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Identifying and Sharing Good Practices

In a Word Good practice is a process or methodology that has been shown to be effective in one part of the organization and might be effective in another too.



Rationale

Most organizations know that learning from the past increases the chances of success in the future—finding ways to do so can also link staff with the resources they need to complete tasks faster, better, and more cheaply. Frequently, this is done by means of instruction manuals or “how-to” guides—which typically provide information or advice on a particular topic, or with taxonomies—which are a common way to organize content logically. Leading organizations maximize opportunities across all core knowledge activities to identify, create, store, share, and use better.

A good practice is defined as anything that has been tried and shown to work in some way—whether fully or in part but with at least some evidence of effectiveness—and that may have implications for practice at any level elsewhere. Three possible levels of good practice flow from this: promising practices, demonstrated practices, and replicated practices.¹ Since knowledge is both explicit and tacit, good

¹Some prefer to use the term “best practice” but it is debatable whether there is a single “best” approach and approaches are constantly evolving and being updated.

practice programs should comprise two elements: good practices databases that connect people with information, and collaboration or knowledge sharing and learning mechanisms, such as communities of practice or peer assists that connect people with people.

Benefits

The benefits from identifying and sharing good practice are that doing so will

- Identify and replace poor practices
- Raise the performance of poor performers closer to that of the best
- Decrease the learning curve of new employees
- Reduce rework and prevent “reinvention of the wheel”
- Cut costs through better productivity and efficiency
- Improve services
- Minimize organizational knowledge loss (both tacit and explicit)

Needless to say, good practice programs give the highest returns where business processes are already quite developed and where knowledge and experience has already accumulated. They will also be useful where several units perform similar tasks but are dispersed and cannot easily learn from one another through day-to-day contact.

Process

Skyrme Associates (2002) suggest a six-step approach to identifying and sharing good practice:

- **Identify Users’ Requirements** Although this step seems obvious it is not uncommon to start by designing a database. This is a case of putting the cart before the horse. One should start by considering where one can really add value, looking at what areas of the organization need attention. Who will benefit most from better knowledge and understanding of good practices? How will they access and use these?
- **Discover Good Practices** There are several ways to identify good practices. One is to examine individuals and groups that deliver excellent results and are therefore likely to be using good practices. Having discovered these, one will then need to discern what parts of their overall approach or methodology represent good practice. This is likely to be done best by people knowledge of the relevant practice. But other approaches exist too: they include communities of practice, after-action reviews and retrospects, and exit interviews. Also, much

can be learned from the practices of other organizations in the same field, or even from organizations in others.

- **Document Good Practices** Good practice descriptions are commonly kept in a database in standard format. A typical template might include the following:
 - **Title** A short descriptive title that can be accompanied by a short abstract.
 - **Profile** Several short sections outlining processes, function, author, keywords, etc.
 - **Context** Where is this applicable? What problems does it solve?
 - **Resources** What resources and skills are needed to carry out the good practice?
 - **Description** What are the processes and steps involved? Are performance measures associated with the good practice?
 - **Lessons Learned** What proves difficult? What would the originators of the practice do differently if they were to do it again?
 - **Links to Resources** Expert contact details, workbooks, video clips, articles, transcripts of review meetings, etc.
 - **Tools and Techniques** A description of the approach and methodology used in developing the good practice.
- **Validate Good Practices** A practice is only good if there is a demonstrable link between what is practiced and the end result. Still, in most cases judgment is needed as to what constitutes good practice. A frequent approach is to have a panel of peer reviewers evaluate a potential good practice. It is better to seek input and feedback from clients too.
- **Disseminate and Apply** Databases of good practices are a useful starting point but most organizations find it necessary to complement these with face-to-face knowledge sharing. This is where true value is added for the process can also generate two-way benefits. Mechanisms include communities of practice, quality circles, visits to individuals and groups displaying high performance, organized learning events, secondments, and exchanges.
- **Develop a Supporting Infrastructure** To successfully implement a good practice program, you need to ensure you have the required infrastructure in place. This infrastructure is often developed as part of a wider knowledge management strategy. Typically, several generic aspects need attention. The people to facilitate and drive the process through its initial stages, until it becomes embedded in the organization's ways of working, e.g., a good practice team or a network of good practice coordinators. The technical infrastructure for document sharing and databases. The content management infrastructure to ensure that good practices are documented and classified electronically in a way that makes them easy to find.

Caution

Here are a few Do's and Don'ts to identifying and sharing good practice

- Good practices are not a quick-fix solution and setting up the required processes and infrastructure can be resource intensive.
- Good practice evolves constantly.
- Do not underestimate the importance of organizational culture.
- Resist the temptation to focus on explicit knowledge: it is through people that deep knowledge is transferred.
- Do not be too prescriptive about good practices and focus instead on encouraging people to identify and share them voluntarily.
- Tie good practices to business drivers, focus on those that add value, demonstrate benefits, and give evidence.
- Recognize the individuals and groups who submit good practices.
- Promote the good practice resource actively.
- Monitor usage of the good practice resource.
- Make contact to the provider of the good practice easy.

Reference

David Skyrme Associates (2002) Best practices in best practices

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