Knowledge managers often overlook the science of how people develop. Here, Mary Dee Hicks and David B. Peterson outline the conditions necessary for individuals to develop in ways that will contribute to organizational success. Insight, motivation, new knowledge, real-world practice and accountability need to be integrated into the KM initiative if organizations are to actually improve performance and results.

THE DEVELOPMENT PIPELINE

How people really learn

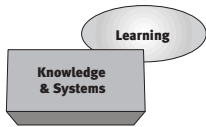### By Mary Dee Hicks PhD and David B. Peterson PhD

Figure 1. Knowledge and systems in the foreground

Figure 2. Learning in the foreground

Many thoughtful writers and practitioners are grappling with the importance of organizational and individual learning in creating an effective approach to knowledge management. From our perspective, the field has advanced more rapidly on the organizational and systems-related issues than it has on the human side of learning. In this article we outline a roadmap for individual change – a guide to the essential elements of learning and development – along with suggestions for how to use this framework to improve knowledge management initiatives.

Leading thinkers on the topic of learning in organizations, such as Peter Senge[1] and Arie deGeus[2], provide compelling perspectives on learning at a systems level, and even acknowledge the importance of individual learning, but do not systematically deal with how individual development happens. Thomas Stewart[3] dismisses most training and development methods as irrelevant to learning. Others relegate training to a narrow role as a distribution system for new information. Verna Allee[4] and Karl Erik Sveiby[5] highlight the importance of on-the-job learning in knowledge deployment and discuss how knowledge is created and shared in dynamic communities of practice. But they emphasize the dynamics of collective learning, and the nature of learning in the abstract, rather than articulating the process of individual change. Sveiby

acknowledges development as a retention strategy for people who possess valuable knowledge, but does little to illuminate how to make this growth a reality.

Focus on learning

What is overlooked in these knowledge management discussions is the science of how people develop. Organizations that strive to extract the greatest value from their collective expertise often emphasize their tools and systems for building, using, and managing knowledge. This focus can infuse the organization with insights about alternative approaches, stimulate opportunities to share ideas, and provide synergy for bringing ideas together where they can combust into something even better. But this focus often underplays the personal, human side of performance: changing and improving people's capabilities (See Figure 1).

Effective knowledge management must address not only what people need to know, but also their ability to use it to improve what they do. KM approaches that emphasize learning and development help people make better use of the knowledge that is available to them (See Figure 2). With a focus on learning, organizations are more agile in building the talent they need when faced with constant change and problems that require new knowledge and solutions.
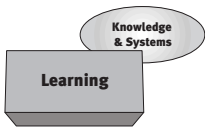
KEYPOINTS

1. People's ability to learn and develop new capabilities is a critical, and often missing, focus in any knowledge management approach.

2. Five conditions must be present for systematic people development: insight, motivation, new knowledge and skills, real-world practice, and accountability.

3. To accelerate learning, organizations need to identify where the development process is most constrained and take action at that point.

4. The greatest value from knowledge management is achieved when systems approaches are combined with attention to the dynamics of human learning.

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The Development Pipeline

To focus effectively on learning, an organization needs to ensure that five essential conditions for learning are in place. The Development Pipeline defines the conditions that must exist for the learner (Figure 3). Following a pipeline metaphor, a wide pipe allows a plentiful and smooth flow of development, whereas even one narrow section of pipe restricts development to a trickle. The key, therefore, to using the pipeline to enhance development is to identify the narrowest section of the pipe. The greatest leverage – and the greatest organizational payback – is gained by targeting efforts at widening those constrained segments.

Each pipeline condition must be addressed in order to systematically and efficiently build new capabilities in people:

Figure 3. The development pipeline

1. *Insight*: Do people know what to develop? People need insight regarding:
- *What the organization needs from them*. A clear picture of the organizational standards and expectations for success includes a sense of how the person's responsibilities and actions connect to the organization's strategy and purpose.
- *How others view them*. This covers a range of perceptions, including how other people interpret and evaluate the person's style, performance, and contribution.
- *Their own abilities*. Based on their own experiences, as well as input from others, individual development is facilitated by an accurate appraisal of their own abilities and style.

2. *Motivation*: Are people willing to invest the time and energy it takes to develop themselves? People need to see how acquiring a specific new capability equips them to accomplish meaningful personal, group, and organizational objectives. When people have a personal incentive for development, development becomes worth their trouble and their energy to change is mobilized.

