

Configurations of Knowledge Management Practices: Three Ideal Types

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Abstract

Knowledge management practices are proliferating at a refreshingly brisk pace. Many organizations are developing new technologies, new software, novel approaches to attracting, rewarding, and retaining knowledge workers, and proactive approaches to create, store, transmit, and share knowledge. Knowledge management practices are being disseminated faster than ever. In this boom period for knowledge management dissemination, however, there is a real danger that adoption decisions will be driven by fad and fashion rather than a systems analysis of the fit between particular knowledge management practices and specific organizational contexts. A knowledge management practice that is a best practice in one context may not even work in another context.

This paper uses a configurational theory building approach to develop three ideal types of knowledge management practices: an Innovation Creator; an Innovation Assembler; and an Imitator. These ideal types are defined by strategic positioning in an industry, existing knowledge capital, organizational culture, practices for knowledge creation and acquisition, knowledge directories and locators, norms for participation in decision making, methods of sharing and

disseminating knowledge both internally and externally, staffing, socialization practices, rewards and compensation, job and organizational design, the environment of the organization, and supporting technologies.

Innovation Creators seek to take first-mover advantage by internal development of new products, and services. Sub-components are likely to be tightly integrated to assure top performance of the overall product/service. These organizations will emphasize highly interactive knowledge management practices, clearly identified experts who use their tacit knowledge for joint decision making, etc. Prime examples include Honeywell, 3M, Motorola, and HP.

Innovation Assemblers will adopt a modular approach to rapid development of complex, novel systems using unique combinations of existing modules. Although additional customization of the sub-components may optimize the performance of the final systems, Innovation Assemblers often define markets through rapid innovation. They emphasize the use of external knowledge, more technology aids for knowledge sharing, efficient utilization of explicit knowledge, and investment in knowledge management infrastructure. Prime examples include Dell, Toyota, and Raytheon.

Imitators avoid the bleeding edge of the innovation process, but quickly learn how to move second. Imitators are often able to leapfrog the competition by learning from the mistakes of others and investing in the best technologies after the competition is locked into an alternative approach. Imitators develop external networks, actively recruit personnel from the industry, and emphasize speed and efficiency as fast followers. Prime examples include TJ Maxx and Handspring.

The paper will include a more detailed development of the ideal types with particular attention to specifying which knowledge management practices will or will not be effective in each of the types.