Enhancing Knowledge Management at Holcim

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Abstract

Holcim is one of the world’s leading producers of cement and aggregates with operating units in around 2,000 locations worldwide. Enhancing and sharing knowledge gained in one unit can impact the profitability of the entire Group. Holcim iShare makes Group knowledge easily accessible. Documented knowledge is captured in the Holcim iShare library where documents can be found with a simple, free-text search. To share the knowledge in the heads of our people Holcim iShare Networks have been developed as global communities where people meet virtually around topics of common interest. Both, the library and the networks reside on Holcim’s intranet. Holcim iShare has proven to provide value – in terms of time, money and quality of task fulfillment.

Keywords: Holcim, knowledge management, library, networks

Prof. Gilbert Probst was instrumental in laying the foundations for Holcim's knowledge management today. It began in 1995, when Prof. Probst established the Geneva Knowledge Forum - a platform to exchange experiences on knowledge and learning related topics with participants from well known companies in Switzerland, Germany, and Austria. Holcim was a founding member and could thus benefit from discussions ranging from strategic concepts to operational implementation from the very beginning. A case in point was the introduction of Communities of Practice (see below) which Holcim adopted from DaimlerChrysler - another member of the Geneva Knowledge Forum.

From 1999 to 2008, Gilbert Probst was a member of the Holcim Board of Directors. He provided valuable contributions to the strategic direction of “Holcim, a faster learning Group”. Its central tenet is continuous learning at all levels in the organization. This includes the rapid and worldwide exchange of best practices and know-how across the entire Group. Founded in Switzerland in 1912, Holcim is one of the world’s leading suppliers of cement and aggregates (crushed stone, sand, and gravel). The company also supplies ready-mix concrete and asphalt, and provide related services. Holcim is a global company employing some 80,000 people, with production sites in around 70 countries.

For Holcim, knowledge management is fundamental and is expected to happen globally. It may be over simplistic, but it is worth noting the comment of another global supplier’s top executive: “The only benefit in being a multi-national Group in a business that is inherently local is knowledge sharing.” Holcim must extract value from the fact that its many operating units around the world produce, sell, and distribute similar ranges of products. Enhancing and sharing knowledge gained in one operational unit can have an impact on the profitability of the Group as a whole. Doing this better than our peers leads to competitive advantage.

History of Knowledge Sharing at Holcim

Knowledge sharing is not new to Holcim. In the mid 90s, under the banner of a “Faster Learning Organization”, processes and tools to make learning and sharing faster and more systematic were implemented. Owing to the fact that implementing such processes represents a change initiative, a first logical step was to uncover the ‘Unwritten Rules’ of an organization. The analysis of the unwritten rules leads to the hidden, but very powerful, reality of a company’s culture. Unwritten rules are not
good or bad per se. They uncover barriers and drivers for learning and sharing (Scott-Morgan, 1994). Several Group companies did unwritten rules studies. The studies always triggered change. However, in many cases, they were considered as “sharp surgery.” Consequently, we moved to lighter approaches (workshops, discussions, etc.) which provided similar results.

The next milestone to make knowledge sharing operational was the decision to introduce a Holcim wide Project Management Approach (PMA) in 1999 (Baumgartner, 2001). Designed to avoid repetition of costly mistakes, Holcim’s PMA is very much focused on the value of knowledge sharing. PMA provides a common language for project execution and explicitly requires project teams to actively search and distill knowledge during project execution. PMA is the project management standard in Holcim today.

In 2000, the After Action Review was introduced, for systematic debriefing and distilling lessons learned after any business activity (Garvin, 2000). It is an effective tool to systematically gather lessons learned: what has happened, why has it happened, what are we going to do next time?

Another major development was the development of Communities of Practice in 2001 (Probst et al., 2010). Communities provide platforms for people to meet around common topics of interest with the objective to create, expand, and exchange knowledge, and to develop individual and organizational capabilities. Today, more than 30 communities are operational.

Continuing in this vein, in 2004 Holcim enhanced its learning portfolio with highly interactive Management Education programs, developed in collaboration with IMD, Lausanne and the University of St. Gallen. Key to their success is dual-teaching. The business school faculty provides concepts and generic knowledge, and a “transfer executive” firmly ties the theory to our business reality. These programs became strong face to face knowledge exchange platforms, facilitating sustainable transfer of new knowledge to the business. Participants work in teams to develop solutions to strategic business challenges with Group-wide impact. The projects deliver an immediate result for the Group and reinforce the application of the learning in real business (Holcim Annual Report 2005, 2006).

Following Probst, Raub, and Romhardt’s (2010) “building blocks of knowledge management”, so far our focus was mainly on identification, development and distribution of knowledge. Since 2008, we have put a strong emphasis on more efficient usage and preservation of knowledge by gathering Group relevant knowledge in one place and providing easy access to it. Attention has moved more to the issue “if Holcim knew what Holcim knows”.

**Holcim iShare – Making Group Knowledge Easily Accessible**

Principally we distinguish between written (documented, explicit) knowledge and the knowledge in the heads of our people (unwritten, implicit). We capture the documented knowledge in the Holcim iShare library, in which documents can be found with a simple, Google like, free-text search. To benefit from the knowledge in the heads of our people we have developed Holcim iShare Networks. These are global communities in which people meet virtually around topics of common interest. Both the library and the networks are IT based and reside on Holcim’s Portal, the intranet of Holcim.

**Holcim iShare Library**

Today, Holcim iShare provides access to more than 9,000 documents from Holcim’s central service organization and its Group companies worldwide. The documents relate to all business areas (like cement, aggregates, concrete, and asphalt) and all business functions (such as manufacturing, commercial, finance, or human resources). The number of documents is growing every day. Holcim