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## How to Build a Knowledge-enabled Support Center using Bottom-up Knowledge Management

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Occasionally articles appear describing the obvious potential benefits of integrating knowledge management with Customer Relationship Management (CRM) applications. CRM is, after all, the process of bringing as much available knowledge to bear at the right time to maintain and improve the customer relationship. The more knowledge from more sources, the better. Yet, while CRM has become an accepted business practice, cross-departmental knowledge management (KM) has yet to.

In an ideal support world, the customer-related knowledge of the organization would be available, as appropriate, to anyone anytime, from the executive team and the product developers to the sales team and call-center support specialists. Though this union of KM to CRM would be an enormous leap forward, its development has yet to be embraced wholeheartedly. Perhaps the combination of a new model for customer support with an innovation in KM practice described below holds the key.

In their whitepaper, ["Getting Started with Knowledge-Centered Support"](#), the **Consortium for Service Innovation outlines a strategy for a new focus in customer call center service.** CSI's Knowledge-Centered Support (KCS) is an attempt to "transition from a call-centric approach to a knowledge-centric approach in customer service organizations... Support becomes an inherent responsibility of the entire organization."

It is a commonly accepted fact that the solution, and the knowledge within, are the most valuable part of the customer support transaction. To capture and leverage that knowledge, a new strategy is needed: one that is centered on the role of solution knowledge and the culture, processes, and technologies that create it. The KCS model asks "How is the knowledge needed to execute the solution strategy effectively being generated, matured, managed, and transferred?" An underlying, functional knowledge management system is therefore integral to CSI's Knowledge-Centered Support model.

Yet while great strides have been made in customer data management, companies still struggle with the other half of the equation: themselves. Particularly in the difficult domain of solution management, a problem often arises: defining the customer's predicament turns out to be much easier than tracking down a solution. An oft-quoted knowledge management maxim complains, "Companies don't know what they know." Though the answer to a customer's query may exist in an employee's head, on someone's hard drive, or in an archived email discussion from another department, many organizations have no way of finding that knowledge. If these sources could be adequately indexed and tapped, a knowledge-enabled organization would flourish, and Knowledge-Centered Support could help revolutionize call center workflow. Unfortunately, this leap demands a knowledge management system that works. Until now, most haven't.

In "The Knowledge-Enabled Organization," author Donald Tobin explores how an organization can foster knowledge-sharing. How does a company become a "knowledge-enabled organization that uses the knowledge and skills of all employees, regardless of level, function, or location, to help solve today's problems and to build a competitive edge for the future?" The answer may lie in the emerging field of knowledge management solutions called "Bottom-up Knowledge Management." To understand the Bottom-up philosophy one must first understand why traditional top-down knowledge management implementations and approaches have failed.

KM is the process of codifying and transferring individual employees' knowledge. Unfortunately, few traditional KM implementations have lived up to expectations. The blame has most often fallen on the strong and ingrained cultural bias against sharing knowledge within organizations. As KM pundit Hubert St. Onge has rightly stated, "Employees own knowledge, not the company." Knowledge cannot be collected from the top, or company-wide level, because employees hoard their knowledge. There are rarely positive incentives to use a KM system, and

even when there are, manually adding to the company knowledge base requires too much effort to be practical. Meanwhile, well-intentioned but misguided top-down attempts to promote knowledge transfer through collaboration, e.g. cross-departmental "action teams" and monthly "sharing meetings," also fail. Even worse, they leech valuable time from the knowledge creators' already packed schedules, subtracting instead of adding to their productivity.

Furthermore, in an effort to inspire participation, traditional KM vendors have donned a number of technological disguises: some shift the focus to search technologies or automatically-generated taxonomies, while others push collaboration or e-Learning features at the user. As the continued low adoption of traditional KM systems has shown, these approaches wrongly insist that employees in the organization embrace narrow applications with limited knowledge management benefits. To succeed, a KM deployment must be a grassroots effort, aligned with the organization's in-place business processes and unobtrusive in its operation.

