The knowledge function at EY

"EY is a global leader in assurance, advisory, tax and transaction services with more than 270,000 employees in 150 countries. EY’s knowledge function has been recognized with several Global Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise (MAKE) awards.

Andreas Hoffjan: EY is very well known for their proficiency regarding knowledge management and has won several knowledge management-related awards. Is there a way of explaining your success?

Ragna Bell: When I think about what drives EY’s success in knowledge management, it comes down to four major areas:

First, knowledge is instrumental to the work we do. We focus on our knowledge management capabilities, because they are critical to our success. We want and need to bring the best insights and prior experience to clients. Knowledge management helps us do that.

Secondly, support from the top. Knowledge management is a topic of conversation at the local executive level and with the EY Global Executive, the most senior management body. Senior sponsorship and support at those levels set the expectation that knowledge sharing and management is necessary for the organization.

Thirdly, we make sure it’s easy for EY people to do “knowledge.” Nobody wants to spend all their extra time sharing their work, unless it’s easy and valued. The global knowledge organization is here to make it easy by providing the right enablers. Over the last few years, we’ve heavily invested in making sharing and accessing knowledge seamless and straightforward for our people. We’ve set up and supported digital platforms, established consistent knowledge architecture, and built the right infrastructure.

Finally, in an increasingly dynamic environment, one of the important aspects of making knowledge management successful is how we work with the changing environment. We are constantly adjusting; making sure that we adopt new technologies, staying on top of the rapid pace with which new things become important.

Andreas Hoffjan: Can you describe how the knowledge management function is set up at EY?

Ragna Bell: EY’s knowledge function is a global shared center which supports each of the EY member firms. Within this global team, we can drive consistency, common strategy and use the same methodologies and tools. Having a deep functional center of excellence in place where we gather functional excellence and align around strategic business priorities, we can best serve our stakeholders: the professionals serving clients, be they organized by service offering, industry or location.

Moving further through EY’s knowledge organization, we have teams with deep functional expertise supporting digital platforms, architecture, data and analytics and infrastructure. Within these teams we focus on technology and content – the traditional elements of knowledge management. These teams are organized as centers of excellence and support the entire organization.

On the other side of our knowledge team, the research and insights teams align more closely with business units. Here we focus on the creation of research, analysis, thought leadership, points of view and, finally, the extraction of knowledge. The nature of this work requires both deep understanding of, and proximity to, the services EY offers. Organized by internal customer groups, these teams of analysts and knowledge managers work directly with their business stakeholders on joint priorities, while operating within standardized frameworks established by our global knowledge organization. The closer we can bring certain aspects to the business, the better – because within our own organization we can learn from each other about what works.

Andreas Hoffjan: Can you go give us a bit of background on what you focused on when setting up the knowledge function?

Ragna Bell: It’s important to recognize that EY’s knowledge organization represents a long history of knowledge investment. Even our recent transformation program reflects a multi-year effort. Assembling these components into a leading-class knowledge capability has required continuous investment, perseverance and sponsorship from senior leadership. During the process, there were several things that we focused on:

First, we developed and built a robust, intuitive digital platform that makes finding and sharing..."
knowledge easy and seamless for our people. The global Discover platform has been a critical foundation for a successful knowledge market.

Next, we were challenged to establish a robust knowledge architecture with consistent views of metadata and taxonomy which for an organization of our scale is important — and it’s not easy. Finding terms that are relevant across language barriers, businesses and cultures requires a deep commitment to and understanding of taxonomy. You must tag content consistently, so that your search tools work well for finding and users can share content easily. This invisible element, enabled by technology, is incredibly critical to an effective knowledge marketplace, where people seamlessly seek and exchange knowledge.

Third, we enlisted robust leadership engagement around knowledge management. Across an organization of our size and scale, there are many competing priorities, so asking people to invest committed time in knowledge management was a change. It requires partners leading through action, holding people accountable, setting goals and expectations, and following it up with recognition and rewards for tangible knowledge sharing results. This is when a vibrant knowledge culture materializes. When the message doesn’t come from leadership, it will not be mirrored across your organization.

The fourth piece we invested in was the knowledge organization itself. Bringing in forward-looking skill-sets and capabilities around services, industry, data, technology and platforms — these significant investments mean we can continue to contribute effectively to the entire organization.

Finally, we focused on developing unique insights. We see this as one of EY’s strengths: the knowledge function is not a back-office operation that only captures and shares insights developed by the business. Instead we collaborate closely with account teams, EY client teams and EY service line leaders. Through daily interaction, by staying close to the business and the market, we are confident that the insights we create are more relevant and thought provoking.

