



What the
commander
needs to
know now

Wading through mounds of data to extract useful, timely knowledge is a continuous process for operational units.

Signaleers share front line experiences

Operational knowledge management

By LTC Roberta Samuels

You've successfully finished Signal Company Command, BCT S6, or maybe even corps or division

staff duty, but you have another year before your PCS, and the XO says, you've done such a great job for us, the commander recommended for you to be the division KMO. You've heard

"knowledge management" thrown around at NTC or JRTC, and usually from your previous perspective it involved sharing files, or maybe 'The Portal' and technology. It's no big deal, right? Servers, routers, ABCS, laptops --you've been dealing with it all of your Signal career...and then your first task is to review the battle rhythm...what does that have to do with technology?

You check the division's MTOE and find out the authorizations are for an 02A, Branch Immaterial O-5/ LTC as the KMO and a FA 57A Battle Command Systems Operator O-4/ MAJ as the deputy KMO. Then you start to research the field of KM and find FM 6-01.1 Knowledge



LTC Roberta Samuels, knowledge management officer for Regional Command (East)/Combined Joint Task Force 101 in Bagram, Afghanistan, shares information with a staff member.

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Management Section, MilSuite's Army Knowledge Management Forum, and CALL's KMNet. You sign up for an account on KMNet, look around the site, and find a lot of information, including a paper by MAJ Michael McCarthy, "So you're going to be a KMO?" Plus you find several books on KM when doing a search on Amazon. But where do you start and what do you need to know?

FM 6-01.1 defines Knowledge Management as the art of creating, organizing, applying and transferring knowledge to facilitate situational understanding and decision making. Signal officers provide communications support to the right people, at the right time, to support the mission. KM is comparable, in that it's often looked upon as helping the commander get timely information within a context to make a better decision. In KM, the components to make this happen are dependent upon people, process and technology, while taking into consideration the unit's culture, structure, and content. Typically your first inclination is to focus on technology because it's easy to see, and to describe. It readily provides measurable results.

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to make new or innovative changes to the creation or distribution of knowledge within the organization. Technology is a supporting element. However, the Commander's understanding of KM execution directs how the KM section supports the command. This varies greatly across commands. One of the first questions you should ask your boss is, "What are your expectations of KM integration and support to the staff and subordinate units?" Prior to asking this question, I recommend that you have researched the resources listed above and have a draft KM strategy, because your boss may reply back to you with, "What is KM and what can it do for us?"

Since you are talking to your boss, who exactly is that person... the G6, G3, G2, chief of staff, or someone else? Chances are it varies from unit to unit, but doctrine states

the KMO works for the chief of staff, or in a brigade task force, the deputy commander or executive officer. Advantages exist for working within a staff section because you can build a support base and have an ally in promoting a course of action. The downside of working inside a staff section is you tend to look at a problem through a different lens; if working for the G6, you are more likely to initially apply a technical solution; if working for the G3 or G2, the solution is likely to focus on operations or intelligence, while potentially missing involvement of the support staff.

A KMO that works directly for the chief of staff promotes the ability to support the entire staff without pressure of loyalty to another primary staff section. The chief of staff maintains visibility of and collaboration across the staff,



Coordinating multiple streams of information into useful knowledge requires vigilant analysis, both on the collection side and the recording end.



and most KM solutions will require support from multiple staff sections. Plus, with the chief of staff serving as the unit's chief knowledge officer, he/she is your champion. The chief of staff enforces KM best practices, such as ensuring transparency across the command by directing mega-large reads-ahead be posted on the portal site instead of e-mailing them to a select list. The provides situational awareness to the entire command instead of a select few.

Now that you've identified your KM support system and references; know generally what KM is, what its components are; and who you work for, what skills will you need to be successful as a KM? As a Signal officer, you can start with the technology skills. You are probably comfortable with the technology component, especially if you are familiar with the full capabilities of MS Office, SharePoint, InfoPath, Adobe Connect, and Army Knowledge Online. Your DKMO as a FA 57A should have a good understanding of the ABCS capabilities, connectivity and support to operations. But to be successful as a KMO you will need to establish personal relationships – with the division staff, with other unit KMs, with KM contractors, with the garrison staff – as you will interface with a variety of people to solve problems. Sometimes it will be you bringing people together to solve a problem or improve a process. This is where the ability to facilitate collaboration, run an effective meeting, identify and assign responsibilities comes into play. Being able to serve as that 'outside observer' to the group and not get personally involved in the problem is another important skill to have as a KMO. Finally, a skill that you likely already possess as a Signal officer is leadership. Just as in any leadership position, you will make recommendations to execute a COA that is unpopular, but results in a higher performing unit.

Where can you develop a more

in-depth understanding of KM and the skills needed to be successful? Several organizations on Fort Leavenworth provide KM training and coursework for the Army. Army Knowledge Management Proponent provides training for basic KM, content management, assessment, at no cost to the unit other than travel and per diem expenses. A KM elective is also available at the Command and General Staff College's Intermediate Level Education course. AKMP also supports an annual three day Army Operational Knowledge Management conference, which provides a unique opportunity to meet peers, higher HQs KMOs, and military KM experts who have significant experience and expertise. This conference is typically held the third week of October in Kansas City, Kan., and shares current military KM practices and experiences. Commercial KM courses are available through various civilian KM organizations, where 'certifications' can be earned. However be aware of KM certifications – currently there is no industry standard established. Several graduate programs offer a KM degree and a careful examination of the courses will indicate if the degree is process oriented, technology oriented, a combination, or possibly even business focused. Before taking any course, review the course content to ensure your expectations are met.

Finally, what are some of the challenges in KM that you will face? KM is a 'soft' field, meaning often it is difficult to define the metrics to see the 'return on investment.' It's often difficult to measure better decisions and processes improved, even when you 'know' that the unit is working more effectively. Your commander's guidance towards KM is often personality or experience based, which means your work may or may not match Army doctrine. When operating in a joint or coalition environment, doctrine is mostly non-existent and best practices may not be similar across services or countries, where

culture strongly influences practices. And just as in Signal operations, working across multiple networks, with various classifications, while depending on unreliable connectivity is a challenge for good knowledge management.

For a Signal officer serving as the knowledge management officer, the challenges prove to be more than just maintaining 'the network,' or managing 'the Portal.' Serving as a KMO will expand your understanding of staff processes and the impact of information and knowledge management on decision making. And as with any duty position, whether coded for a Signal officer or not – in the role of the KMO, you get out of it what you put into it.

For more information on KM refer to the following links:

1) KMNet <https://forums.bcks.army.mil/secure/CommunityBrowser.aspx?id=341623>

2) MilSuite – Army Knowledge Management <https://www.milsuite.mil/book/groups/army-knowledge-management?view=overview>

3) https://wkb.bcks.army.mil/Search/MetadataSummary.aspx?f=/content/live/bcks/a963_km_white_paper_20091229.pdf (NOTE: When I first wrote this paper, the link listed above worked. On 15 April 2011 the link did not work. Here is information on the resource that you may want to explore: "So you're going to be a KMO? - A Competency Model for a Knowledge Management Officer," 15 Dec 2009 by MAJ Michael McCarthy).

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