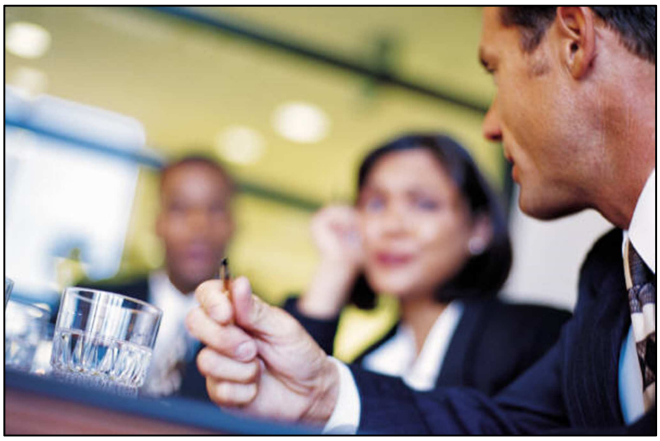
Knowledge Needs Assessments: Ten Good Practices for Successful Design, Smooth Implementation, and Effective Results

Marketing Research (MR) sheds an interesting light on Knowledge Management (KM). MR is used to analyze demand from existing or prospective customers. Meanwhile, KM tends to consider staffs in organizations as internal “clients”, with the specificity of being both consumers as well as producers of knowledge and KM services.



Identifying the knowledge needs of internal staffs or external partners has become a routine activity in many organizations. Just like MR is regularly applied to products and/or services development with a focus on external markets and demands, knowledge needs assessments have become a standard tool to evaluate knowledge gaps and to elicit KM priorities. Knowledge needs assessments can be implemented at any maturity stage of a KM program, being at the earliest phase of a KM project when an organization is starting to consider possible KM approaches and potential benefits, or when it has already rolled out various KM activities and wants to take informed decisions about the next steps. Based on our extensive work with knowledge needs assessments in organizations both from the private and public sectors around the globe, we highlight a few good practices that can contribute to successfully design, smoothly implement and effectively rip-off the benefits of this KM tool.

1. Define the Scope of the Research

One of the primary activities to carry out when having decided to conduct a knowledge needs assessment is to define its scope. The scope usually stems from a business need such as improving the performance of a particular process, identifying how two organizations can better work together, informing an upcoming Knowledge Management strategy, improving the efficiency or innovation capability of an organization, and so forth. Scoping the needs assessment involves also identifying the target group that will be studied, which can be internal –e.g. project team, department, entire organization- and/or external –e.g. partners, stakeholders, and clients-. The size of the target group will influence various factors such as ensuring that the right executive sponsor is in place while the location of study participants will contribute to designing the research methodology. Deciding on the scope of the assessment requires also clarifying the focus of the research -e.g. its depth or breadth-, as well as its scales –e.g. thematic, geographic, demographic, etc.-.

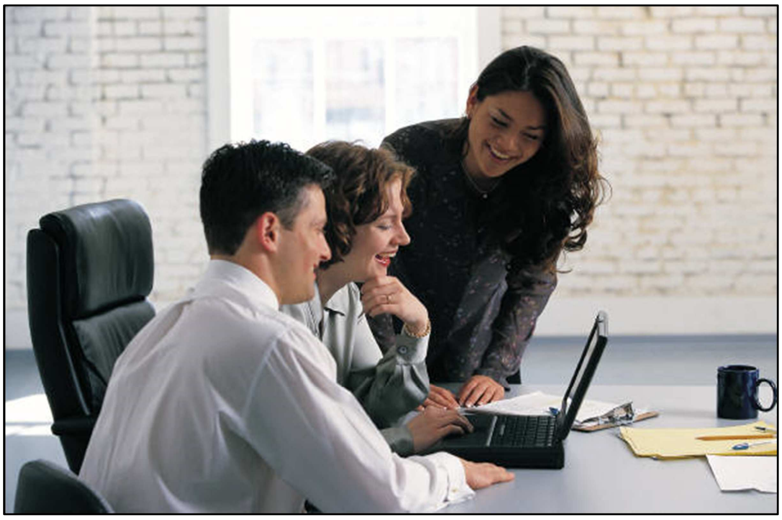
To a certain extent, the scope of the exercise will impact the time required to implement the project.

