Sustaining knowledge enabled excellence in performance at Acquisition Solutions

Quality is a fundamental part of how Acquisition Solutions does business and is one of its ten corporate guiding principles. In the words of its founder: “Quality is more than the fulfilment of client requirements and expectations. It is not just providing the client required deliverables; rather it’s the delivery of a complete body of work that is more useful to the client than what they expected.”

To fulfil this vision, Acquisition Solutions must continuously improve its processes to maintain the highest level of quality in every product and solution delivered. It does this by integrating knowledge management (KM) concepts, strategies, and practices and a tailored and contextual quality management (QM) approach into one seamless framework and operational model that not only address the needs of employees, but also exceed what a more traditional approach to QM can accomplish.

The journey

From Acquisition Solutions’ inception, company leadership has consciously and deliberately instilled a strong corporate culture that values collaboration and trust as foundational to delivering high-quality products and solutions.

Building on existing quality control processes that focused on providing a “second set of eyes” to deliverables and work products prior to submission to clients, the KM team’s initial focus was to introduce KM concepts, strategies, and implementing practices throughout the company, evolving the organizational view of knowledge.

A strategy emphasizing adoption of a “systematic framework was then developed and applied to capture, adapt, transfer, and reuse information, experience, and insight to measurably improve organizational performance and customer, employee, and corporate value”.

KM practices are also a crucial component of the continuous performance improvement (CPI) model, which embeds processes for learning before, during, and after execution (FAST learning) into the way learns plan, execute, and assess their performance.

Knowledge Enabled Excellence in Performance©

Acquisition Solutions researched the many components of a quality management system (QMS) and approaches such as six sigma, Malcolm Baldridge, and ISO9000. Based on research, a customized, integrated strategy was designed to match circumstances and meet needs. Three basic QMS components were identified – quality planning, quality control, and quality assurance:

- **Quality planning.** Identifying characteristics of quality deliverables and work products, as well as quality service delivery, in the context of operations. These characteristics must align with client needs.

- **Quality control.** Evaluating desired outputs and outcomes to ensure that performance satisfies all relevant quality characteristics. Focus on monitoring
individual projects, tasks, or results with the intent to eliminate causes of unsatisfactory performance.

- **Quality assurance.** Defining, evaluating, and refining operating processes and methodologies, across all projects, tasks, and deliverables, to ensure that relevant quality characteristics are satisfied.

The Knowledge Enabled Excellence in Performance (KEEP) framework reflects the integration of essential KM and QM concepts into one seamless framework. This framework provides the guiding principles and overarching concepts that can then be tailored to individual engagements, based on time constraints, context, and complexity.

Communities of practice, already central to the CPI model, are equally essential to the KEEP framework. Communities are viewed as voluntary groups of peers, practitioners, and other individuals who regularly engage in sharing and learning, based on common interests and a passion to improve their individual performance, the performance of their teams, and the performance of the entire company.

Practitioners within a community are the custodians of corporate knowledge and help to leverage collective 'know-how.' Communities provide a forum for practitioners throughout the company to connect, collect, and collaborate to leverage the depth and breadth of the knowledge and experience held by practitioners throughout the company. They help individuals, teams, and the company as a whole to learn, validate, and reapply lessons during execution, and therefore are an indispensable part of the KEEP approach.

**Implementation: "Quality at the Point of Execution"**

Acquisition Solutions’ corporate focus is on "Knowledge at the Point of Execution." This includes the concept for quality at the point of execution, recognizing that any KM or QM approach must make sense where the work is done. It is neither sufficient nor reasonable to share only concept and strategy with leadership and assume that they will be successful in translating this into practice.

To develop an effective operational model that would provide measurable and meaningful value, the KM organization made a deliberate effort to work from the ground up where the need to understand concept and strategy are not as important as the practical needs that affect daily execution. Leadership understanding and buy-in to the overall concepts and strategy are clear prerequisites to any effort, but real success in practice is achieved through a hands-on approach to implementation.

