What’s a Chief Knowledge Officer?

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Despite the funky titles, the folks you are meeting at the conference are great. They are open, frank, and willing to share with you what they’re doing. They remind you of people involved in start-ups who are excited about their work. But they also spend time listening to what it’s like back home for you and your organization. They connect with you.

More than anything else, they really believe in knowledge management. They talk about how things could be different. They’re convinced they can bring a huge competitive advantage to their business. These aren’t dreamers talking pie in the sky stuff, though. They are firmly grounded in the business drivers and needs of their organization. They tell you exactly how what they are doing links directly to the organizational goals. They talk about returns, sometimes giving numbers, sometimes telling stories.
In this chapter, we’ll take a closer look at people with new and strange titles. Being a formal knowledge manager is a new role in many organizations. So we will look at where these corporate newcomers come from, what they do, and what they’re like.

**Somebody Has to Do It**

Some chief knowledge officers (CKO) are self-made. James McKeen and Sandy Staples of the Centre for Knowledge-Based Enterprises at Queen’s University in Canada found that about 25 percent of CKOs they studied created their own jobs. These CKOs even write their own job descriptions, although most don’t even have one. However, for the most part, chief executive officers (CEOs) create chief knowledge officer positions.

Such CEOs are plagued by internal problems. Knowledge is not being widely captured or shared across a corporation. Lew Platt, formerly CEO of Hewlett-Packard, bemoaned the fact that his organization didn’t know what it knew. Or the corporation may have been reorganized, merged, or acquired. The people left after the dust settles don’t know what the organization still knows or how to find out what it knows.

Externally, it isn’t any better for these CEOs. Their customers get more demanding every day. However, while customers get more demanding, the organization becomes less able to use what the organization knows about customers to meet those demands and develop more business. Despite databases of customer complaints, nothing gets fixed.

And so it goes. Poor knowledge management is the underlying cause of a never-ending list of problems be-deviling CEOs. They become convinced that effectively using their knowledge is the answer, but the organization can’t seem to get its act together. It’s at this point that organizations start calling for a knowledge management doctor.

You may say that your organization is already doing knowledge management. I’d be surprised if you weren’t in some way. Explain the concepts of KM, and people start to recognize they’ve been doing it before it was cool. Unfortunately, that doesn’t mean that there
aren’t critical gaps or significant opportunities being missed. And this is what drives CEOs in every kind of organization to call for a CKO.

Some of you might argue about the CEO appointing a CKO. Making knowledge the job of a CKO lets everyone else off the hook, you might say. It draws borders around knowledge, which should be everyone’s concern. Some also point out it could lead to the dreaded evils of bureaucracy: fossilized thinking, overcentralization, and the building of fiefdoms.

In fact, in an ideal world, everyone should be doing knowledge management. However, it is not an ideal world. Creating the position of CKO, giving it to someone, and holding that person accountable is a time-honored way of putting teeth into a decision. (Not to mention arms and legs.) At least at first, having a honcho in charge can draw attention to knowledge issues. More importantly, a CKO can get an executive mandate and thus the resources that result in the organization’s taking KM seriously.

Some CKOs take a middle path. They say the job is temporary. They will get things rolling, conduct pilots and gradually build up a substantial program. Then the knowledge management team may escape and dissolve back into business units, with those units taking over the effort. Another approach is to position a KM group as an independent think tank, perhaps as a side business.

Later on, it may indeed be possible to declare the war won, dismiss the general and the troops, and celebrate victory. But don’t expect a short war. Putting together a substantial program and building an infrastructure can take years, even with the best of nonbureaucratic intentions.

The role of CKO is still so new that it is hard to say what is best overall. Each organization has to decide what is best for it.

**Stranger from Outside or Hire Within?**

This is a conundrum. Hiring the right someone from the inside has many advantages. Many CKOs are relatively young, usually in their 40s. One study found that the average time within the organization for CKOs was nine years. Despite their relative youth, though, they are seasoned and respected managers within their own corporations. They have credibility, and they also have a breadth of experience. Usually, they’ve held a number of different jobs, perhaps in different functions, in their organizations. This gives them an in-depth knowledge of the business.

They’re well connected and familiar with personality foibles of the higher-ups. They know the culture, all of the unwritten do’s and don’ts of the “way we do things around here.” Insiders don’t need to “come on board,” get their feet wet, or settle in. They are positioned to take off running.

On the downside, insiders have the faults of their culture. They may be as blind as everyone else to the emperor’s lack of knickers. Their connections may include
enemies resulting from years of internal skirmishing. Past failures as well as successes are common knowledge. They can start running, but do so burdened with a well-known past.

A stranger lacks the baggage. Clear-eyed, they can survey the corporate landscape and point out the mountains invisible to everyone else. They start with a clean slate, with any luck. They also may come with previous experience as a CKO. Given that most CKOs are first generation, finding anyone internally with previous experience as a CKO is unlikely. Unfortunately, strangers lack the advantages an insider has.