2. Plan Ahead of Time

Carrying out a knowledge needs assessment requires some preparation as well as implementation work that will be performed over a period of a few weeks that are difficult to compress. Mobilizing the project team and executive sponsor can take up to one week - which can be used to perform a desk review of the organization's internal and external environments, including its strategy and business objectives, organizational and staffing structures, activities and outputs. Designing the research methodology, carrying out exploratory interviews, and turning the assessment into an online questionnaire is frequently a two to three weeks long process. Rolling out a survey and leaving to a sufficient number of staff and partners adequate time to respond may require up to three weeks – during which additional people can be interviewed and policies, cultural elements, processes, and technologies qualitatively reviewed-. Cleaning and presenting data, interpreting results, and formulating recommendations is rarely done in less than two weeks. Further time may then be needed by the project team to review, finalize and escalate or disseminate results. Altogether, organizations embarking in a knowledge needs assessment should consider that they will be in a position to take benefit of the study report roughly two and a half month after the project kick-off date.

Attempting to compress this cycle bears some risks. An ill-designed questionnaire may increase the dropout rate from target respondents or leave aside some important questions. Shortening the time during which a survey is opened may reduce the number of responses and return a sample group that is not well representative of the organization. Rushing the analysis may leave aside some important insights and conclusions.

It is therefore important to leave adequate time to the project team and to plan the assessment sufficiently ahead of any other subsequent task, like the development of a knowledge management roadmap, a KM strategy, or next year KM work plan.



This is also especially important as knowledge needs assessments are a visible activity benefiting from large if not corporate-wide rollouts that raise expectations from all participants. These projects are well positioned to initiate some supportive mobilization among the target group and instill a momentum upon which upcoming KM activities can be collaboratively designed and launched. Basically a knowledge needs assessment should be considered as a milestone in a change management process. It will trigger high benefits and deserves committing some time to the process.

3. Ensure Executive Buy-in

With any project the choice of the executive sponsor is of primary importance and this is especially true for knowledge needs assessments. Basically the seniority of executive sponsor should be aligned with the scope of the project. Too often this requirement is only perceived as stemming from the need to get the green light from an executive manager to interview or survey part of his/her staff, i.e. to have an agreement that people will spend some of their working time to an activity that comes in addition to their daily tasks. Almost systematically the sponsor is also engaged to kick-off the project through an encouraging email or memo to its staff. While this is highly beneficial as it does raise the attention of the staff and helps to secure greater participation, this is primarily a short-term benefit. The direct contribution of the executive sponsor to the needs assessment – e.g. through an interview- is also a good practice as it usually leads to gather insights on priority business objectives and matching knowledge needs. While all of the above has its importance, the most significant reason to involve the right decision maker at the earliest stage of the needs assessment is to expose what information will be collected during the process and what types of conclusions –and possible investments- may result from these consultations. If the organization is not ready to commit resources to some follow-up actions, the needs assessment may have to be bounded accordingly or some data knowingly collected for information purpose only. Research for quick wins and knowledge gaps that are easily addressable may have to be prioritized *ex ante,* over potential shifts of the KM architecture that are too resource intensive for the organization to bear. From one hand a needs assessment is a change management tool, from the other hand it may not be suitable to raise unrealistic expectations. Such tricky balance between the collection of –and prioritization among- ambitious demands and managerial reality should be openly discussed with the executive sponsor when kicking-off the project. This will ensure genuine shared-ownership of the process and findings, i.e. the forthcoming conclusions will be more likely taken up and effectively implemented.