3. *New knowledge and skill*: Do people know how to acquire the new capabilities they need? Skill acquisition accelerates when people know how to gain access to useful resources, forums, and methods for learning a particular capability. This condition is the one that is usually covered most thoroughly by knowledge management practices.

4. *Real-world practice*: Do people have opportunities to try their new skills at work? People need to apply what they have learned and reflect on those experiences to solidify their learning. Compared with condition 3, which is concerned with acquisition, this condition is about application. To begin a new approach, and to become proficient with it, requires persistence, willingness to take risks, and the capacity to shed old ways of doing things.

5. *Accountability*: Do people internalize their new capabilities to actually improve performance and results? Ultimately, new knowledge and skills need to become incorporated into people's regular work repertoire. The process of consolidating what has been learned ensures that using new skills becomes natural, repeatable, and self-sustaining. This is most likely to occur when there is personal or organizational accountability that sustains commitment.

Ensuring access to the best information

This classic issue in knowledge management is triggered by a range of challenges:

"A core group of our technical experts will retire within five years and we have to transfer their know-how to the next generation of workers before it's lost."

"Our sales people need to streamline the order cycle by using up-to-date product and account information as they meet with customers."

"We're squandering resources and duplicating efforts because the best practices from one part of our company are never seen by people in other parts."

t   *"We are trying to provide more integrated solutions for our customers, but our people are sequestered in different specialties that don't work closely together."*

The most obvious solution to these issues – a better knowledge base – rarely works. Yet this is where many organizations invest their energy and resources. Gathering best practices, building data bases and communication channels, and training people how to use the system will not resolve the problems unless the real issue – helping people change their existing behavior patterns – is addressed. The classic question, "How can we ensure that people have access to the best information available?" does not get at the real issue. The real solution involves answering the learning question, "How can we equip our people to perform important tasks more effectively?"

Information management

The typical development pipeline when information management is used as a solution is presented in Figure 4. Insight and real-world practice are moderately high because people understand in general the change that is required of them and see where it needs to happen. Despite the obvious potential benefits of learning to use the new knowledge, personal motivation and accountability are low because people know that extra effort will be required at the same time that organizational measurement and reward systems have not changed. The problem of access to the right knowledge has largely been solved because of the new knowledge base. But this meets only part of the need for acquiring new capabilities. People may still lack some of the essential skills to perform as desired.

Common issues for each of the development conditions, and possible actions to deal with them, include the following:

Insight
In this scenario, people have a sense of the desired change, but may not understand exactly what skills they need to learn to accomplish that change. A sales person who now has easy access to more up-to-date approaches, for example, may believe that the approach that they have used in customer meetings in the past is adequate and may not understand how their skills are falling behind the new standards and processes. Organizations can help by

creating ongoing means for ensuring that people have up-to-date performance feedback and a solid understanding of what is expected of them. Many organizations have focused on competency models to describe how performance expectations and skill requirements have changed. For real insight, these general models still need to be translated into specific expectations for each person.

Motivation
When they are overwhelmed by their daily workloads, few people can generate compelling reasons to dedicate regular time and effort to new learning. As their initial interest in the knowledge resources fades, they fall back on their time-worn approaches. In one consulting organization, consultants have ready access to experienced colleagues and proposal prototypes that could help them offer more integrated solutions for their clients. However, they often default to using the much narrower, but more expedient, proposals they have used in the past.

To address this constraint, organizations need to revise their measurement and reward systems to match the desired behaviors. They can work with senior management to help them be visible role models for learning the desired new behaviors. They can also encourage each employee to explore the personal payoff for themselves: What will make the biggest difference in easing your workload, making your work more rewarding, and satisfying your customers? Breaking the new task into reasonable-sized pieces, so learning each step appears realistic and do-able, will help with this aspect of motivation.

In addition, to increase both insight and motivation, managers can be trained to discuss performance feedback and explore mutual expectations with members of their teams. This can help people discover what they need to learn and articulate their reasons for becoming more proficient. With these two pipeline segments widened, people will know what to learn and will see clearly why those new skills are important.

