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# Chapter 1:

# Knowledge management strategies and frameworks for the post-COVID world

*By Nick Milton, director and co-founder, Knoco Ltd*

## **Introduction**

The world is coming towards the end of the biggest health crisis for decades, and organizations across the globe are taking stock of the current situation and asking themselves, in a post-pandemic context – “What now?” What new strategies, business models, and approaches will be needed in a post-COVID world? Knowledge managers within those organizations will also be asking themselves similar questions, in order to determine how KM can best support the business in its new endeavors and ways of working. Now is a time for considered reflection, and in this chapter I hope to provide some guidance and models to guide that reflection. I will look at the post-COVID landscape in two dimensions – firstly what new activities and priorities an organization will face, and secondly what new ways of working will be required. The former will set the strategy for KM, while the latter will address the nature of the KM framework itself.

It has to be said at the outset, however, that it is probably premature to conclude the reflection. We are not yet in a post-COVID world; the pandemic is still raging, and though ubiquitous vaccination in the developed world has ended the need for lockdown, there are still large numbers of people either ill or voluntarily self-isolating. It is not yet clear whether the lockdown-enforced pattern of working from home will continue once it is safe to return to the office, whether there will be a hybrid approach mixing home-based and office-based working, or whether, in a year or two, office life will be indistinguishable from office life five years ago. We do not know what will happen, and in that lack of knowledge we can only really look at scenarios.

## **The four main scenarios**

We can consider four possible scenarios for the future of any organization, based on the Boston Square in Figure 1. Each of these scenarios carries risks for KM, and at the same time presents opportunities. The four scenarios are described below.

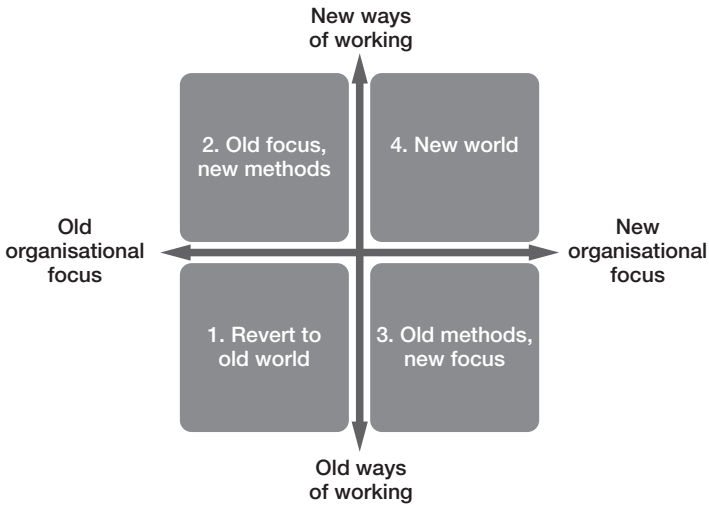


Figure 1: Four possible scenarios.

**Scenario 1 – retaining the same organizational focus as before, with the same ways of working**

This scenario represents a return to the pre-COVID world. Face-to-face activity and interplay has a freshness and immediacy that Zoom and Teams meetings do not, and remote working does not provide the same opportunities for creativity, innovation, and cross-team knowledge sharing, as discussed later in this chapter. The danger for knowledge management in reverting to the old world is that the gains it made in many organizations, as a facilitator for remote work, may be lost, and reversion to the old world could be a step backward for KM. On the other hand, if the knowledge manager acts quickly, they could build on KM's COVID successes, perhaps by:

- Conducting a learning review of the organization's COVID response to draw out lessons;
- Gathering stories and examples of how KM supported the organization during COVID;
- Making the case that KM can similarly support office-based work; and
- Making the case that KM can also support the transition back to the office.

### **Scenario 2 – new ways of working with an unchanged organizational focus**

This might be, for example, a firm that retains some of the elements of remote or hybrid working, yet the mission and strategy of the organization is the same as it was pre-COVID. For many organizations, KM provided excellent tactical support during COVID, providing help with videoconferencing tools and processes, and helping develop online information repositories. There is a risk that organizations in Scenario 2 may expect KM to continue at this tactical support level, rather than using it as a (more valuable) strategic enabler. The opportunity, on the other hand, is for KM to offer to develop a true hybrid KM framework, which brings creativity, innovation, and cross-team sharing to the hybrid world. Such a framework is discussed later in this chapter.