On a related note, if the purpose of the knowledge needs assessment is to inform a forthcoming corporate KM strategy, it then may be required to add to the governance structure of the assessment project a Project Board formed by senior managers. This will contribute to regularly embed guidance and inputs from senior executives during the process, increasing their overall buy-in and maximizing the likelihood that results are taken up.

4. Design the Methodology

Most knowledge needs assessments fall under the umbrella of exploratory research. Social scientists and marketing researchers are already well used to rely on qualitative and quantitative techniques that are directly transposable to knowledge needs assessments. Research tools most frequently used during knowledge needs assessments include desk reviews, interviews, surveys, focus groups, and direct observations. According to the scope of the research and research questions, these techniques can be exercised separately or combined in order to enrich findings and triangulate results.

Each tool has specific strengths and shortcomings. Online surveys are certainly the most effective way to gauge the needs of large organizations or dispersed teams but do not provide the latitude to mine specific issues drawn forth by the responses they have captured. In-depth one-on-one interviews have the potential to gather rich perspectives from department, unit or project staff, but have often to be limited to short consultations when conducted remotely –e.g. Skype to countries with poor connectivity-. Focus groups are particularly useful to mine specific issues or to brainstorm options after a survey but, for large target groups, are less effective at determining priorities than quantitative research. Desk research and observations are also powerful tools but require direct access to the local environment to gather insights about the types and quality of the knowledge resources generated by the target group, about the level of KM institutionalization, range of KM policies, and level of use –e.g. content management policy, publications policy, etc.-, about the physical workplace and its conductivity to social interactions, about the online working environment –e.g. level of adoption of collaborative technologies, or quality of content repositories-, and so forth.

Sequencing these research techniques would draw a path that marketing researchers would probably recognize:

1. Desk research
2. Interviews
3. Questionnaire
4. Focus groups

5. Develop the Questionnaire(s)

Although the interviews and focus groups require careful preparation and a clear canvas of questions –e.g. closed or opened, structured or semi-structured, etc.-, they can cope with some level of imperfection and adjustments on the fly. Questionnaires have much little tolerance for defaults. It is not rare that their development takes up to two weeks or more depending on their complexity, the number of languages supported and the number of target groups –e.g. internal or external-, the familiarity of the project team with the work of the organization, or with the range of KM concepts and tools available from which to select those most relevant to the study and that will be assessed.

The period during which the questionnaire is developed is often fruitful to refining the initial scope of the needs assessment and make more precise assumptions on the most critical knowledge that is needed to support the achievement of the organization's corporate objectives –or department, unit, project team, etc.-.

This is also a period of creative tension as the questionnaire needs to find a balance between the desire to inflate the number of questions for the sake of being comprehensive and the need to prevent future respondents from dropping-out. To some extent questions have to be gauged according to the capacity of the organization to act upon the findings.

Data collection can run through specific KM components, for instance unfolding the content of the following categories:

- KM alignment with business objectives
- Leadership
- Norms and cultural values
- Policies, institutionalization
- Roles and responsibilities
- Rewards and incentives
- Business processes
- KM staffing and governance
- Range of KM products and services
- Communities, social networks
- Content creation & dissemination
- ICT environment
- KM measures and metrics

A number of survey items have to be carefully designed. The demographic component is key to study different segments of the sample group and focus knowledge needs (e.g. by age range, region, gender, job function, etc.). Some questions may be specifically geared towards creating a baseline that is in sync with the business strategy (e.g. "*On average, how much time do you spend daily looking for the right information*?" if time and costs are a priority concern; or "*On a daily basis, how often do you connect with colleagues in other countries (or offices) to share information, seek support, or provide feedback*?" if social innovation is a corporate priority). Baseline questions are tracked over time in order to see how much improvements KM is making to the bottom line. A final cross-cutting question is essential to identify priorities over the entire set of sections and components. Other usual survey designs techniques and good practices apply (e.g. leave ample room to qualitative data collection; avoid using compound questions; pre-test the survey; etc.).

