

The chief knowledge officer (CKO) has a critical role in an organization – they’re the manager of a critical asset. But what makes a successful CKO and what defines them as successful? Here, Bill Kaplan outlines a CKO’s required skills, including a concise “CKO attributes” model, strategic necessities for success and three key messages to keep in mind.

# CREATING LONG-TERM VALUE AS CHIEF KNOWLEDGE OFFICER

## Key attributes, messages and ambitions for success-seeking CKOs

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A great deal of knowledge or “intellectual capital” is used daily in executing your organization’s business. This resource, like all other critical resources, must be leveraged and further developed in an organized, disciplined, and systematic manner that captures, adapts, transfers, and leverages this valuable resource.

This requires a guiding strategy to enable individuals, teams, and therefore the organization, to become more knowledge – enabled by complementing and supporting both operational and infrastructure components in their everyday work, providing tools and techniques that make work easier and the leadership and workforce more productive and effective. Ultimately this results in improved overall organizational performance, and improved organizational performance is what KM is all about and nothing else.

### Defining the chief knowledge officer’s role

In this article I will describe what I believe to be essential skills, attributes and traits of a successful chief knowledge officer (CKO), including the founding messages and beliefs a CKO should work with, the position in the organization they should hold or seek to attain, and markers that define a successful tenancy as an organization’s CKO.

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As organizations develop and scale, there’s an increasing urgency to intelligently leverage what they know about what they do. This enables the agility that an organization must have to remain competitive, adapt to change quickly and sustain its momentum.

For organizations that recognize this value, creating and enabling a CKO position and assigning a senior executive who’s responsible for ensuring that the organization maximizes the value it achieves through one of its most important assets – its knowledge – is critical.

The CKO is not a relabeling of existing positions like a chief information officer, or a variation of another position. The CKO is a unique and integrated or hybrid manager, possessing skills and attributes that include an ability to think conceptually, manage people and projects, communicate effectively both internally and externally and, very importantly, persuade and advocate. The CKO is very often a principal agent of change.

### The CKO’s organizational context

It’s helpful to think of the CKO in the context of other organizational leadership roles and the functions and responsibilities they have with respect to developing and managing the organization’s assets. The chief financial officer (CFO), for example, manages the financial assets of the organization, the human capital officer (HCO) manages the workforce, the chief technology officer (CTO) manages the technology assets of the organization, and so on.

Because of the importance of the asset in question, it makes sense to have an organizational leader that is responsible for, and focused upon, developing and leveraging the intellectual assets of the organization. This individual is the CKO (see box, below).

#### CKO in context

- Chief executive officer (CEO) manages overall corporate assets.
- Chief financial officer (CFO) manages financial assets/capital.
- Chief technology officer (CTO) manages technology assets/infrastructure.
- Chief diversity officer (CDO) manages customer capital/competitor capital.
- Human capital officer (HCO) manages workforce assets/human capital.
- Chief knowledge officer (CKO) manages intellectual assets/knowledge frameworks.

#### Placing the CKO

The CKO should be considered an integral part of the senior leadership team and have an equal “seat at the table.” The CKO is accountable for the “knowledge capture and reuse framework” of the organization. While accountable for the framework, including developing and maintaining the framework, execution resides at the operational level (see box below).

Successful advocacy of the tools and techniques that leadership and the workforce must use to successfully capture, adapt, transfer, and reuse knowledge is better enabled by the right positioning for the communication of the message. This includes a reporting structure where the CKO reports to the senior leader in the organization. This sends a clear message that the organization views leveraging the intellectual assets from the same value perspective, for example, as leveraging the financial assets of the organization.

#### The CKO's place within an organizational structure

Within the structure of an organization, the CKO should:

- report to the senior leader;
- be an integral part of the senior leadership;
- be an internal consultant or could possibly be an external practice consultant;
- have accountability for the “knowledge framework”; and
- have the responsibilities and capabilities to develop, define, recommend and share.

