

Knowledge Harvesting Translates Implicit Knowledge to Assets

By Vicki Powers, APQC

Knowledge management typically focuses on tacit and explicit knowledge, which can be found in someone's head or in printed materials. A third form of knowledge—implicit knowledge—refers to the middle ground of knowledge that can be captured and written down once people explore the full depth a vital process. “Knowledge harvesting” is the mature knowledge retention methodology that enables implicit knowledge to be articulated and turned into knowledge assets that help an organization improve.

Harvesting Knowledge

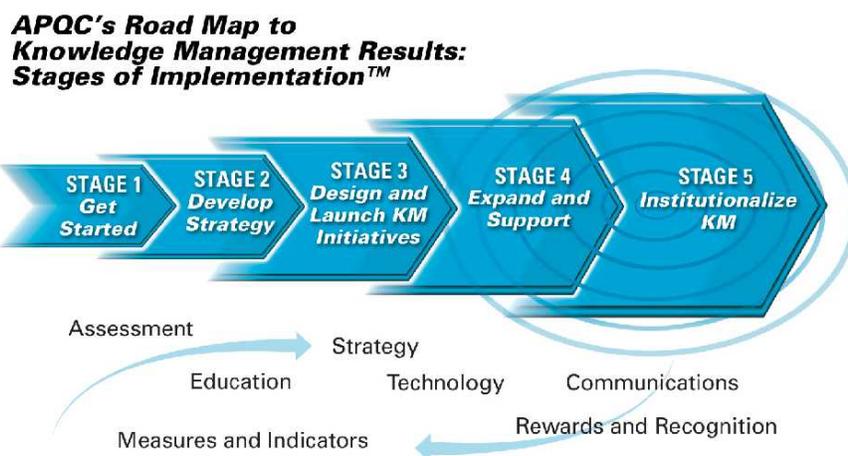
Knowledge Harvesting¹ is a process to quickly convert top-performer expertise into knowledge assets that improve organizational performance. A knowledge harvesting project follows a staged process of: focus, find, elicit, organize, package, share, apply, and evaluate and adapt. The ultimate purpose of knowledge harvesting is to capture enough details from an expert so that the target learners can understand and actualize the process and achieve good results.

This process can be applied to develop new products, capture knowledge from departing employees, or launch a new KM project. Knowledge harvesting can help address the risks of “brain drain” and capture knowledge before it walks out the door, as many industries and organizations fear and expect in the next five to seven years.

“There are a number of sectors and even entire industries that are going to be significantly hit by significant attrition rates,” said Larry Todd Wilson, founder and president of Knowledge Harvesting Inc. “Not all situations will warrant knowledge harvesting as the solution; but, if you need to go beyond traditional HR and KM tools, it's important to realize that this approach is available for important knowledge retention initiatives.”

Integrating Knowledge Mapping with Knowledge Harvesting

Knowledge harvesting enhances and integrates with the American Productivity & Quality Center's (APQC's) own knowledge management methodology and approach. Organizations use knowledge mapping during the second and third stages (develop strategy and then design and launch KM initiatives) of APQC's Road Map to Knowledge Management Results: Stages of Implementation™. Knowledge harvesting appropriately fits in the fourth stage (expand and support).



Cindy Hubert, executive director at APQC, believes that integrating knowledge harvesting and knowledge mapping helps customers understand their business process from a knowledge perspective. “Once you begin to understand how knowledge works within that process, you can understand and measure the impact of it on business performance,” said Hubert. “Knowledge harvesting takes customers to the next level and helps them glean the implicit knowledge in people’s heads.”

Wilson believes mapping knowledge is an excellent exercise to complete prior to harvesting knowledge. It serves as a useful input to harvesting knowledge because it provides a holistic overview to understand context. It generally captures the cultural, historical, and functional knowledge within an organization.

“Knowledge Harvesting takes you beyond the contents of a knowledge map and drills down to the lowest possible level of detail in regard to one or more target processes or sub-processes,” said Wilson. This low-level know-how and support information is captured through interviews with top performers or experts. A series of interviews provides the central event of a knowledge harvesting project.

Eliciting Knowledge from Top Performers

Some organizations discover how to harvest knowledge during a crisis. Georgia-Pacific Corp., for example, discovered that its expert collections manager would begin indefinite medical leave due to serious illness. According to Wilson, the organization had just two weeks to gather relevant knowledge and learn more about his network of relationships with credit managers, collection agencies, and attorneys.

During the stage to elicit knowledge, the harvester not only identifies the target audience who will use the information, but also studies existing explicit data that pertains to the process. This provides a baseline and helps to identify gaps which represent elicitation opportunities.

“It’s very difficult for the expert or top performer to articulate his own deep knowledge,” said Wilson. “You can’t just give the contributor a blank piece of paper and say ‘Tell me about your work.’ To get to the vital, implicit knowledge, it requires a discerning, empathetic person to elicit the knowledge.”

At Georgia-Pacific, the entire project took about six weeks, which included interviews after the manager left and follow-up sessions with the employees who assumed his responsibilities. The target learners needed additional information that required more rounds of questioning.

Packaging the Knowledge

Even though technology is not the most important part of a KM initiative, it certainly is an enabler for success. This remains true for knowledge harvesting as well.

Wilson believes technology plays a significant role in disseminating harvesting knowledge. “After you have focused and completed the elicitation stage, you have to figure out how to package it, which is the technological component,” said Wilson. “Organizations need to figure out the best way to deliver some form of performance support to their target learners. This is based on delivering the right set of information at the right time based on their individual needs.”

In the Georgia-Pacific example, the credit manager’s knowledge was packaged as interactive software to guide credit managers through the collection recovery processes. Overall, according to Wilson, knowledge harvesting saves Georgia-Pacific time and money by helping employees leverage and actualize knowledge that already exists in the organization.

Value of Knowledge

The value of integrating knowledge harvesting with APQC’s Stages of Implementation is primarily one of depth, but it also represents maturity, according to Wilson. Wilson said many organizations have procedures and process maps. But some organizations need to go deeper in order to capture lower-level details about the essence of the work.

“Knowledge harvesting complements APQC’s existing tool set by providing another tool that allows organizations that have a desire to go deeper,” said Wilson. “When you look at what APQC has done in

KM, with its staged approach and all the resources it has developed over the years, this represents a new capability and shows that APQC's perspective on KM has matured a bit more."

Knowledge harvesting also provides value to the bottom line. In a recent study "Business Value of Knowledge Management: Return on Investment of Knowledge Retention Projects," Wilson and the academic authors stated that the return on investment for knowledge harvesting projects range from 6:1 for efficiency-oriented projects to 12:1 for revenue and optimization-oriented projects.

The study summarizes, "Realizing the value of effectively capturing and disseminating implicit knowledge is a necessity; and the strategic application of determining the best project orientation is essential in assuring organizations that money invested in knowledge retention projects will have a positive outcome on the company's bottom line."

Footnote:

¹ Knowledge harvesting is a registered trademark by Knowledge Harvesting Inc. since 1996.

Vicki Powers is a freelance writer based in Houston. She has written a number of APQC articles, including "APQC Embraces Six Sigma Internally" and "Service Level Agreements: Are they Essential?"