

### Jochen Scholl, graduate assistant, Center for Technology in Government

Knowledge management is a hot topic in management circles today, Jochen said. While some people treat knowledge management as a fad, the concept does have very real benefits for managers looking to spark learning and change within their organizations. He noted that many private companies die early deaths, at enormous costs, and that this happens even when the economy is doing well. Jochen said knowledge management is a tool that can be used to ensure the vitality and life of both private and public sector organizations. "The organization's health has a direct correlation to that organization's knowledge and learning," he said.

In order to understand the concept and components of knowledge management, you have to define knowledge. Jochen said knowledge is equal to information plus understanding; knowledge is information in a context that supports proper decisions and actions. Knowledge management builds on this definition and involves tacit and explicit knowledge, intellectual capital, knowledge as stock and process, culture, measures, and technology.

- Tacit knowledge, that which is present but difficult to express in words, is part of knowledge management. When an organization taps into a person's tacit knowledge and uses it to better the organization, then it is transformed into explicit knowledge.
- Intellectual capital, another component, involves human, structural, and customer resources, such as intellectual property rights and trademarks.
- Knowledge is also stock; people may have competence, but they aren't proficient until they have the experience to apply that knowledge to effect change. People have to capture, generate, replicate, and recycle knowledge.
- Knowledge is also a process. You can learn a new skill, but it takes insight and feedback to learn about how you learned that skill. This "double loop learning" is a necessary step to acquiring real knowledge.

In order for a change in individual or organizational behavior to occur, unlearning must take place. "To unlearn a behavior is much more complicated than to learn a behavior. Learning is living, and living is learning," Jochen said. An organization's culture also affects learning and changes in behavior. He said, "Organizational culture is one of the major blocking factors for learning to occur and change to take place. Most organizations have cultural inhibitors to learning and change."

Technology also has a place in knowledge management. There are a number of available systems and tools, such as e-mail, document handling systems, and computer-based training, that make it easier for people to learn. "Technology is often an enabler to learning, but this is all restricted to codifiable knowledge," Jochen said.

The key is using knowledge management to increase organizational vitality. "It is not only important to learn, but it's also important to change. If you've got an organization that is bad at learning and changing, you've got a fatal organization. A vital organization can translate learning into change," Jochen said.

In summary, Jochen indicated that knowledge management is, at the least, a technology issue, and, at the most, a human resources issue. Organizational knowledge builds on and depends on individual knowledge. While individual knowledge can be leveraged, there are some fundamental limitations that technology is unable to overcome. Technology does, however, help in accessing untapped knowledge. And without an organizational culture that is conducive to sharing and learning, no leverage and growth can occur.