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Getting some help: the staff

In every restaurant, the chef is surrounded by a team of staff. This team can include waiting staff, sous-chefs, a sauté cook, bartenders, the maître d’hôtel, and perhaps a dedicated sommelier . . .

Through our interviews it has been fascinating to see the spread of different structures and roles which different KM programmes and teams have assembled. Some have technical roles – taxonomists and wiki experts; some have content managers, others have access to facilitators, community of practice coaches and workflow experts.

In many cases, we see a combination of formal, central roles and a wider, distributed group of champions. These local champions are KM enthusiasts and advocates who can serve as change agents, participants in pilots, a conduit for communications and for obtaining feedback, and providers of success stories. In many of the organisations we interviewed, the leaders/co-ordinators/facilitators of communities of practice played a de facto role of knowledge manager and champion for their specific domain or work unit.

Dan Ranta at General Electric (Chapter 11) sums this up well:

75% of our best ideas have come from the business – across all generations.

Law firm Linklaters (Chapter 19) describe the senior role of ‘Knowledge and Learning Partners’ as a senior group of influential champions around the world:

In a way, they’re our key communication channel – because the most effective communication is always partner-to-partner. We encourage them to talk to other partners about what we’re doing in the knowledge and learning world.
Getting extra help – the role of external consultants

Restaurants have to cope with the peaks and troughs of demand. A major corporate event or a wedding party can generate a requirement to increase capacity substantially. A change in customer demand or desire to follow a new food trend can also require new skills and capabilities in the kitchen, resulting in the temporary appointment of a specialist chef, or a training course for established staff. Even experienced chefs might need additional support or skills to meet the demand for an intricate new dish.

In a similar way, a KM programme manager will often encounter moments when they need to add capacity, build capability, or both. These are the moments when they might reach out for the help of an external consultant.

Identifying, selecting, and working with consultants can be challenging and rewarding, from both sides of the relationship. A poor consultant might tell you what they think you want to hear instead of working with you to developing the best solution for your needs. A good consultant will have worked with a number of organisations and previously seen issues similar to yours. They might have different thoughts about how the assignment or task could be done and may challenge your way of thinking. Ultimately, they will develop or deliver a solution considering your organisation’s context – and explain it in terms that your organisation can understand.

A great consultant will give you an honest opinion irrespective of the impact on their future business. Sometimes a consultant is posed with what is known as the ‘consultant’s dilemma’, when they don’t believe that the assignment that they have been given will provide the most beneficial outcome. The dilemma is framed with the question ‘Do you give them what they want, or do you give them what they need?’

The authors of The KM Cookbook have had experience in consulting with around 200 organisations, as well as having procured consultancy from within our previous corporate roles. We’d like to present our recipe for a successful relationship with a KM consultant.

Top 10 tips for the client

1. When selecting your consultant, ask yourself ‘Can I work with them?’ Cultural fit is important. Ask them what makes the best client–consultant relationship from their perspective.
2. Be clear about what you are asking the consultant to do, and why you are asking them to do it. Explain both the what and the why and ask them if they have any questions.
3 Ask the consultant for examples of where they have addressed similar challenges, and what they think might be different about your context. That will help avoid them being tempted to copy-and-paste into your situation. Copy-and-paste solutions rarely exist, and you’re paying a consultant to be insightful, flexible, responsive and adaptive.

4 Be open about related work which has been done previously, by you, or other consultants in the past, which might affect the success of the current work. Tell them about past successes — and failures. Don’t leave it to them to discover skeletons in the cupboard!

5 Produce a scope that is specific on outcome and outputs but not overly constraining on inputs and methods. Include milestones and deliverables.

6 Include break clauses in the agreement to permit evaluation of the work done and allow the client to determine whether to continue, change consultants, change direction or issue a follow-on contract.

7 Beware when hiring software consultants that they don’t over-engineer the solution. When you ask them the time, make sure they don’t build you an atomic clock.

8 Assemble a steering group to oversee and evaluate the deliverables and act as champions for the work.

9 Be prepared to own and co-develop the outputs — don’t subcontract your thinking.

10 And finally, don’t be too ambitious and expect the consultant to solve every issue with one assignment.

Top 10 tips for the consultant

1 Do your homework. Be interested. Read, follow, Google, research and network your way into a better understanding of the organisation — as though you were going for a permanent job!

2 Ask the client what will delight them, and what would frustrate them. See if they can describe what a successful outcome will look like and what it would mean to them and their organisation.

3 Include a risk register describing how you will deal with setbacks (e.g. changes in scope of work, unavailability of key personnel, unforeseen delays) in your proposal.

4 Suggest the creation of a short inception report or informal statement of work on starting the assignment. This clarifies client expectations and provides an opportunity to discuss any changes following the initial contracting phase.

A good client organisation is one where you have contacts at three levels of the organisation.
5. Don’t be afraid to say what you can’t do, or what others would do better. Your client will respect your integrity more than your attempt to bluff your way through.

6. Accredit and acknowledge others with frameworks and models when you use them. Your client is employing you for your connections as well as your collections.

7. Encourage your client to consider how you might build up their capability or coach a team member to leave new skills behind. Aim to leave a legacy rather than create a dependency.

8. Seek to co-create frameworks, models, tools and methodologies rather than produce your own from your back pocket. It’s very rare to be confronted with an ‘obvious’ or ‘simple’ problem for which you have a ‘best practice’ solution. If it was that obvious, they probably wouldn’t be hiring you!

9. Avoid the temptation to criticise the work of previous consultants. You don’t know the context or conditions that they were working under.

10. Be a giver, not a taker. The KM world is relatively small, and good natured – you’ll find that what goes around, comes around!

**Professional accreditation**

The arrival of the KM Standard isn’t the only significant ‘coming of age’ activity for Knowledge Management.

As we write *The KM Cookbook*, CILIP, the UK library and information association, is working with a group of leading international Knowledge Management practitioners to pilot and launch the first Professional Registration in Knowledge Management backed by Royal Charter. This important professional accreditation work fits with a wider inclusive International Knowledge Professional Society (IKPS) which is forming as an umbrella network for connecting these initiatives and KM sub-communities around the world.

We believe that professional accreditation (chartership) will become an increasingly important option for corporate KM staff and consultants alike which will provide a common approach to assuring competency and bring KM one more step towards corporate legitimacy.

Now that you have the staff or know-how to get the help, and you are aware of future routes to professional development, it’s time to open up the kitchen cupboards and the fridge and start to understand and combine your ingredients.