'war for talent'; differences in values and behaviours across the generations; a positive public image and relationship with the community; and leveraging diversity to develop innovative, breakthrough solutions.

Angie Chaplin, director, Center for Learning and Leading, Lutheran Services in Iowa, Inc., explored the five practices of exemplary leadership, as researched by Jim Kouzes and Barry Posner, authors of the best-selling book, *The Leadership Challenge*. "These common behaviours," Chaplin said, "are used by leaders to transform values into actions, visions into realities, obstacles into innovations, and risks into rewards." The five practices are: model the way; inspire a shared vision; challenge the process; enable others to act; and encourage the heart.

While the presenters at the SHRM Conference did not explicitly label their learnings as aspects of KM, there is little doubt that human resource management both supports and delivers on the promise behind knowledge management. ■

Noreen Kelly, trust strategist, is president of Noreen Kelly Consulting. She can be reached at +1 312.988.7562; noreen@noreenkelly.com; <http://www.noreenkelly.com>