



Organisational information citizenship - turning the IT department's staff into IT citizens

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1. Introduction

As every knowledge manager knows, a successful organisational knowledge strategy is highly dependent on the people who will accomplish the tenets of the strategy. Characteristically, these people are comprised of departments, business units and divisions, with well-defined roles and functions that, performed in a specific way, render organisational operations. However, while these units may work towards the same organisational goals they often operate independently and exist as stand alone units or independent islands. Employees in one department are seldom aware of the operational procedures of other departments (Madu and Madu 2003). For an organisation to build real information and knowledge citizenship, a better integration of functional units and more openness and sharing of information are imperative to the success of a business.

This series of articles focuses on building citizenship behaviour within key strategic units in an organisation that predictably can influence the success of a knowledge management strategy. This particular article focuses on promoting citizenship within an information technology (IT) department, a fundamental player in the execution of a knowledge strategy.

2. Defining an IT department

The IT department is the formal organisational unit or function responsible for technology services and for maintaining the hardware, software, data storage and networks that comprise the organisation's IT infrastructure. The IT department consists of specialists such as programmers, system analysts, project leaders and information systems managers. IT departments are often headed up by a chief information officer (CIO) who oversees the use of information technology in an organisation. The IT department engages with end-users, who are the representatives of departments outside of the IT systems group for whom applications are developed and systems are deployed (Laudon and Laudon 2004).

3. IT and knowledge management (KM)

KM is a multi-disciplined approach to achieving organisational objectives by making best use of knowledge. It involves the design, review and implementation of both social and technological processes to improve the application of knowledge in the collective interest of stakeholders (Sandrock 2008). KM increases the ability of the organisation to learn from its environment and incorporate knowledge into its business processes. KM refers to a set of processes developed in an organisation to create, gather, store, transfer and apply knowledge.

IT plays an important role in KM by supporting these processes for creating, identifying and leveraging knowledge throughout the organisation, by means of knowledge technology (Laudon and Laudon 2004).

4. Information and knowledge citizenship for IT departments

Citizenship implies an attitude and behaviour one adopts towards information and knowledge where one actively displays knowledge-sharing behaviour, personal KM and a responsibility to engage in life-long learning. The overarching principle of what it means to be an information and knowledge citizen implies that the citizen takes personal ownership, responsibility and accountability for sharing knowledge and learning.

Since the nature of an IT department is to provide services to employees in an organisation, the IT staff's attitude towards citizenship is very important and can have an enormous impact of the relationship they have with end-users in the organisation and their ultimate success as a function of the business.

Not only should IT staff be displaying citizenship behaviour, but they should be challenging their audience to display the same behaviour.

5. Barriers and challenges to citizenship behaviour

More often than not, a chasm owing to misunderstanding exists between organisational IT departments and business. Barriers to the relationship, cited by business include the following:

- IT ignores knowledgeable business user input
- IT is too focused on 'cool technology' as opposed to what is right for the business
- There are poor response times to service requests
- There is incompetence in IT teams
- IT staff assume that because a user does not understand IT, the user is stupid
- IT staff are unaware or disinterested in work that the functional units do.

IT cites the following problems as key relationship barriers with business:

- A lack of business management interest in IT
- IT budgets
- IT workload
- User problems – unacceptable computer usage, maxed bandwidth usage, no common sense, lack of responsibility of users
- Lack of governance
- Lack of user acceptance/knowledge and respect for governance
- IT is expected to align with goals of the business but are often left out or not invited to participate in conversations with business.

In addition, the emergence of the shadow IT department is a further challenge to the traditional function of the IT department. End-users are frequently turning to the consumer technology universe to satisfy their individual IT needs to enhance their efficiency, work faster and find newer and better ways to get work done (Worthen 2007).

IT departments on the other hand want IT to be reliable, secure, scalable and compliant and thus build their architecture for manageability, often at the expense of user experience. The consumer technology presents IT departments with security and compliance challenges (Worthen 2007).

6. What IT departments can do to build citizenship

While IT departments are not solely responsible for the tension with business, it is a business unit that touches almost every employee in an organisation and, by default, has a strong influence on the culture and attitude towards citizenship in an organisation.

The following suggested actions can assist IT departments to build citizenship within their own teams as well as organisation wide.

IT departments should be encouraged to align with the KM department or particularly the KM strategy as it provides a neutral platform from which to operate and gives the team access to the business via an additional channel.

- IT teams should participate in various knowledge forums in order to educate themselves about business challenges and opportunities for innovation.
- IT departments should host their own forums in order to educate business units and end-users about IT practices, policies and governance models.
- By definition, IT practitioners or 'techies' hide behind labels of not being 'people oriented'. Citizenship requires interaction, collaboration and discussion, especially with one's audience, and new behaviour is required.
- Removing IT staff from their insulated environments and embedding them in a business unit results in better IT teams with a deeper understanding of the business processes they support and business units understand how IT enables them to be more agile and effective.
- Encouraging business to visit the IT department to see how they do their work and why.
- Creating a modicum of respect for each other's field of knowledge and expertise.
- Insisting on being invited to participate in conversations with business.
- Having a strong leader that will keep IT and the business jointly accountable and responsible for linking technology to the most important company strategies.
- Leading, developing and nurturing a governance structure that promotes IT goals as a whole, both at the functional and business unit level of the organisation.
- Encouraging evolution and gaining a reputation for saying yes will encourage end-users to be forthcoming about ideas, giving the IT team an opportunity to learn what it is that the user is really trying to do and provide ways to equip users to do this without compromising security.
- Build partnerships in the IT team as well as in the organisation with the goal of taking personal responsibility and a readiness to explore better ways of working.

7. Conclusion

The IT department is a cornerstone in every organisation and has the ability to be an influential partner in the success of a KM strategy. By encouraging citizenship behaviour of knowledge sharing, personal KM and life-long learning within the IT department's team can fundamentally change their modus operandi within the organisation.

In addition, by encouraging citizenship behaviour in their relationships with the various functional units within the organisation, IT has the opportunity to be an active participant in the achievement of organisational goals.

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