Expertise Management at Country Fire Authority Australia

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1. About the Case Organization

The Country Fire Authority (CFA) is the main emergency response agency for fire in the state of Victoria, Australia. Victoria is the third most dangerous state for fires in the world after the south of Spain and California. CFA has 53,000 volunteer firefighters organised into 1219 brigades spread across the state. Fire events can be as varied as storm events, bush fires, car accidents, house and factory fires.

2. About the Challenge

CFA is one of the largest training organisations in Australia in terms of training delivered to its volunteers. However a great deal of the knowledge in the organisation comes from the experience of firefighters in actually fighting fires. CFA historically has had very little visibility into this form of knowledge.

It is vulnerable when veteran firefighters leave or retire. A small brigade can easily lose 60% or more of its knowledge if just a few family members leave. CFA is 165 years old. Brigades have self-managed their knowledge throughout that period, but as CFA has grown it has become more and more challenging to proactively manage the visibility and flow of knowledge as an asset across the whole organisation.

In particular it has become important to monitor knowledge gaps, or impending knowledge loss. Significant knowledge loss in a brigade can easily lead to loss of a brigade or safety issues if it is not mitigated or managed. Knowledge sharing at local level is outstanding. The issue is managing knowledge availability and flows across the organisation. Hence the KM function at CFA is focused on knowledge management organisation-wide.

3. What We Did

KM at CFA must involve the firefighters at CFA, and match their preferred ways of working.

The first initiative is to make knowledge assets within CFA more visible, and get it treated as an asset. CFA management is used to managing tangible assets such as stations and equipment. The next challenge is to make intangible knowledge visible to management so that they can manage it as an asset as well.

The second initiative is to create a directory of people and contacts associated with experience areas and competency areas, with an enterprise search solution, so that people can seek out people who hold specific knowledge and expertise areas. CFA is piloting a KAM (Knowledge Asset Management) App. We conducted a knowledge and expertise audit to prepare for this, and to identify topic areas, with names and roles. People will be able to identify key processes and equipment, and identify/ connect with key contacts across the organisation associated with that topic.

This initiative is also being linked to a strategic outcomes framework, which gives the Board visibility

into knowledge contributions across the organisation.

4. Challenges and Lessons Learned

The leadership culture is very focused on tangible assets. Some people think KM is just about writing manuals for tasks. And some people think knowledge use happens organically and cannot be managed deliberately.

The organisation is also very siloed because of its size and the diversity of needs it fulfils. The firefighting styles, equipment and terrain in the east of the state are very different from those in the west.

Knowledge flow cannot be forced in such an environment. We have to understand the high value knowledge, and the problem space in great depth. We thought communities of practice would work because the personal style of knowledge sharing seemed to match the culture. This turned out not to be the case. The organisation is running at 110% and people are very focused on getting their measured activities completed. Additional time spent on generalised knowledge sharing did not take off. We have to understand the local culture and style or working, work in an agile fashion and work from within that understanding.

5. Impact and Benefits

The COVID pandemic helped because it accelerated CFA's move into the digital space. We capture usage metrics showing how the new approach is paying off, and we also get feedback emails that give us concrete examples of how people have been connected across the organisation and where value has been created.

6. Next Steps

- To roll out the KAM App organisation wide within the operations – at the moment it is being piloted in the admin and business side.
- To cross link this work into business planning so that knowledge becomes part of how CFA makes its strategic plans.