## KEYPOINTS

- Managing knowledge, one of an organization's key assets is a critical aspect of a successful business.
- To successfully manage the knowledge asset requires a proficient, intelligent, multi-talented individual, who holds a senior position. This person is the chief knowledge officer (CKO).
- To be a successful CKO, an individual must have certain key attributes, including an ability to teach, cheer, lead and communicate well, high-level business acumen. They must also be a strategic thinker who can engender success in their peers.
- The CKO must also have a solid understanding of what knowledge management is – performance improvement – and maintain consistent key messages to that effect.
- The CKO must also be able to recognize and clearly demonstrate the success they and their team have achieved

#### Key attributes of a CKO

Since KM involves integrating people and processes and enabling technology, the CKO requires a specific skill set – the ability to understand the organization and its big picture and tie all of this to the strategic plan and measures of success for the organization.

The CKO must be someone who not only can be cheerleader and a teacher, but also has a vision of knowledge sharing with the authority and experience to enable the corporate culture and processes achieve the KM goals.

The skill set for the CKO is a range of skills includes the following:

- Interpersonal communication skills to convince employees to adopt cultural changes.
- Leadership skills to convey the KM vision and passion for it to leadership and the cross-functional teams and knowledge workers supporting KM in the company.
- Business acumen to relate KM efforts to efficiency and profitability.
- Strategic thinking skills to relate KM efforts to larger goals.
- Collaboration and facilitation skills to work with various departments and facilitate their ability to work with each other.
- Understanding of the relationship of information technology and its role in enabling success through KM.
- Demonstrated experience as a practitioner in delivering results through KM.

These attributes are clearly defined in the CKO attributes model (see Figure 1, overleaf).

#### Leveraging leadership support

The right organizational positioning and reporting structure is only a start. Actual success also depends on how well the CKO takes advantage of the skill set they possess. In fact, one of the most

Figure 1: The Acquisition Solutions “CKO Attributes” model



This model highlights the key attributes for a successful chief knowledge officer. These attributes range from the practical (experience, understanding of IT) to the personal (passion for KM).

powerful attributes, and the one I believe is most required for success, is the CKO’s ability to achieve results through their peers.

Seeing the value of leveraging knowledge and then adapting business and operational processes to make this happen “as part of the way the organization does business” will only occur if the peer leadership and the organization really understand and believe there is value in doing do so.

**Key messages**

Organizations that can move knowledge effectively across the organization to improve their performance recognize the following concepts:

1. Leadership has enabled a framework for “performing and learning” – sharing experience and insight from doing, supported by appropriate enabling technology, that enables people at all levels in the organization to improve their performance.

2. They recognize and understand that helping people and teams learn before, during, and after the work they do is the single, most effective way to improve performance in the short term and establish the value of capturing, transferring, and reusing knowledge in the long term.
3. Experience and learning is captured, stored and made accessible after each project in a format that's designed to meet the needs of the re-user of the knowledge.
4. A process is in place to integrate captured knowledge with what the rest of the organization knows and to make it visible and usable for others.
5. Responsibilities are defined for maintaining all knowledge processes and activities
6. Facilitated networks or communities are maintained through active participation within the organization in all areas that drive organizational performance.

**Key messages**

As a CKO, you must have consistent messages that are founded on the following concepts:

1. It's not about knowledge *management*, it's about knowledge *leadership*.
2. KM is about performance improvement, and nothing else.
3. Performing and learning must work within the context of workflow.

**Achieving success**

Success also really depends on providing the CKO with sufficient resources to take the organization's KM concept "from theory to strategy to practice." This means resourcing the CKO team with sufficient budget and people.

While it's important to place the CKO in a position that visibly reflects the organization's view of the CKO's value, without a budget, the CKO skill set and that of the CKO team will be marginalized at best.

**Vital components for success**

To be a successful CKO, you need to:

- be in the right position in the organization;
- have the resources for a team (internal consulting and external delivery);
- have or develop an engaged leadership and workforce, giving belief in your message and therefore your value; and
- have and use the ability "to speak truth and to power."

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**Recognizing success**

CKO success can be measured in many ways and depends on the context of the organization, its culture, and its leadership. I offer the following general measures, which if achieved, reflect success for a CKO and their organization:

1. A consistent and disciplined process for the explicit or formal leveraging of knowledge is a part of ongoing operations.
2. An ongoing effort to improve the ability to leverage the hidden value of corporate knowledge in business development and organizational growth.
3. An ongoing focus on improving the ability to learn from past challenges and successes in strategic decision making.
4. An ongoing focus creating value from knowledge (information, experience, and insight) held by employees.
5. Capturing and reusing knowledge should be woven into the organization's business and operational processes to provide real value to the individual and the team in their daily work.

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