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Knowledge Management: The Role of the CKO
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Abstract
The CKO is portrayed as a catalyst for knowledge management programs. This paper provides a brief overview of the CKO leadership role, a review of CKO job responsibilities, and a review of critical success factors for the CKO position. Opportunities for research are discussed.

Introduction
The Chief Knowledge Office (CKO) is a recent phenomena created to help manage a unique organizational asset – intellectual capital. It is the CKO’s job to develop a strategy that dictates how a company handles its intellectual assets, which includes elements such as creativity, communication ability, analytical skill and intuition, along with traditional, bottom-line accounting and production benchmarks (Alonzo, 1996).

The CKO and the concept of knowledge management have only really come to the forefront of management thinking within the last few years. Knowledge management is a discipline that promotes an integrated approach to identifying, managing, and sharing all of an enterprise’s information assets. Information assets may include databases, documents, policies and procedures, as well as previously unarticulated expertise and experience existing in individual workers. Managing many corporate knowledge management efforts is an entity called a “CKO”.

What is a CKO?
Carillo (1997) identifies the CKO and CLO (Chief Learning Officer) as the newest titles hitting many organizations. While these jobs cover a broad range of activities in areas such as research, training, and information coordination, Carillo says that most CKOs agree their main objective is to bring together and leverage pockets of business and technical knowledge. He says that knowledge officers must find out what both technology and information officers need to do their jobs better. Carillo argues that there are a lot of information resources a company has that need to be structured to be useful and, he contends, CKOs provide that structure, making information that’s available in one department accessible to everyone in the company. Hence, the CKO is much about cultural change. Carillo believes that unless you change the culture in an organization to one that values openness and sharing, the organization won’t benefit from technologies that enable knowledge management capabilities.

Watt (1997) sees the CKO, as the job of the 90s which joins the peer positions of chief technology officer, chief information officer (CIO) and chief operating officer with duties that stretch across the company. Watt states that the role of the CKO is to ensure that corporate knowledge banks are open to any employee who can put them to good use for the company. She asserts that managing this information asset is not the same as overseeing technology. In other words, she believes that the CKO role is not the same as the CIO role. However, she asserts that CKOs and ClOs will do their respective jobs better if they work well together. Watt says that CKOs must try to get a handle on the company's repositories of research, resources and expertise, including where they are stored and who manages and accesses them. Then the CKO must encourage pollination among disparate workgroups with complementary resources.

Stewart (1998) discusses the job of chief knowledge officer (CKO), which he says is still so new that the few people who hold the position don’t know quite what it is. However, Stewart asserts the CKO position is needed because intellectual capital matters more than any other asset and must be managed explicitly, not left to fend for itself. He states that most sizable companies should to have a CKO for the following reasons:
1. there is a large, coherent, and profit-generating set of responsibilities that appropriately belong to one person.
2. no one is doing it now.
3. unless someone holds the position, its responsibilities will be neglected or perhaps perverted.

Finally, Harris (1998) asserts that the CKO is basically responsible for fostering and managing the knowledge creation processes. However, Harris (1998) says that the title "chief knowledge officer" is not universally used to designate the key advocate for knowledge management programs. She notes that alternate titles include chief learning officer and manager of intellectual assets.

The CKO job description
Harris’s (1998) research indicates that the CKO position is most often aligned with the IS function within an organization. Indeed, Harris finds that the Chief Information Officer (CIO) either holds the CKO functional responsibility or the CKO reports to the CIO. However, Harris asserts that the most progressive enterprises are placing the position outside the IS organization and assigning a high level of status and authority to it.

Harris claims that the CKO role should include the following responsibilities:

- leads executive management to develop an enterprise knowledge strategy; validates this strategy across the enterprise, and ensures that its evolution complements and integrates with business strategy
- oversees the development of tactical plans to implement the knowledge strategy, including which organizational units are implemented and when, and the definition of specific programs for harvesting, leveraging and creating knowledge
- sets priorities and secures funding for knowledge management (KM) programs
- oversees the building of the KM program and the implementation of the enabling infrastructure including designing and implementing an organizational structure; defining operating processes; specifying, selecting and implementing technologies and applications; and defining policies for security, usage, maintenance by knowledge owners and participation by user communities (Harris, 1998, pp. 2-3).

Davenport and Prusak (1998) agree that the CKO role should be separate from the CIO role and they also agree that the role of the CKO is complex and multifaceted. However, they assert that the most important responsibilities of the CKO in an organization are building a knowledge culture, creating a knowledge management infrastructure, and making it all pay off economically.

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Earl and Scott (1998) find that typically the CKO is a high level appointment and that the individual chosen for the position is typically a member of the senior management. In a study of 20 CKOs in Europe and the US, they profile CKOs as having the following characteristics:

- There is no such thing as an average CKO: they come from a wide range of professional backgrounds and organizational expectations of them differ.
- Most CKOs know the businesses and cultures of their corporations from personal experience and all of them are established figures in their organizations.
- All of the CKOs are at least somewhat knowledgeable about, and are fully comfortable with, information systems and technology (though only a few have spent most of their careers in these fields).