### **Scenario 3 – old ways of working, but new organizational focus**

The world has moved on during the past few years. Brexit, COVID-19, the “great resignation”, hybrid work, the Russian invasion of Ukraine, the energy price shock, the growing influence of climate change – all of these issues can have a profound effect on a business. Perhaps old business lines are no longer viable, while new business lines and business opportunities beckon for fast-moving agile companies. We cannot assume that the post-COVID organizational focus will be the same as the pre-pandemic focus. There is a risk to KM, if it is seen as a tactical rather than a strategic tool, in that it might be ignored when developing new products, services, or business lines. The opportunity, on the other hand, is to make the case that KM is vital to help the organization navigate a new and changing world. KM allows organizations to learn at the speed of change, and to develop and deploy new areas of organizational knowledge. Therefore, a change in organizational focus will require a change in KM strategy, if KM is to deliver on its strategic potential. In several organizations,<sup>1</sup> KM was used to develop and deploy a body of knowledge on “Dealing with COVID”. This can be used as a demonstration of KM’s ability to help the organization to learn during change, and KM teams should be seeking internal endorsement of the value they brought, in order to gain management endorsement for further strategic support.

### **Scenario 4 – new ways of working, new organizational focus**

This is the “New World” scenario in which the organization will be doing new things, and working in a new way. This is a risky scenario, compounding novelty on novelty, and full commitment to KM will be needed in order to navigate this new world. KM needs a new strategy, to

support new areas of focus, and a new framework, to support new ways of working.

In the following sections we discuss first the steps needed to refresh a KM strategy, and then the elements that a new KM framework is likely to need.

### **KM strategies for a new world**

Development of a new, revised, expanded, or updated KM strategy should, nowadays, follow the requirements of the first few clauses of ISO Standard 30401:2018: the Management Systems Standard for Knowledge Management.<sup>2</sup> Whether or not an organization has any plans, or even desire, to seek certification against ISO 30401:2018, the standard still represents the views of the world's leading international standards organization concerning the required components of a management system (and knowledge management is a management system – the management system with knowledge as a focus). Using ISO 30401 to guide strategy development can therefore be claimed to be good practice.

Some of the elements of ISO 30401 are strategic elements, and these are to be found in clauses 4.1, 4.2, and 4.3. Compliance with these clauses ensures that your KM strategy is robust, and requires that you consider the following issues:

- The required outcomes for KM;
- The issues that affect the ability of KM to deliver its outcomes;
- The stakeholders and their needs; and
- The scope of KM, including the critical knowledge topics.

**KM outcomes** represent the measurable business outcomes that KM will support, which drive the KM strategy, and against which the success of the KM program will be gauged. For some lucky organizations, for whom the post-COVID world is one of opportunity, the required outcome might be growth (sales growth, revenue growth, capacity growth). For others, it might be cost reduction or improved operational efficiency. For others still, it might be capability retention during downsizing (leading to an emphasis on knowledge retention).

The organization should develop a list of **issues** related to this new world, which are either opportunities KM can leverage to deliver the outcomes, or challenges KM may need to surmount. These might be internal issues (new departments, new products, new technology) or external issues (new

costs, new competitors, new markets, new demands or constraints). The issue list will start to map out some of the component elements of the strategy, and will flow down into operational KM plans.

The **stakeholders** for KM may be the same as in the pre-COVID world, or there may be significant changes to the list. However, the needs of these stakeholders are likely to have changed, and the KM team should canvas them to understand their new needs. These stakeholders include the users of the KM framework (e.g. the knowledge workers who will use the framework to gain the knowledge they need to do their job), and also those with an interest in the outcomes, such as senior management and external customers. Prioritize this list; you may not be able to satisfy all stakeholders equally.

The **scope** of KM may have changed<sup>3</sup> during the pandemic, and KM may have expanded (or contracted) both its remit and its organizational reach. The extent of this scope needs to be determined for the post-COVID world.

In addition, the scope should be redefined in terms of **critical knowledge**. New organizational activities need to be supported by new knowledge, and in scenarios three and four above, the KM team will need to define and agree a new prioritized list of critical knowledge topics that will represent its prioritized areas of focus.

Together, the new outcomes, issues, stakeholders and their needs, scope and critical knowledge form the foundation for a new KM strategy. This strategy will be delivered through a KM framework, which may or may not need to be updated for post-COVID ways of working.

### **How KM operated during lockdown and remote working**

In scenarios two and four above, organizations will be operating with new ways of working, some of which may be extensions of patterns developed during lockdown. The KM framework needs to adapt to these new ways of working. Many commentators believe that many approaches to working from home (WFH) will persist, and that organizations may adopt a hybrid model in future, mixing office-based and home-based work. Of course, as mentioned in the introduction, that may not be the case, and perhaps within two years office work will be the norm again. However, if hybrid work and WFH are to be more common, then it is useful to see how KM operated during lockdown, in order for the new KM framework to build on the strengths and address the weaknesses.