**Leadership engagement**

Over the course of several months, both mid-level and senior company leaders were worked closely with to increase their awareness and to gain their commitment and support for the proposed concepts and strategy. Individuals were introduced to the gap analysis, early drafts of the KEEP framework, and proposed implementation approach and time line. Their feedback was continually integrated into the plan so that they all felt they had a personal stake in the plan.

**Quality workshops 1-3**

To convert the strategy and KEEP framework into an effective operational model, a series of workshops were conducted with participation from a broad cross-section of practitioners "at the point of execution." The workshops' overall objective was to identify and leverage repeatable processes and tools, such as templates, checklists, and style guides, to consistently embed quality into the way the company delivers to clients and the way work products and deliverables are developed and packaged.
Finalizing the operational model

During the quality workshops, participants recognized that any quality challenges that might occur during service delivery could be magnified if either the time or resources required to complete a project were not adequately estimated when the project is planned and proposed.

To translate “initiate, plan, execute and control, and deliver and close” into terminology and a workflow that is consistent with a consulting engagement, the KM team met with the business development team to gain a better understanding of the planning and proposal development stages of an engagement. Together, they drafted and refined the KEEP operational model for sustaining quality in the engagement life cycle.

Quality week

To reach beyond workshop participants and generate company-wide awareness of and commitment to quality as part of the way Acquisition Solutions works, the company needed a way to grab the attention and spark the interest of a busy and geographically dispersed workforce. To be effective, a fun, engaging, and informative “Quality week” was hosted.

A major factor in the success of quality week was the effort invested to address both leadership and practitioner aspects of the Knowledge at the Point of Execution© model. Quality week was marketed well in advance of the reserved dates, and mid-level management were encouraged to hold team meetings during quality week and to facilitate discussions around what quality meant in the context of their client engagements.

Quality workshop no. 4

Based on the outcomes of earlier workshops and quality awareness week, a fourth workshop was organized to “obtain commitment to formally implement a number of practices and tools organization-wide to make an immediate improvement in the current level of quality delivery and deliverables.” Representatives from the workforce and management came together to participate to obtain the commitment needed to move forward with implementation, again working both sides of the Knowledge at the Point of Execution© chart.

Announcing and implementing quality tools

Several steps were taken to ensure that the widest possible cross-section of the company would actually adopt these new tools and practices and make them part of the way they work. The KM team ensured that each tool had a consistent, standard format and that related tools were easily accessible and cross-linked for easy reference. These tools were then announced, via e-mail and intranet, in manageable chunks over a two-week period.

However, even the most carefully phrased e-mails and intranet postings alone are not sufficient to make change stick. In line with a commitment to Knowledge at the Point of Execution©, Acquisition Solutions are working from the practitioner outward to effectively engage everyone by hosting several learning events at corporate offices, as well as travelling to meet project teams at their place of operations.

Next steps

Encouragement by senior leadership to leverage these tools at the point of execution, with just a bit of enforcement, also helps to ensure adoption. To maintain momentum and “make change stick,” corporate leaders are encouraged to make members of their teams accountable for applying the quality tools and practices that have been developed. As success stories are identified, they are captured and posted on the intranet to generate awareness of the value these tools are providing. Planning for the next suite of essential quality tools is also underway.
Lessons from the journey

The top five lessons learned from the journey at Acquisition Solutions are:

1. Provide value at the point of execution.
2. Ensure you adequately socialize the concept and strategy you are advocating.
3. Focus on the easy things first.
4. Make tools easy to find and use.
5. Never give up!

Upon reflection, the issues selected for immediate implementation are consistent with what was found to be the company’s greatest needs and envisioned as its future state during the initial gap analysis. Also, the quality tools, techniques, and processes implemented in support of the external clients can be leveraged for the G&A processes internally.

Finally, key KM practices and processes – such as peer assists, action reviews, communities of practice, knowledge assets, and storytelling – have made it possible for the implementation of the integrated KM and QM operational model. They are more than just the components of a model; they truly are part of the way the company works.

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