Knowledge Management in the Real World

How to help your customers meet their goals.
First in a series

Melissie Rumizen and Bill Baker

A leather sales representation at specialty chemical manufacturer Buckman Laboratories posts a request for technical help: Does anyone know how to tan the skin of a stingray? The request is urgent, as the sales representative must start a trial for a customer in Thailand the following week. An expert from the United States sends a detailed process.

At Raytheon, a Six Sigma Expert (Black Belt+) in California is faced with a scheduling problem to meet a customer's need to have equipment delivered soon. She asks if anyone has a technique to help shorten a project schedule to eliminate waste and inefficiency and help meet the delivery requirement. A Critical Chain Community of Practice in North Texas helps bring them up to speed and the delivery is met.

Hallmark develops an on-line community for some 800 customers named IdeaExchange. The customers chosen become consultants to Hallmark who participate in brainstorming on new ideas. Their input spurs the development of new Hallmark products.

The United Kingdom energy provider, Centrica, builds a corporate Yellow Pages for its employees. Employees are encouraged to fill out their own entries, which include answers to such questions as current areas being worked on and projects worked on in the past. One senior director also includes some comments on his wild children and daft dog, which boosted participation from others. The overall goal is to provide a directory of employees, their skills, and background.

All of these seemingly disparate examples fall under the same umbrella — knowledge management (KM). Simply put, KM focuses on how an organization creates, captures, shares, and leverages what it knows. Systematic processes support these activities. As we learned in Total Quality Management (TQM), processes are powerful. We can control, improve, and replicate processes across an organization. The end goal is accomplishment of an organization's goals.

Management is relatively easy to define. Knowledge is harder. One definition is that knowledge is information in context that produces an actionable understanding. In other words, it has value because it helps us make decisions. While this definition does eliminate a great deal of data stored in data warehouses and databases, it isn't quite as helpful for planning a strategy.

A more useful way is to look at knowl-