Respondents to a 2021 survey of changes to KM due to lockdown<sup>4</sup> suggested that WFH and remote working created the following positive effects (in the words of selected survey respondents);

- Greater access to, and participation from, remote offices;
- Cost and time savings for meetings;
- More accessible data due to remote working;
- More habitual online collaboration;
- People are more focused and the requirement to capture and share (knowledge) has been greatly enhanced;
- It became easier to conduct sessions with people from multiple geographies; and
- The needs from the business have become more clear. As a result, KM in all its facets has become a bigger priority for management and more space for new KM projects has been made available.

In addition, the following negative effects were reported:

- You have to make an effort to contact people. Juniors are not learning by overhearing conversations;
- Less ad-hoc knowledge sharing from employees;
- More difficult to effectively engage with people;
- Personal knowledge sharing has been impacted;
- Our interviews are now more difficult to do. Also, the possibility to use physical billboards (knowledge walls) has been limited because half of the people don't appear in the office;
- Training (especially for new joiners) was harder;
- The inability to have random, face-to-face contacts between those of us working (with KM) as well as others within the organization who may champion the initiative has been problematic; and
- While overall remote work has been good, lack of direct interaction and a focus on more "formalized" approaches to reaching out to one another (e.g., scheduled meetings) feels like it has had a negative impact on our reach.

In summary, KM during lockdown supported remote collaboration between team members, and the requirement for KM became more obvious to management and staff alike. At the same time, the richness of face-to-face communication, and unplanned ad-hoc knowledge gathering and sharing, were lost.



Other studies have shown similar results. An article entitled “The effects of remote work on collaboration among information workers”, published in *Nature* in 2021 by Yang et al,<sup>5</sup> looked at the working habits of over 60,000 US Microsoft employees before and after the pandemic, to study how work habits shifted as working became remote. There are several very interesting conclusions from this article. One came from an analysis of how the number of “ties” changed as remote working was introduced – ties being organizational connections which are either strong (regular interaction), weak (occasional interaction), or bridging (interaction with someone in a different division or team). Strong ties are often found between members of a work team, while bridging ties and weak ties are one of the primary ways in which knowledge flows from group to group, division to division, and project to project. The study demonstrated clearly that time spent with weak, cross-group, new (added), or bridging ties dropped significantly as workers moved to remote working. One of the conclusions of the study was the following:

*“Our results suggest that shifting to firm-wide remote work caused the collaboration network to become more heavily siloed – with fewer ties that cut across formal business units or bridge structural holes in Microsoft’s informal collaboration network – and that those silos became more densely connected. Furthermore, the network became more static, with fewer ties added and deleted per month. Previous research suggests that these changes in collaboration patterns may impede the transfer of knowledge and reduce the quality of workers’ output.”*

Nancy Dixon, in a 2022 blog post entitled “Where Is The Only Place Employees Share Their Knowledge? The Hallways of Learning”<sup>6</sup> uses the analogy of hallways as silo-bridging locations or processes where knowledge is shared. She cites conferences, where the richest knowledge is shared not in the formal lectures in conference rooms, but in the informal hallway conversations. Organizations can set up processes and structures, such as Communities of Practice or Peer Assist, to provide this “hallway” function, as Dixon claims that “Hallways are the only space where it is possible for an organization to learn”. However, the results of the Microsoft study show that in the world of remote work, although the online team rooms work well for collaboration between “strong ties”, the hallways are becoming deserted.

Remote working, and by extension hybrid working, therefore brings risks of more siloed teams, less knowledge sharing between weak ties,

and fewer hallway-based knowledge sharing across teams. It brings risks of more communication on tasks and actions, and less communication of knowledge. It brings significant risk to effective knowledge management.

### **A KM framework for a hybrid organization**

If, in the new world scenarios two and four, organizations will work in a different way, including much more common remote and hybrid working, then the KM framework must be strengthened to ensure that the silos are breached, the “hallway” spaces and processes are deliberately and actively applied, and that interactions between weak and bridging ties become built into the patterns of work. A hybrid organization can no longer rely on ad-hoc knowledge sharing, overheard conversations, or chance encounters in real hallways, at water coolers, or around the tea kettle. Knowledge management must ensure that the flow of knowledge becomes intentional and planned, through the adoption of roles, processes, and structures as part of a management system for KM.

Unfortunately, there is no long history of knowledge sharing in remote and hybrid organizations, as this is a relatively recent development (at least on the scale that we see in early 2022), and there is therefore no current best practice model for KM in such a context. Possibly the most useful model we can look at is the multinationals, or organizations with many branch offices, where KM has had to deal with people working remotely from each other in a geographic sense. In many ways, with modern remote working, everyone is their own site office, so how do organizations with multiple site offices manage knowledge?

