Practitioner Guidelines on Conducting Knowledge Audits

These guidelines were compiled by the participants in the Kuala Lumpur Knowledge Management Roundtable, May 3 2017, hosted by Securities Commission Malaysia.

1. BEFORE THE KNOWLEDGE AUDIT

a) Framing:

Examine the organisation's structure, and the distinct functions of each department. Get hold of the department business process workflows.

Have preliminary conversations with management to sound them out informally on the idea, identify the pain points and business issues they are concerned about. Make informal observations of the current culture, business processes, and knowledge types being used in the business. Make sure you understand the culture of the organisation, the business environment and ecosystem, as well as current organisational change initiatives under way.

Consider the best model of audit, and audit methods to use for that culture and situation.

Identify key potential influencers, supporters, partners, naysayers. Speak with potential allies first (e.g. HODs of friendly departments) and socialize them on the knowledge audit concept, seeking their feedback on how it could be made most useful to them.

Be clear on the objective of the audit, i.e. what we want to achieve, the potential ROI of the audit, the main issues to address, how it connects to and supports business objectives, who are our stakeholders, who are our sponsors, who are our target audiences and respondents.

Consider what label you are going to use for the knowledge audit, appropriate to the organisational culture – (e.g. KM assessment, KM evaluation, knowledge audit, KM audit, knowledge mapping, KM needs analysis, KM planning exercise, etc.).

Make sure you have sufficient resources to conduct the audit, scale the audit to your resources. If it is a discovery audit, be sure you have sufficient resources to pursue additional lines of enquiry if new issues come up during the audit.

Determine the audit type, and the appropriate audit methods considering your objectives, your capabilities and resources and your organisation culture.

Get formal support and buy-in for the audit scoping from senior management – be clear about the level of resources, participation and time required, from them, and from their people. Be clear about the need and benefits of a knowledge audit, the intended goals, desired outcomes, and guiding principles, and be clear about the importance of their role in implementing the recommendations when the audit is complete. Connect the audit to your understanding of the business strategy to show how KM assists the business strategy. Share examples of how similar organisations have used knowledge audits to produce business benefits. Ask them for a clear mandate and for their assistance in nominating the right participants in the audit. If it is a discovery audit, let them know that the activities may change based on issues discovered as the audit progresses.

b) Planning:

Define what outcomes you want from each step in the knowledge audit process, and identify risks to the outcomes, and mitigation strategies for those risks. Identify constraints that could impact the project plan – e.g. other organisational initiatives, annual cycles of events, holiday periods etc.

If you are using an external consultant, identify potential candidates, and scope their work and role in the project. Define the requirements and deliverables. Make sure you have the resources and budget required.

Identify the roles and resources required from your own team, and ensure they have the time and capacity to perform their roles.

Identify the right respondents for your knowledge audit (based on audit type, and audit goals) – e.g. subject matter experts, department representatives, representatives of different types of staff (functions, levels, years of service).

Come up with a detailed project plan and timeline, with major deliverables, completion criteria, all the way from initial communications and preparation to the implementation of audit recommendations.

c) Preparing:

Identify the major focus areas to explore for surveys, interviews, focus groups. Design the data collection instruments and the workshops, as relevant.

Invite the right level of staff – preferably 2-5 years of experience doing the job. Make sure their managers are informed of the invitations, or that the invitations are routed via their managers. If you can, get the main (senior) project sponsor to send out the invitations.

Develop a communications package for all the knowledge audit respondents on their required involvement, any preparation, assurances of confidentiality (if relevant), what will be done with their inputs, etc.

Communicate to all stakeholders and participants what the audit's purpose is, what their involvement will be, and what the desired outcomes are. Provide briefing documents for each stakeholder/participant type and each major activity they are involved in – e.g. senior leadership, heads of department, subject matter experts, etc.

Run briefing and awareness sessions for stakeholders and participants, on the plan.

Prepare the logistics, materials and tools for the audit data collection activities. Consider the venues, and method of collecting data – e.g. recording, transcription, mapping tools, post-its and flip charts. For workshops think about well-lighted rooms, with plenty of wall-space, refreshments, and away from work emails and distractions. For interviews, think about the value of having interviews at the workplace where work artefacts can be pointed out or observed.

Learn as much as you can about the participants' job roles, major functions and work processes in advance of the audit commencement.

2. DURING THE KNOWLEDGE AUDIT

Be open to using a variety of methods for collective sensemaking and data gathering: e.g. World Café, anecdote circles.