Section 7: ICT Environment

1/3. Please tell us how useful the following tools would be to your work:

	Very much needed	Much needed	Slightly needed	Not needed or already there
Applications for collaborative authoring (e.g. à la Google docs)	○	○	○	○
Blogs	○	○	○	○
Federated search engine	○	○	○	○
Mailing list for networking and e-discussions	○	○	○	○
Mapping / Georeferencing of data	○	○	○	○
Online learning events (e.g. webinars)	○	○	○	○
Online workspaces for teams to discuss and share materials	○	○	○	○
Real time e-discussions (i.e. live chat room)	○	○	○	○
RSS feeds, news aggregator based on interests (e.g. Yahoo pipes)	○	○	○	○
Social networking sites (e.g. à la Facebook)	○	○	○	○
Team and corporate calendars	○	○	○	○
Teleconference platforms (audio or video) on the desktop	○	○	○	○
Wikis	○	○	○	○
Yellow Pages (e.g. who's who searchable by expertise area)	○	○	○	○

Turning a questionnaire into an online survey requires selecting a tool that can accommodate a number of criteria, such as the expected end-user experience, ease of administration, types of questions supported, and so forth. Some tools such as Survey Monkey for instance are found easier to implement but do not necessarily provide the same end user experience than more complex platforms, such as Survey Gizmo.

6. Roll-out and Reinforce

A pre-launch message sent to the target group a couple of weeks before starting the flag the project and its purpose, raise attention, and setting some expectations. This consultative process is an effective means to message is usually sent by the executive sponsor as an official memo, an email, or through social media platforms. Likewise, the launch of the online survey is preferably done by the executive sponsor. Such message contains some brief but essential advocacy information to reinforce the importance of the knowledge needs assessment and to call for a broad participation -this call can be further routed through formal channels, such as management meetings-. The kick-off message also provides a link to the online survey, flags the cut-off date, indicates if other consultative techniques –e.g. interviews- are going to be deployed, and acknowledges in advance all participants. The period during which the survey is opened is frequently extended through a reminder message, e.g. one to two weeks before the initial deadline. Meanwhile, additional semi-personalized and nominative emails can be easily created with a mail merge function in order to maximize the response rate, or specific social networks targeted to foster participation.

7. Conduct Face-to-face Consultations

Interviews, focus groups, round tables or similar qualitative techniques are essentials to the needs assessment. They supplement the survey or eventually replace it for small target groups when quantitative results are out of scope.

Items explored can cover some specific components of an internal KM framework, or leverage parts of some existing KM model as introduced above, or run through shorter approaches –e.g. people, processes, technology-.

Focus groups in particular are rich platforms to gather needs and suggestions, either on specific issues or across homogenous target groups. New comers who have joined the organization less than 6 months ago for instance are not yet used to the internal modus operandi and are frequently a source of fresh ideas, being keen on flagging performance gaps and suggesting practical improvements.

Here again, the detailed design and implementation of these investigation techniques can benefit from the findings and recommendations already well described in Marketing Research.

8. Close and Analyze

When the needs assessment has relied on a survey, a closure message is of good practice to thank participants and disclose some early observable data such as the number of responses, the geographical spread, or the level of participation according to any other demographic segment.

