

# A holistic approach to realising the full value of your “knowledge assets”

## BRIEFINGS

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**Know-Net** is a total knowledge management solution developed by a European consortium of KM consultants and tool developers. The project, which was partially funded by the participating companies, the European Commission and the Swiss BBW, lasted 18 months. It has been or is currently being applied by consultancy Planet Ernst & Young, surveyors NAI Gooch Webster and software developers MDA.

In knowledge management’s first phase, pioneer practitioners used a variety of approaches with differing levels of emphasis on technology, cultural and managerial issues. However, looking over the landscape, it becomes apparent that the methods employed by such early adopters fit into two core strategies for KM – the “product” and the “process” approach. While each had intrinsic value, KM is now entering a new phase and the need for a balanced fusion between them is increasingly critical. Know-Net – our framework for knowledge management – is designed to meet that need.

### Product and process approaches

The “knowledge as a product” approach implies that knowledge can be located and manipulated as an object. Often referred to as codification, it focuses on artifacts containing and representing knowledge, such as documents in best-practice databases. The aim is to capture and distribute the explicit knowledge in memos, reports and articles and store them in a knowledge repository – a collection of best practices and reusable work. One aspect of this approach is that it treats knowledge as an entity divorced from the people who create and use it.

The “process” approach emphasises ways to nurture and promote knowledge-sharing and disputes the notion of “capturing” knowledge. Focussing on KM as a social communication process – where knowledge is tied to the person who developed it and is shared through personal contact – it emphasises support for collaboration. Technology aids the process, helping people share knowledge through tools like video-conferencing and e-mail. The process approach also looks at the development of communities.

### The knowledge-asset centric view

The Know-Net framework aims to fuse these two approaches, by building on the resource-based view of an organisation<sup>1</sup> and treating knowledge as a strategic asset<sup>2</sup>.

The common thread between process and product-based is that both aim to support KM, through management of knowledge assets. These assets can be human (a network or community), structural (a process), or market (a brand name). The product approach is more concerned with accessing and organizing specific knowledge assets, while the process approach aims to make direct connections between organizational knowledge assets. However, both use some form of knowledge representation as a means of packaging and transferring knowledge either from a person to a system (and vice versa) or between people.

Both approaches use knowledge objects to represent knowledge assets. These assets create, modify, store and disseminate knowledge objects. For example: an employee is a knowledge asset who can create knowledge objects like new ideas, learnings and proposals, while a

process is a knowledge asset that stores and disseminates knowledge objects like best practices, company standards and R&D material.

### Knowledge-creating activities

So a knowledge object represents the information that has to be processed by humans and transformed into knowledge. The activities that transform such information include:

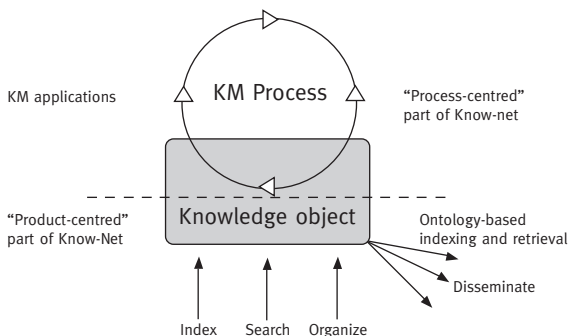
- Comparison: how does information about this situation compare to other situations?
- Consequences: what implications does the information have for decision and actions?
- Connections: how does this bit of knowledge relate to others?
- Conversation: what do other people think about this information?<sup>3</sup>

Knowledge objects aim to facilitate and leverage such knowledge-creating activities by providing to people with the information needed. Each has the following characteristics:

- It acts as a catalyst, enabling the fusion of knowledge flows between people, with knowledge content discovery and retrieval, enabled by technology. This means it acts as a connecting node for all key components in a KM system (strategy, people, process, content, technology).
- It facilitates the knowledge transfer from person to person, or from information to person.
- It is created and maintained by a KM process.
- It is used to search, organize and disseminate knowledge content.

The knowledge object is the common unifier and lowest common denominator of a holistic

Figure 1: Fusion of the “process” and “product” approaches



KM solution, incorporating and integrating process and content, and fusing the process-centric approach with the product-centric approach.

**The role of the knowledge-asset**

In the center of our Know-Net framework are the knowledge assets (see figure 2). The framework also represents:

- the knowledge strategy, processes, structure and systems a company develops in order to facilitate knowledge creation and sharing;
- the knowledge interaction networks at the individual, team, organizational and inter-organizational levels.

Even these elements are drawn in the periphery of the knowledge assets (structure, systems, processes, strategy) can be considered as knowledge assets themselves.

The different levels of knowledge networking, represented in the outer section of the framework correspond to the “ontological dimension”<sup>4</sup>.

This refers to the social interactions, that begin at the individual level and then by communication between organizational boundaries which lets knowledge expand and develop. If new knowledge is relevant to the needs of the organization, it’s likely to permeate through groups and divisions and thereby extend the community of interaction dealing with that knowledge. New knowledge that has a potential to support more advantageous ways of doing things is likely to be retained as a subject for further debate within the network and may also lead to an extension of the community of interaction.

Within Know-Net we distinguish between four levels of knowledge networking: *individual*, *team*, *organization*, and *inter-organization*.

- The *individual* level refers to knowledge workers’ competencies, experience, capabilities and development issues.
- The *team* and *organization* levels

include internal company networks, such as informal, self-organizing or formal communities of interests, communities of practice and engagement teams.

- The level of *inter-organizational* networks refers to inter-enterprise relationships – value networks where each focuses on core competencies, as well as on the accessibility to external, developed capabilities. Networks with customers, subcontractors or competitors are included here.

**The Know-Net Method**

Knowledge management has to address basic cultural and organizational issues of how knowledge is shared, distributed and created, and how these processes relate to key business goals. This emphasis on the business as well as human element of knowledge management implies that, for a KM initiative to be successful, significant education, communication and consulting is required in parallel to technological development.

The Know-Net framework method aids the development of knowledge-oriented strategic directions and the leveraging of knowledge assets. We hope it will contribute to the next phase of knowledge management.



**Overview of the Know-Net method**

The Know-Net method proposes a phased approach to enable structured thinking and planning for a knowledge management project. It’s designed to be modular, so that organizations can start at different levels depending on readiness, needs and requirements.

- **Awareness** about the benefits of knowledge management and its relationships to strategic as well as operational and day-to-day issues in the corporate environment.
- **Stage 1: Plan** refers to the Knowledge Management Strategic Planning phase, where an organization determines the vision and readiness for a KM initiative and the scope and feasibility of the project.
- **Stage 2: Develop** is the phase in which an organization transforms itself to a knowledge intensive company based on the company-specific KM value proposition derived in Stage 1. Here, the structure and the design of a holistic solution (that covers processes, people and technology) are iteratively developed, tested and reviewed.
- **Stage 3: Operate** is the phase in which an organization rolls-out a company-wide implementation plan with a holistic approach to KM.
- **Measurement** of the level of creation, sharing and use of knowledge assets within the company.
- **Training** of both the knowledge workers to the new processes and technologies as well as of the staff to take up new knowledge-related roles.

**References**

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Figure 2: The Know-Net Framework