Andreas Hoffjan: The Discover platform seems to be the “digital backbone” of EY’s knowledge market. Can you give us an example of how the platform supports employees in their day-to-day routine?

Ragna Bell: Picture this scenario: I’m a senior manager in Ernst & Young GmbH’s Advisory practice. My partner has asked me to draft a supply-chain pursuit proposal for a FORTUNE 500 consumer products company. A first step would be Discover, where I’d search for existing global knowledge on either the client issue or the potential approach. The search results would return content in a structured way and include different content types.

On the one hand, I’d find sanitized proposals that we used on similar examples in the past, application methodologies, established EY services to support the issue, and thought leadership or client materials that I could use to learn more about the topic. The search results returned are structured by content type and ordered based on user rankings, usage rates and content age. And then I can filter it based on any number of criteria.

Each item returned is also linked to an individual professional and their Discover profile, where I can learn more about the person who shared this knowledge. Discover profiles contain extensive professional information about a person at EY: location, expertise, competencies, service line and industry background, client engagements, and CV. These searchable profiles let me find content (i.e., documents) and the people that have worked on and shared the deliverables. This means I have a list of people that I can connect with for assistance or recommendations.

Now, with the right content and contacts, I can quickly get my team started developing the pursuit proposal. Knowing these tools and resources are in place, I can navigate the process and organize assignments. When we need help or want to customize our proposal, we are equipped to find the answers.

How people will proceed in each scenario is situational and depends on where they are in the organization. But having a platform like this affords EY people the flexibility to work in the ways that works for them.

Andreas Hoffjan: What is your focus as EY Global Knowledge Leader: is it more on the formalized, documented knowledge or more on people?

Ragna Bell: I focus 100% on both. It doesn’t matter how big the knowledge team is, with an organization of 270,000 people located in 150 countries, we need to invest in the platforms and infrastructure and deep, effective intelligent search capabilities that support a population of that size.

However, to make intelligent connections, to elicit and extract knowledge and experiences, and to maintain professional networks, there’s an important people component, which is why we focus both on people and infrastructure.

Over the last five years, we’ve all seen technology’s disruptive influence and are constantly adapting. I’ve seen a similar shift in the knowledge management role and the skills we need to support a knowledge organization. Technology now answers certain questions better than people once did. EY has changed, and knowledge managers have become knowledge consultants. Where we once supplied research and data to account teams, we’ve made that easy for them to find. Now knowledge advises EY professionals on services and strategies. We work with them to create content and insights. These elevated roles require new skills and capabilities, strong business acumen and deep specialization.
Andreas Hoffjan: Because things are indeed changing quite drastically. How do you make sure that the knowledge management at EY is successfully set up for what’s coming next?

Ragna Bell: This is the question that keeps me awake at night. The unprecedented speed of change we live with means that everything we develop and deploy must be ready to grow and evolve. Everything is changing quickly – technology, markets, client expectations – we must challenge ourselves to build an organization that addresses today’s problems, but also be ready for the unknown. There are a couple of things that we have done to ensure that we stay relevant, today and tomorrow:

An environment of constant evolution means that it’s crucial for transformation or change capabilities to be built into the organization. We’ve focused on making sure the knowledge team has ready access to competency and professional development enablers.

We also are building more bottom-up innovation capabilities. We want to capture the opportunities and ideas that come in from diverse and globally dispersed team. Using the CogniStreamer platform, we can rapidly capture and cycle through innovation ideas, thinking quickly about ways to enhance our knowledge offerings.

A small team in the knowledge organization looks ahead at the newest technologies, considering future applications at EY. By scanning the market, reviewing emerging technologies, and testing their functionalities, they can make early use cases and recommendations for knowledge applications. Currently we’re piloting artificial intelligence and intelligent search applications.

Lastly, we stay active in the market. By participating in external forums, whether it’s with organizations like Digital Workplace Group or in best practice forums, we not only share some of our experiences but hear from peers, competitors and market leaders in the space about what’s happening. From those collaborative efforts, we bring in some of our best ideas.

Andreas Hoffjan: So what are the next steps you’re taking and what are the major challenges you’re facing?

Ragna Bell: There’s quite a lot that we’re working on.

One focus is innovating our own research and analysis products. Currently, we’re looking at automating research. Traditional research requires examination of different data sources, hypothesis development, analysis and synthesis. Today there are companies, both startup and mature, that have revamped the research process completely. We’re piloting intelligent research capabilities and working with data providers, text summarization and analytics. What insights could an analyst create if her research burden was lightened?