There is no right or wrong answer to the conundrum of internal or external. I know successful CKOs from both sides of the fence. Some individuals have even been successful as both internal and external hires in different companies. In practice, however, most organizations hire from the inside. Executive search firms will tell you that they maybe handle one or two CKO searches per year. There is a dearth of CKO Wanted ads.

In Search of the CKO

Thinking over a few of the former and current CKOs I know, I get the following list of previous occupations:

- Anthropologist
- Code breaker
- Librarian
- Chemist
- University dean
- Chief information officer
- Computer engineer
- Independent consultant
- Owner of small business
- Doctor of veterinary medicine, specialist in equine obstetrics

(To preserve a friendship, I shall not name the last individual. I do feel free to say that this gentleman delivered horses, usually at night, in an unheated barn in Minnesota winters.) However, despite the diverse backgrounds as represented in this list, CKOs do tend to play common roles.
**CKOs Are Evangelists**

CKOs relentlessly spread the word to the rest of the organization—senior management, middle management, and all of the knowledge workers. They also try to inspire and enlist fellow travelers. It isn’t enough that you come to believe. You must join the movement. They want followers, allies, partners, and sponsors.

A journalist once asked me if I could sum up what a CKO does. My answer was that it varies, but there is one common denominator. They have passion. You see it in their faces. You hear it in their voices. You feel it as they pound (gently!) the table. They believe with every ounce of their being that knowledge management is the answer to the organization’s questions. This passion drives them to be evangelists.

**Didn’t Know**

Michael Earl and Ian Scott of the London Business School studied 20 CKOs in five different countries. Looking at personality traits, they found that CKOs are more able to deal with stress than the average person, and unlikely to dwell negatively on problems. They enjoy social gatherings, like to build close relationships, and seek excitement. They need to be goal-oriented and high achieving. Overall, Earl and Scott describe the needed qualities for a CKO as rare and distinctive, putting the onus on the CEO to find the right personality.

**CKOs Are Entrepreneurs**

Self-starters, CKOs are driven to build something new. Since this is still largely uncharted territory, they are visionaries. They translate often-vague generalities from a CEO into a vision anchored in reality. They define what knowledge management is, and design concrete programs.

CKOs are willing to take risks. They gamble for high stakes in the following areas:

- Creating new capabilities
- Proving the value of untried approaches
- Changing the way people think
- Changing the way people work
They are catholic in their sources of new ideas. They may concoct new ideas themselves. They may look to others in the organization, listening and backing the ideas of others. Often mavericks internally, they often look outside for new approaches. Many CKOs begin by looking at what other companies are doing, and talking to consultants.

To be a CKO is to start a new business. They love being at the forefront of something new and exciting and they thrive on it.

CKOs’ failures can be as grand as their successes. With a position of high corporate visibility and the eye of the CEO, it is hard to fail discreetly. While failure is a badge of honor in Silicon Valley, it can be the end of a career in a company. Usually, CKOs are canny enough to pick pilot projects that are guaranteed winners with big returns. But, being entrepreneurial, the shadow of failure is always there.

**CKOs Are Persuaders**

CKOs do not dictate. They use the arts of influence —reciprocity, commitment, consistency, and gentle deference. They build relationships across the breadth of the organization. One way they do this is by earning a reputation for being someone who is always willing to listen to your woes and tribulations. In discussions with you they listen, not dominate. They are open to the ideas of others, but also contribute their own.

In the days of the early pioneers there were few signposts to follow. The field has grown enough that there are many books, journals, and Web sites dealing with knowledge management (but none exactly like this book, I’m happy to say). You can learn a lot sitting in your easy chair or at your computer. People also tend to be generous about sharing their expertise and suggestions. As busy as they are, most people in this field take the time to share. You really have unlimited sources of ideas externally.
If you peek at their calendar, it is filled with one-on-one meetings with key people. The purpose of such meetings often is not about evangelizing. The purpose is to build relationships. Building relationships takes time.

Or to put it another way, they are getting to know their internal customers. They are learning what you need, what kind of language you use, and how you think. Once they understand your situation, often they are eager to offer help—and then they follow through.

They also give credit to other people. This is not the role for someone with an ego who demands the entire spotlight. Others can talk about building networks and collaborating. The CKO must live it, and one of the best ways is by cheerfully surrendering the glory.

They know their stuff. If they are weak in certain areas, they consult experts from the outside or the inside. They are not afraid to ask questions. They continuously work on learning more—about the organization and about their own field. They understand the internal business processes. They make good judgments. If they are internal hires, they have a history of past successes.

**Didn’t Know**

To learn more about the qualities a good CKO should possess, I suggest reading the article “The Necessary Art of Persuasion” in the *Harvard Business Review* (May/June 1998) by Jay Conger. In it, he says that persuasion is a process of learning from others and reaching a shared solution. It is not forcing people to see things your way. He also gives four essential elements of persuasion: establishing credibility, finding common ground, giving vivid evidence, and connecting emotionally.