**CKO Critical Success Factors**

Earl and Scott identify five critical success factors for CKOs:

1. Need ongoing support from the CEO in order to win the trust and support of the senior executive team and line managers as a whole.
2. Need “slack” to get the problem rolling. This translates to multi-year funding, space to try things out, and time to prove the value of knowledge management.
3. Need a clear appreciation that organizational members differ in their knowledge needs and their ability to contribute to the knowledge pool.
4. Need an ability to tolerate ambiguity. Knowledge itself is vague and it is usually difficult at best to measure the results of a knowledge management effort. Moreover, CKOs must gain their influence without authority.
5. Early visible results are essential

Davenport (1994) claims that to be successful, certain personal characteristics are critical for the CKO. He argues that the following attributes are deemed highly desirable for a CKO:

- Deep experience in some aspect of knowledge management, including its creation, dissemination, or application.
- Familiarity with knowledge-oriented companies and technologies, such as libraries and groupware.
- Ability to set a good example by displaying a high level of knowledgeability and success.

In a study of CKOs, TFPL (1998) finds that the majority of CKOs have most of these attributes. Their research shows that most CKOs emerge from planning teams and that they possess one of three main backgrounds – Information technology (IT), human resources, or a core business function. But, TFPL notes, their common strength is their understanding of the organization and its business drivers, combined with an ability to take a holistic view of the company, and to
understand the mix of hard and soft skills necessary to create, sustain and utilize the knowledge base.

**Are CKOs really needed?**

In a survey of its members, The Conference Board (1999) finds that 80% of the 200 companies responding report having a knowledge management program. However, only 25% of these companies indicate that they have a CKO!

There are firms who believe the CKO function is not needed. Cole-Gomolski (1999), for example, reports that many firms feel that having a CKO is the wrong way to harness corporate know-how. Instead, she claims, these firms prefer a more grassroots approach, in which a team of knowledge management experts works closely with – or even as part of – the business units. We see this as an emergent approach to knowledge management in contrast to the top-down, center-led CKO approach.

Cole-Gomolski notes that CKOs were supposed to straddle business and information technology (IT) with a mandate to convince workers that it is good to share information and to work with IT to build applications to support such sharing. The problem was, she asserts, that companies found that putting more control of knowledge management in the hands of end users themselves made it an easier sell. She cites evidence from a study by The Delphi Group (a research firm in Boston) that examined knowledge management groups in 25 companies. The research found that the bulk of knowledge sharing happens within business units. The research concludes that this evidence suggests that having a CKO under such circumstances would send out the wrong message.

We think that contingency theory (Lawrence & Lorsch, 1967) is useful in explaining company preferences relative to the need for and adoption of CKO positions. That is, in mature, knowledge sharing organizational cultures, the CKO function may not need to be formalized as a distinct management position. However, due to the relative newness of the concept, we believe that most organizations are somewhat less knowledge management mature. In these firms, knowledge management probably comprises a large agenda and progress will take time. Under these circumstances, the CKO can act as a driver, leader, or coordinator of a knowledge management effort, serving to keep up the its momentum, while also facilitating efforts to distill, codify, and share learning about raising the firm’s knowledge capabilities.

Some argue that the CKO’s position is constrained by its inability to resolve issues concerning tacit to explicit knowledge conversion. Indeed, most CKOs emphasize either an explicit or tacit focus (e.g., Earl & Scott, 1998) or they are urged by consultants to do so (e.g., Hansen, Nohria, and Tierney, 1999). However, we believe this strategy is based more on pressures to produce demonstrable results than on the logic of facilitating organizational “knowing”. Choo (1998) and Nanaka and Takeuchi (1995) contend that such compromising tactics necessarily adversely impact the effectiveness of knowledge management efforts. They argue that tacit to explicit knowledge conversion is the very essence of the knowledge creation and amplification process. Therefore, if CKOs sidestep this issue, the CKO is inevitably compromising the long-term success of the knowledge management effort itself!

Whatever the manifestation of the knowledge management leadership effort, knowledge management programs are clearly seen by CEOs as important. For example, a survey of CEOs found that improving firm knowledge management was their second priority, right behind increasing globalization (Malcolm Baldrige Survey, 1998).

**Opportunities for Research**

Clearly, there are real issues for scholarly debate and study. We believe that opportunities for research include the following:

- understanding and documenting organization rationales for the adoption or non-adoption of knowledge management programs [limited implementations of knowledge management programs also warrant scrutiny]
- analyzing the underlying rationales/determinants for organizational adoption of CKO positions versus non-adoption or adoption of hybrid configurations.
- assessing organizational placement of knowledge management leadership positions within firms.
- investigating methods for tacit to explicit knowledge conversion (e.g see Davenport & Prusak, 1998, Herschel & Nemati, 1999; Sternberg & Horvath, 1999).

**References**

Available at http://www.ckoinfo.org