The management framework such organizations use for KM tends to work as follows:

- To cross the silos, and to build the “bridging ties”, a set of Communities of Practice (CoPs) is defined, each one covering an area of practice that cross-cuts the team/division structure. In a hybrid world, these communities need their own communication channels, as well as their own roles, processes, and governance. Each community lives in its own hallway.
- These communities act as mutual help groups, helping members find knowledge and experience to solve their problems, and most of the traffic in the CoPs is driven by problems and questions.
- These CoPs are recognized organizational entities, with specific and dedicated roles.

- There is a pervasive culture, supported, modelled, and specifically expected by management, that people will use the knowledge of the CoP in solving any problem.
- Work projects may start with a knowledge gap analysis session, which prompts people to reach out to their CoPs and weak ties. The project leader needs to intentionally ask their team “Who else can we learn from?”. This question forces them to look outside team space, to look through the windows in the walls, to look into the hallways to see who else has valuable knowledge. And then they track those conversations to make sure the knowledge is brought into the team space, perhaps through Peer Assist or another process.
- The CoPs work asynchronously as well as synchronously; through question-driven online forums backed up where needed by richer real-time conversations.
- The CoPs take a major role in validating and stewarding the organizational knowledge base for their practice area.
- Often there is an expertise locator in the organization, where you can search for people by knowledge topic, and so staff can find others, outside their current circle of contacts (added ties) who can share knowledge to help solve problems.
- Work projects include activities for discussion of knowledge, such as Retrospects, After Action Reviews, Peer Assist etc., which not only drive knowledge sharing within the project team, but also help people become conscious of what they have learned, and which other teams they need to share this with. Again, this forces the team to look through the walls and into the hallways.

None of the above is new. However, in a hybrid world, such elements of KM, borrowed from the multinationals and adapted to other organizations, will be crucial in ensuring that remote working does not impede the flow of knowledge.

## **Conclusions**

We do not yet know what the post-COVID world will look like, nor do we yet know the role KM will play in that world. However, we can look at at least four main scenarios. Some scenarios involve the organization addressing new issues and possibilities in the post-COVID world, and KM will need to adapt and renew its strategy in response. The early clauses in

ISO 30401:2018 provide useful guidance for this strategic review. Other scenarios involve the organization working in a different way, perhaps with a greater level of remote or hybrid working. Here a new KM framework will be needed, with significant attention and intentionality paid to the need to breach team silos that otherwise may be strengthened as people interact remotely. The KM frameworks used by multinationals, where teams are globally remote, can be used as inspiration for KM in a hybrid organization.

Whichever scenario turns out to be closest to reality, the post-COVID world represents a time of both risk and opportunity for KM and the KM professional. If we can take the learning and the credit gained during the pandemic and use these to make the case for KM as strategic business support, then the future is bright both for the KM discipline and the organizations it serves.

### *References*

- 1 Fourteen percent of respondents to a 2021 survey said their KM had helped the organization by developing knowledge of the organizational COVID response. The survey is available free of charge from [www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm](http://www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm)
- 2 ISO (2018) Knowledge management systems – requirements – ISO 30401:2018, ISO, Geneva.
- 3 In a 2021 survey 69 percent of respondents said that new work items had needed to be added to KM during COVID-19, with only 23 percent saying old work items had been removed. [www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm](http://www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm)
- 4 [www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm](http://www.knoco.com/knowledge-management-survey.htm)
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Strategies for gathering and harnessing knowledge have existed in law firms for decades. However, knowledge management suddenly found itself in the spotlight as a result of the COVID-19 pandemic. Enforced remote working reduced opportunities for knowledge sharing between colleagues and this gap was filled with knowledge databases and experienced knowledge lawyers. Now that hybrid and virtual workforces are here to stay, these new working practices have combined with technological developments, enhanced demand, and the transformation of how to access knowledge to drive the advancement of knowledge management into a new era.

*Knowledge Management in Law Firms: Challenges and Opportunities Post-Pandemic* is the essential guide to the evolution of law firm knowledge management. It covers how to revisit your strategy in light of recent and future changes, the expansion of knowledge management to encompass legal tech and innovation, the rise of the importance of data, strategies for overcoming the challenges hybrid and virtual working pose to knowledge management, managing knowledge teams, and much more. Chapters are written by an international group of KM experts from a range of organisations and leading law firms, including DLA Piper, Linklaters, and Dentons. Pandemic experiences and lessons learnt are shared as well as ways to approach the future.



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