Another way is an examination of advanced data analytics and visualization. Advanced data analytics means that we can bring better and more predictive insights to the market, in ways that are easy to digest. Internally that’s a new technology and skill sets that would allow us to use and expand our available proprietary data sets.

And we continue to evolve our platform offerings – right now we’re looking to incorporate more intelligent search features and sophisticated chatbot and collaboration capabilities.

Andreas Hoffjan: In addition to the organizational and technological setup and the mindset around it there’s another important aspect to the knowledge management approach: the need to include some sort of measurement. “What we can’t measure we can’t manage” – is that something you would subscribe to?

Ragna Bell: Absolutely, 100 %. Measurement is critical, it’s how we shape our strategy, how we understand our impact. Have we had an impact? How do we measure that? Are our internal customers getting the best ROI?

Without measurement, we can’t know if we’re making progress.

To understand how robust EY’s knowledge culture is, we use a combination of adoption and usage measurements (e.g., searches, submissions, collection size and age, profile updates), alongside individual knowledge management (i.e., sharing, contributing) expectation metrics embedded in our performance system. Through dashboards and scorecards, knowledge leaders, business leaders and stakeholders have a clear picture of the knowledge activity in their business area.

From the outset, we work very closely with senior EY stakeholders to shape our overall knowledge goals and priorities. Getting feedback from these leaders is important, so we use very structured mechanisms to capture their input through extensive interviews. We also survey 10 % of EY people every six months, using these results to inform future strategy.

Andreas Hoffjan: Do you think it’s important to have measurable savings if you want to set up a certain program or change something about your knowledge management approach?

Ragna Bell: Ultimately, it’s important that the ROI realized is effective, whether the investment helps grow the business or saves money. At EY, a person’s time equals money. We create significant value by making sure the way people spend their time is valuable.

It’s often challenging to measure our impact on individual projects like pursuits or engagement activities. Quantifying knowledge’s contribution to a successful result, among all the other considerations – existing client relationships, service offerings and other considerations – is nearly impossible.
However, as part of the global knowledge survey, we ask EY people to tell us how much time they save finding knowledge or providing work to a client, based on the knowledge tools and resources available to them. We found that 93% of EY people save time using knowledge content, tools and resources. Considered across the organization, it translates into significant time savings that EY practitioners can spend on client work instead. Time saved can easily be translated into dollar savings, which is a valuable ROI measurement.

**Andreas Hoffjan:** A lot of people seem to agree that knowledge is important in winning business and performing successfully, however, so few organizations seem to have thorough knowledge management approaches and structures. Why do you think that is?

**Ragna Bell:** When you consider very small companies, formal knowledge management is less necessary. In tightly knit environments, where people have constant formal and informal contact and work within small teams, small organizations have an advantage and less to win by formalizing procedures. As companies get larger, crossing borders and industries, while relying on free knowledge transfer, that’s when knowledge management becomes important and an easier concept to sell.

It also depends on the nature of the business. Not every organization relies as much on knowledge sharing as a professional services firm. Because knowledge is at the heart of EY’s business, there would be a lot of market inefficiencies without a robust knowledge market. Without these mechanisms, there isn’t any way I could know what work we’ve done for an industry client in South Africa and reuse it with mine.

Let’s also not underestimate the importance of culture and the ways people are successful in an organization. Does your company reward your individual knowledge and value your personal network? Sharing them wouldn’t benefit you. At EY, we recognize that sharing knowledge benefits us all. Here, the more sharing, the more knowledge to use. Everyone wins.

**Andreas Hoffjan:** Do you have advice for someone trying to introduce a structured knowledge management approach in an organization? What can they do to facilitate the process, maybe speed it up, make it easier to convince other people of the importance?

**Ragna Bell:** In my experience the senior level support is key. Make sure that you have buy-in from the senior executives – that the approach is prioritized from that level. Without senior sponsorship, most projects will die on the vine.

Make it easy for your people to access. Have the platforms and infrastructure available and in place for them to use. Let them see the benefits.

Finally, focus on culture. You can build the right platforms, you can have the right architecture, you can have the right taxonomy, but knowledge culture must be important and valuable. Reward your people for collaborating – tell the stories, share the success – and positively celebrate the behaviors you want to see.

Ultimately knowledge management and culture transformation bring all those pieces together. Recognize that transformation just takes a long time. Culture doesn’t shift in a year. You must put all of this in place, and then you have to say it, repeat it, recognize it, reward it until you get the results you want.

**Andreas Hoffjan:** Ms. Bell, thank you for this interview.

The views reflected in this article are the views of the author and do not necessarily reflect the views of the global EY organization or its member firms.