New knowledge and skill
With a rich base of knowledge readily available, it might seem as if this condition is the development forte in this scenario. In cases where access to accurate information is the stumbling block, the knowledge base will suffice. More often, however, organizations ask people to behave in new and different ways. Helping people learn the necessary new skills is often neglected. One sales team, for example, was equipped with new laptop computers and a new database on customers and

Figure 4. Typical development pipeline for organizations with a new knowledge base
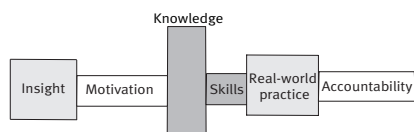
products. They were offered a half-day training seminar, which half the people could not attend. Those who were unable to attend were given a copy of the training manual and no additional support. Even people who received the formal training struggled with downloading new information and navigating the software smoothly. Some of those who were adept at accessing the data needed further skill building in using the information in situations with customers.

Real-world practice

In this pipeline, accessing new knowledge is easy. Taking risks to try new things on the job, persisting with new approaches in spite of their unfamiliarity, and breaking old habits are not. To deal with these constraints, organizations can create safe havens for practice, where novelty and experimentation are valued more than proficiency, and where reasonable mistakes are readily tolerated. They can set expectations that improvement will be gradual, and can create opportunities, beyond the confines of traditional roles, where people can flex their new knowledge. A marketing department executive in a computer company, to boost people's willingness to take the risk to try new things, openly shared her own experimentation and mistakes with her team. Knowing what issues they were working on, she repeatedly asked them what they had tried recently, how well it worked, and what they planned to do next to keep pushing their comfort zone in real situations.

Accountability

Organizations that invest heavily in distributing knowledge typically do so because of a compelling need to build people's capabilities. Yet they often fail to put real teeth into their expectations that people change. One senior retail executive, passionate about the need for more collaborative leadership throughout the management ranks, not only required his entire executive committee to participate in extensive developmental appraisals and leadership coaching, but led the way by being one of the first to participate. Then, the entire top team shared their personal learning experiences with the next tier of leaders and committed publicly to ongoing learning activities. Along with establishing learning goals for all leaders, and tallying their new learning at performance review time, the executive publicly declared his commitment to development as an organizational

imperative. This kind of multi-pronged investment in learning sends a consistent message that building new capabilities for now and the future is a job requirement.

Conclusion

The forces driving organizations to strengthen their knowledge management processes are also intensifying the importance of learning as a skill in itself. Only organizations that address both knowledge systems and people development in tandem will be capable of harnessing the ultimate value of intellectual capital. This approach keeps learning in the foreground by combining the hard technology of knowledge systems with the soft technology of human behavior and learning. **KMR**

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Case Study: No off-the-shelf learning at Tesco

Tesco is one of Europe's largest food retailers with stores in the UK, the Irish Republic, France, Hungary, Poland, the Czech Republic and Slovakia. With 650 outlets and over 170,000 staff, the company is reliant on organizational learning to instil the Tesco brand principles in the behavior of its employees.

The company commissioned research to analyze the different ways of learning, to enable it to tailor training for different types of learner. Researchers found three types:

1. "See it" learners. This type of learning was favored particularly at the general assistant level. "See it" learners like active, participative learning in short bursts, followed by practice in doing. Traditional support material would be videos.

2. "Try it" learners. These are self-motivated employees (usually managers) who enjoy finding out details on their own. This type of learning must be monitored – it's potentially dangerous to allow trial and error when dealing with a equipment such as a deli slicer.

3. "Know it" learners. These people are more theoretical, they like the traditional, book-learning methods and they enjoyed formal education. "Know it" learners find role play unnerving and would prefer to read a training manual.

Designing practical methods based on the research results

Tesco has changed its approach to organizational learning radically as a result of the research. Employees are now asked to identify which type of learner they are, enabling the trainer to select the most suitable tailor-made tool: a subject fact file; a role-play game; or a "talk-about" (an informal discussion group).

This case study is extracted from *Fifty Ways Towards a Learning Organization* by Andrew Forrest (The Industrial Society 1999). The original source is *How to Choose the Right Development Method* by Alan Mumford published by Peter Honey Publications, 1997.

Notes

1. Senge, Peter. *The Fifth Discipline: The Art and Practice of the Learning Organization*. Currency Doubleday, 1990.
2. DeGeus, Arie. *The Living Company*. Harvard Business School Press, 1997.
3. Stewart, Thomas. *Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations*. Currency Doubleday, 1997
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5. Sveiby, Karl Erik. *The New Organizational Wealth: Managing and Measuring Knowledge-Based Assets*. Berrett-Koehler, 1997.