**CKOs Are Communicators**

They are masters of the elevator speech. Think of how long you normally have to explain something to someone on an elevator—maybe about 30 seconds. During that time you must explain what you plan to accomplish, how you plan to do it, and what the results will be. You don’t even have time to draw a breath. CKOs handle this like seasoned salespeople.
They also understand the importance of crafting a communications strategy. They pursue multiple means of communication, all that are available to them. They speak at internal events. They publish in the corporate newsletters. They have Web sites built. They look for every way possible to spread the message.

**CKOs Are IT Savvy**

Although they lack the technical skills and experience of the CIO, they understand the capabilities of information technology. They can identify gaps in the existing infrastructure. They then can help recommend changes needed to support their programs. Or they may find new capabilities, if those are needed. They may even need to tackle IT issues before they are able to begin any KM programs.

Overall, CKOs are IT literate. This doesn’t mean that they know every software package and vendor. At the very least, however, they should know about general capabilities for information retrieval, content management, integrated systems, and collaborative work. Since they’re usually involved in the procurement of knowledge management IT systems, this helps them cast skeptical eyes upon the wild claims of vendors and their own IT department at times.

Most importantly, they understand the limitations of IT. They know that IT doesn’t equate to knowledge management. IT is a tool; it is a tool you have got to have. But the users remain king.

This knowledge and skepticism means they can talk to the CIO semi-intelligently. The CIO or someone in the IT organization is an ally a CKO desperately needs. To work well with an ally, the CKO must able to talk the language of the CIO. IT savviness is so important that we will devote all of Part 3 of the book to IT (pun intended).

**But What Do They Do?**

The quick answer is a whole bunch of things. More specifically, most CKOs build programs. Let’s look at the CKO job by looking at the types of actions needed for building programs:
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- Identify gaps in capabilities and performance
- *Benchmark* new ideas and performance standards
- Integrate needs from different parts of the organization
- Align resources such as people, IT, and money
- Ensure that the IT infrastructure enables knowledge creation, sharing, capture, and leveraging
- Develop new strategies, approaches, and tools
- Implement pilots and approaches
- Build a broad base of support at all levels of management
- Collaborate with key people such as the CIO and head of HR
- Leverage the strengths of the culture, using them as a jujitsu move to outmaneuver weaknesses
- Create environments for creating and sharing knowledge
- Practice change management
- Demonstrate results
- Celebrate successes

In other words, they help everyone in the organization take advantage of what different people and groups know and can do to improve, grow, and better serve customers.

Where Do They Perch?

CKOs usually roost in one of four places: a separate, stand-alone office, with the CIO, the corporate training function, or with human resources. An undeniable rub is that any CKO residing in an IT, training or HR function is part and parcel of a larger group. This group has many other responsibilities, many of which will not involve the CKO. There are many competitors for the always-limited resources in any function. The CKO de facto becomes part of the crowd, jostling for resources and visibility.
This also makes the CKO dependent on the CIO, head of training or chief of HR. I have seen this work well, with fervent support by these functional leaders. I also have seen it work poorly, as the CKO is sent to the back of the business bus. Why take the chance of lukewarm support from someone with other things on his or her mind?

Another flaw with this approach is that the CKO’s boss hobnobs with the honchos, not the CKO. At the routine meetings of the senior executives, the CKO’s boss sits at the table, not the CKO. The CKO loses much of his or her needed access. Since gaining support of senior management is a critical success factor for CKOs, this severely hobbles them.

Putting a CKO in such a function also sends a message that knowledge management is merely part of a traditional function. It is nothing special, just a heretofore undiscovered aspect of an old friend. It isn’t so important.

Stand-alone is the best. “Reports directly to the President or CEO”—now that has impact. It says that knowledge management is more important than people had realized. It says that it will be a major concern for the organization. As marketing folks know, perception is all. It trumps reality.

It also gives the entrepreneur more than a little elbowroom. Unhampered by departmental focus, squabbles, and goals, the CKO can direct his or her energies to starting a brand-new business within the business.

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Know How

If you have ever been involved in a new program or initiative, you know how difficult it is to get things going. It’s like trying to turn a battleship. The field of change management focuses on ways to implement change within an organization despite resistance. Most CKOs regard their ability to master change management as a critical success factor.

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The Least You Need to Know

- CEOs usually create the chief knowledge officer position, in order to solve organizational problems and create new capabilities.
- CKOs can be hired either internally or from the outside. There are advantages and disadvantages for both.
- Chief knowledge officers have many hats: evangelist, entrepreneur, persuader, and IT realist.
- CKOs need a good relationship with the CIO or someone in the IT organization.
- CKOs may be located in the IT function, the corporate training function, the HR function, or as a stand-alone. Stand-alone is best.