Make sure the people who turn up are properly qualified to give you the data you need – if less experienced or more junior people turn up, go back to their bosses and your original mandate to ask for the right people.

Be prepared to keep communicating the purpose, activities and desired outcomes, and to remind participants at every stage in the activity. They will not remember the big picture from one point in the project to the next. Provide handholding and coaching where required on things like mapping activities. For workshops, think of having a main facilitator to drive the whole workshop, and co-facilitators to coach and guide individuals or groups within the workshop activities. Have an experienced facilitator who knows how to deal with cases where participants give push-back and do not want to cooperate. Consider whether you might need an external facilitator/ consultant. Anticipate potential push-back (your initial sensing in the Framing phase will help) and prepare your responses.

Document the issues raised by participants during the exercise. Maintain and open mind, and document issues they raise even if you disagree with them or think them unimportant. Use, video, audio, photos, note-taking, maps, mind-maps, transcriptions, etc. Be prepared to go back to them for clarifications on any feedback that is unclear. If creating knowledge asset maps, make sure the business activity and knowledge asset descriptions are documented clearly and as completely as possible. Make sure you validate their contributions back with them once it has been documented. Anticipate potential confusions or errors – e.g. assuming that business activities in a knowledge map are the same as process flows.

Try to provide for something of value in the audit activities that they can take back with them and use immediately – e.g. facilitating them towards an awareness of things they can address immediately before waiting for the audit close. This creates buy-in and will support the change management effort later when the post-audit implementation plan is ready. Try to include some elements of fun in workshop activities, as well as food and a pleasant environment.

Be clear about what will be documented, how confidentiality will be handled, and make sure you maintain their trust by demonstrating your knowledge of their roles and work areas, and by sticking to the guiding principles and assurances given at the start. Be prepared to deal with sensitivities and doubts about how their input will be used, and what it is for, e.g. if participants do not like to acknowledge risks or gaps, explain the purpose, and adjust the terminology as necessary.

Maintain a balance between being knowledgeable about their work (to identify pain points, focus areas and prepare probing questions, and to establish trust and common ground) and being naïve about their work so that you can ask naïve questions. Naïve questions often provide rich insights.

Provide regular updates on the progress of the exercise.

Be prepared to adjust your audit plan, to add or change audit activities and/or audit methods, to investigate new issues, based on the findings and observations during the audit.

3. AFTER THE KNOWLEDGE AUDIT

Analyse the data and prepare the audit report with observations and recommendations. Summarise the key messages and validate if necessary with key respondents. Substantiate findings with verbatim examples and participant inputs in their own words, anonymised if necessary. In your report, focus on the original audit objectives. However, make sure you document and maintain any findings or data discovered in the audit that may be of relevance in the future. Be prepared to produce supplementary reports in the future based on this data to address specific issues that may arise. Review the report with your own internal team first to make sure their insights into the audit process and findings are considered. Be clear about what you want to use the report to achieve.

Determine the most important actions to be taken as a result of the audit, focusing on the most important risks, gaps and opportunities, seek senior management endorsement, and develop a detailed implementation plan, with a means of tracking and measuring progress and impact against the plan. Define tangible benefits that you can identify as positive outcomes from the audit. If possible, embed the action plan into the organisation's annual strategic plan and workplans.

Determine the best ways to present and communicate the knowledge audit findings promptly (a) to the participants (b) to the sponsor and stakeholders© to the people responsible for follow up actions and (d) to the organisation at large. Prepare a communications package for each audience and purpose. Consider a range of formats to communicate key points: written report, presentation slides, infographics, video summaries, promotional collateral such as calendars, mousepads, etc.

If you have created knowledge maps, make sure you revisit them, refresh them and repurpose them continuously e.g. to track risks, opportunities and gaps addressed, identify and track new activities, as input to taxonomy, as inputs to departments on department level KM activities, etc. Don’t be afraid to keep going back to your data and redeploying it for new purposes. Let people see that it can be a constant reference tool.

Do change management. Be prepared to provide continuous support and networking on the follow up activities. Provide tools and automation as necessary, with reasonable maintenance and support costs.

For the inputs in this post, our thanks to participants from:

- *CyberSecurity Malaysia*
- *INCEIF*
- *JKR*
- *MTDC*
- *PETRONAS*
- *Securities Commission Malaysia*
- *Straits Knowledge*

and Ghazali Mohamed Fadzil.