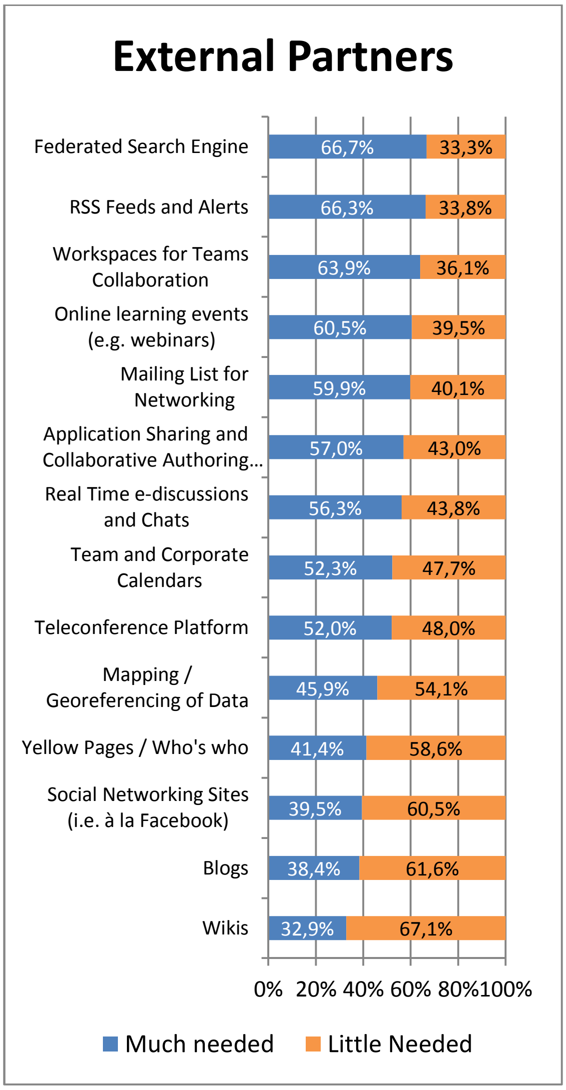
Data exported to a spreadsheet should be cleaned up in order to remove records that are too much incomplete, inconsistent, or duplicates. Using a pivot table enables to interpret results according to the demographical characteristics listed in the questionnaire in order to itemize knowledge needs across sub-groups of respondents as well as to cross-tabulate survey categories in order to showcase dependencies between components of the KM model listed in the questionnaire.

9. Present Results and Facilitate Uptake

Once the most salient findings stemming from the survey and other consultative methods have been identified and presented, they can feed the study report. For ease of development, it sections will echo and articulate the components of the KM model that have been successively used to collect data. Findings should be complemented by an analytical part that renders knowledge needs in terms of KM architecture and service delivery.

In order to facilitate dissemination and uptake, the study report is frequently complemented by a PowerPoint presentation that highlights key results and conclusions.

Presentations, round tables, dissemination of results are necessary means to further ensure shared ownership of the knowledge needs assessment and to spur uptake. In particular,



presentations to the Executive Sponsor and other managers are critical to facilitate the decision-making process and get buy-in to engage in the next steps. On that matter, it is trivial but important to recall that management outweighs Knowledge Management: some of the priorities pointed out in the knowledge needs assessment will likely be disregarded for strategic management reasons. A needs assessment is not a KM roadmap, strategy or action plan. It

aims to inform them but has to be reviewed according to the best case scenario and management (financial) approval. As earlier indicated though, to mitigate risks of disillusionment and maximize the opportunity to leverage the results of the knowledge needs assessment, it is important that the entire process, areas of investigation and possible conclusions are well presented to the Executive Sponsor prior to the launch of any data collection.

10. Follow Up

Results of the knowledge needs assessment can then be referred in forthcoming KM work, as a means to recall that it is anchored in a consultative process and aims to address select needs of internal -or external- "clients".

Progresses in the delivery of KM services and evaluation of their impact can be periodically monitored against baseline questions in the survey. As time goes by and changes impact the internal or external environments of the organization, launching a new knowledge needs assessment can shed rejuvenated light on the ways to improve people's work and results.

Breard & Associates, 2012

Consulting & Advisory Services

http://www.breard-associates.com

About Breard & Associates:
Breard & Associates is a consulting and advisory company. We focus on international development work and support clients through the provision of expertise and capacity in the complementary fields of institutional development, organizational design, capacity development, knowledge management, staff's and community's development, ICT, results-based management, and monitoring & evaluation.

Breard & Associates is a member of ***Developing Together***, an independent network of international development experts.

Breard & Associates, *Knowledge Needs Assessments: Ten Good Practices for Successful Design, Smooth Implementation, and Effective Results*, Paris, 2012.