

# Chief Knowledge Officers

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## INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management (KM) refers to a range of practices used by organizations to identify, create, represent, and distribute knowledge for reuse, awareness, and learning across the organization. KM typically takes the form of programs that are tied to organizational objectives and are intended to lead to the achievement of specific outcomes such as shared intelligence, improved performance, competitive advantage, or higher levels of innovation.

Knowledge management focuses on developing and maintaining intellectual capital across the organization. It attempts to bring under one set of practices various strands of thought and practice relating to:

- Harnessing the effective use of data, information, and know-how in a knowledge-based organization and economy
- The idea of the learning organization
- Various enabling organizational practices such as communities of practice and corporate yellow page directories for accessing key personnel and expertise
- Various enabling technologies such as knowledge bases and expert systems, help desks, corporate intranets and extranets, and content management systems (Wikipedia, 2007).

Beginning in the 1990s, the person responsible for directing and coordinating these activities for organizations was oftentimes designated the chief knowledge office (CKO).

## BACKGROUND

The role of a CKO was created and promoted by consultants in the late 1990s to develop a firm's knowledge infrastructure, to promote knowledge capture, storage, and distribution, and to act as a symbol that employees look to for guidance in a knowledge management culture. Bontis (2002) states that the CKO position was intended to help a firm to leverage its intellectual capital by:

- Promoting stability in a turbulent business environment
- Enabling the speedy delivery of products and services

- Creating high efficiency in the knowledge value chain by sharing of resources and realization of synergies
- Enabling the separation of work so that specialization is feasible

The CKO job description frequently encompassed a number of different responsibilities. For example, the CKO might be responsible for leading executive management to develop an enterprise knowledge strategy, validating this strategy across the enterprise, and then ensuring that its evolution complements and integrates with business strategy. The CKO might also be charged with setting priorities and securing funding for knowledge management programs as well as defining policies for security, usage, and maintenance of intellectual capital. Depending on the organizational culture, the CKO could also act as the chief advocate for KM as a discipline—walking and talking the program throughout the enterprise and assisting executives and senior management in building and communicating personal commitment and advocacy for KM (Davenport & Prusak, 1998).

Rarely did the CKO come from an information systems or human resource organization. In fact, CKO backgrounds were quite varied, though most had substantial experience with their firm and knowledge of the firm's industry. Whatever their background, CKOs were supposed to straddle business and information technology (IT) with a mandate to convince workers that it is good to share information and to work with IT to build applications to support such sharing (Earl & Scott, 1999).

In 2001, 25% of Fortune 500 companies had a CKO and 80% of Fortune 500 companies had a knowledge management staff. Forty-two percent of Fortune 500 companies anticipated appointing a CKO within the next three years (Flash, 2001).

While many organizations were enthusiastic about knowledge management programs, there were also firms that believed that a CKO function was not needed. Sometimes senior management felt that having a CKO was the wrong way to harness corporate know-how. Instead, they preferred a more grassroots approach, in which a team of knowledge management experts worked closely with—or were even as part of—the business units. The underlying rationale for this approach lay in the belief that by putting more control of knowledge management in the hands of end users, knowledge management would be an easier sell because knowledge sharing would be actively inculcated within business units.

Accordingly, these firms believed that centralizing knowledge management under a CKO would send out the wrong message (Cole-Gomolski, 1999).

In firms where CKOs did exist, Pringle (2003) notes that many of these survived by judiciously distancing themselves from the original “craze” while still exploiting knowledge management concepts. This oftentimes meant that CKOs didn’t talk about knowledge management per se. Instead, the CKO pursued activities that encouraged employees to talk to one another or that allowed workers to reuse already existing materials or information. Pringle indicates that these CKOs typically imbedded knowledge management activities within performance management systems that gave staff members the incentive to learn and to share their expertise. That is, assessments of employee sharing of information efforts as well as demonstrable learning activities became an integral part of employee annual performance reviews.

## CURRENT TRENDS

Quite a number of books and articles about knowledge management and CKOs were published in the late 1990s and the early 2000s. However, in 2007, while knowledge management is a concept still practiced and written about, new articles about the CKO entity are rare. The reason for this may be that either the desire for such a position with this title has diminished or that the knowledge management environment has evolved such that the need for a figurehead or program leader has been reduced.

Boothby (2007) believes that the CKO position itself still exists, but he also believes that the responsibilities of the position have changed. He states, that while the old definition of a CKO’s job was to guide knowledge management, the new definition of the CKO’s job is to empower knowledge workers. He argues that empowering workers means giving knowledge workers tools that make them more productive, which is operationalized as helping knowledge workers to communicate more effectively.

Boothby asserts that CKOs used to hire people who categorized everything and wrote complex taxonomies to organize knowledge. Moreover, this “traditional” CKO employed large, complex systems to create, capture, store, and distribute knowledge. That is, they looked for a standard approach that would satisfy the needs of their whole company.

The problem for the CKO today, according to Boothby, is that such an approach is not viable anymore. Needing to find one universal solution is a false constraint he asserts. He argues that an open Internet works just fine with multiple blogging systems, wiki systems, and open source programs and operating systems. In the current technology environment, large companies do not need one universal enterprise solution. Instead, Boothby states, large organizations prob-

ably need many different tools for different types of users and different types of problems.

In the past, knowledge management technology was oftentimes expensive, centralized, and coordinated. Today, knowledge management technology can be inexpensive, decentralized, and perfuse. Boothby notes that knowledge management technology can cost less than a tenth of the price of old systems. Moreover, with many systems today, users can generate their own software content (e.g., via Linux, blogs, wikis, etc). Boothby concludes that CKOs should stop focusing on what is ideal and allow any system, so long as it complies with some basic open Internet standards.

Boothby’s arguments do assume that CKOs only seek technology solutions to knowledge management efforts. This is only partially true. In many organizations, CKOs are responsible for the sharing of both explicit and tacit knowledge and technology typically only addresses the former well.

However, Boothby’s assertion that knowledge management technology is evolving appears affirmed by an Executive Report of the 2006 CKO Summit held at the Bath Priory in the United Kingdom (TFPL, 2007). Here, social computing, identified as blogs and wikis, was seen as the backbone of current knowledge sharing efforts. These technologies, combined with the use of search engines and document management systems, were seen by Summit participants as facilitating and diffusing knowledge transfer capabilities and better enabling knowledge harvesting. Moreover, social computing technologies were viewed as providing common and standardized information architectures for knowledge management programs, resulting in more active knowledge sharing activity.

The 2006 CKO Summit report also suggests that previously prescribed knowledge management leadership responsibilities have remained somewhat constant over time. The report indicates that the current issue for managers of knowledge management programs is to articulate the common framework for knowledge and information management for their organization. Articulated components of this framework include:

- Mission, vision, and objectives for shared services
- Governance (an agreed strategy for inter-organizational KM)
- KM vision and mission
- Operating model
- Information architecture
- Metrics/performance measures
- Delivery and benefits

What the Summit’s report additionally makes apparent is the changing nature of knowledge sharing itself. In the earlier days of knowledge management, emphasis was placed on the need to manage “pull” technology. That is, organization’s

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