Since the knowledge of the organization lies within individual employees, or "the bottom," a new strategy to exploit that knowledge has begun to enter the KM marketplace: Bottom-up Knowledge Management. David Snowden, IBM's foremost KM researcher, has often said that "knowledge cannot be conscripted; only volunteered." Bottom-up KM avoids this prerequisite altogether; knowledge workers in a Bottom-up KM system are not required to volunteer anything. The Bottom-up approach aims to foster higher KM adoption by providing benefits to the individual user, along with workgroup and departmental collaboration tools that together yield implicit KM advantages to the enterprise as a whole.

Embedded in useful productivity tools, Bottom-up KM systems like Entopia's Quantum platform integrate with business processes such as research and communication, content development and scheduling. As knowledge workers across the organization collaborate with their colleagues and create new content, the intuitive Bottom-up KM system dynamically analyzes these activities in the background. As a result, expertise profiles and knowledge libraries gleaned from the entire company are collected as a natural by-product of daily work. By focusing on the individual's productivity first, and then their intellectual capital, a knowledge-enabled organization is built, from the Bottom-up.

**Greg Oxton, Executive Director of the Consortium for Service Innovation, concurs:** "Because knowledge is the result of interactions between individuals, functional KM can only be "bottom-up". In this model the need for management or control diminishes while the need for leadership and alignment to a purpose increases. In a call center, the Bottom-up KM system amasses useful interactions and documents from around the organization as solutions are generated. Answer times are reduced as more of the company's knowledge is catalogued and reused, while new agent training and skills-based routing are facilitated. The Consortium of Service Innovation's model for Knowledge-Centered Support describes a model to create support-oriented organizations, provided they sit atop a knowledge management system that works from the point of interaction, that is the Bottom-up."

Convinced that a bottom-up knowledge-enabled support system is the way forward? You'll be happy to hear that getting started is easier than you think...

If it is indeed the call center professional's goal to strive to improve the service offering by shortening calls and resolution times, shouldn't the tools be there to provide fast and easy access to the right answers in the knowledge base? I recommend first analyzing the business process, the departmental and organizational strategy – it is imperative to align any tactical knowledge-sharing initiatives to strategic plans. It is important to take a look back at previous strategies that didn't work, look at why they didn't work and discard dysfunctional processes. In doing this, you will likewise need to discard applications that don't work well with others or meld into your processes. You will need to understand the business process and how you can bring the knowledge base to bear upon the decisions made and responses provided by the support professional.

The next step is to make it easy for your support professionals to share-knowledge. The true test of an effective knowledge initiative is sharing the knowledge with the rest of the team. You want to implement a system that is easy to learn and easy to use which will in turn garner adoption... and the knowledge base will grow as a natural by-product of your support professionals' daily work. If you give the end-users a tool with which they are comfortable, they are more likely to use it. I cannot stress enough just how vital adoption is to a successful knowledge initiative.

You will likewise need to encourage users to share the knowledge that is inside their heads (tacit knowledge) by making the results real and tangible to them. By nature, people tend to share information with those they know and trust. Therefore, the culture of an enterprise is key and encouraging a knowledge-sharing culture is very critical. Short of a cultural revolution, one way to surmount this challenge is to implement knowledge initiatives on a smaller scale to start. User see the benefits, soon word starts to spread that this initiative actually works causing a viral effect. If users can gain "just-in-time" access to answers and solutions to problems while they have a customer on the line, they will be encouraged to make their knowledge available to the rest of the team.

By way of summary, start with the individual. Start from the bottom-up. By putting the knowledge initiative in the control of the user, you will start to reap the rewards much quicker!

If you're interested in hearing more about the various tools and processes available to enable this, please feel free to get in touch with **Entopia** at [www.entopia.com](http://www.entopia.com).

For more information about the Consortium for Service Innovation and the Knowledge-Centered Support model, please visit [www.serviceinnovation.org](http://www.serviceinnovation.org).

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