

How to Answer CEO Questions about Knowledge¹

What is the one thing that I should do as CEO?

Get knowledge on the agenda. Talk about how you use and will continue to use knowledge assets (information, knowledge, expertise, capability, corporate experience) in pursuit of your strategic intent. Actively pursue strategic insights: promoting discussions that encourage reflection and interpretation of the organisation's experience, and how your conclusions can inform the way that you create value from knowledge DNA.

What's an example of a 'strategic insight'?

It's thinking differently about what creates value for your organisation. Here's an example: Using a traditional lens, we think of customers in terms of the revenue (tangible assets) we earn from them. A knowledge view recognises that we may also earn intangible revenues from our customers. Some customers (capacity-building clients) not only give us revenue; they also build our skills and expertise in ways that set us up to attract new clients. Some customers (image-building clients) not only give us revenue, but also build our brand or image in the market place (if x is a client of yours, you must be good!)

Understanding the intangible as well as tangible revenues encourages us to ask different questions about our client base. What are the implications if all we earn from our clients is money? What percentage of our assignments do we want to be capacity or image building?

Do I have to use the 'k' word?

Yes (be brave). Your people will find it difficult to think strategically about knowledge if you dilute its importance by calling it something else. This is the; intangibles are your prime assets; accord them the respect and understanding they deserve and you will be richly rewarded.

¹ Extract from Andrews, Kate: DNA@ work (2006) John Wiley & Sons, pp 21 - 38

We already have a strategy planning process. Shouldn't that pick up the knowledge issues?

A knowledge-focused organisation recognises that its knowledge assets define its strategic possibilities. Shared understanding of your knowledge assets and how they can be converted to value is the springboard for strategy development.

Regardless of your strategy, its achievement will depend on what people do with the information and knowledge resources of the organisation. Therefore you will benefit from embedded, sustainable processes that make three critical connections:

- Connecting your people with the information resources they need to maximise their performance
- Connecting your people with the organisation's experts, and their expertise, to support superior achievement
- Connecting your people with your organisational experience – the sum of what you have learned over the time and reach of your operations. Most organisations struggle with this. We are less than the sum of our parts because our experience is fragmented along divisional and business lines.

To whom should I delegate carriage of the knowledge issues?

The advocacy and the passion and the leadership have to be yours, because you are the designer of the organisational strategy. If you have HR, Library or IT professionals they will contribute valuable technical insights to the knowledge agenda. Encourage them to pool their specialist contributions rather than operate on separate trajectories. As importantly, involve your most influential line and operational people to drive the agenda – this keeps your knowledge efforts responsive to key business priorities.

Is this about Intellectual Property, R&D and Patents? Is this all about information technology?

Yes and no.

Intellectual Property is a subset of a firm's knowledge assets. But knowledge assets are broader than formally protected IP: think head contents, information and data as well. Information technology is critical; however technology is only part of the picture. Look for contributions from people and organisational knowledge sharing processes as well as technology.



What if we're too busy to even think about knowledge?

Ask your frantically busy staff for suggestions to improve efficiency. ("Thinking of the way that we use knowledge and information, what are the blindingly obvious ways to better support our day-to-day work?") Their answers will identify starting points with immediate benefit. (You'll probably be surprised at how frustrated your staff are now – and frustration brings much energy for change.)

How do I measure the Return on Investment (ROI) of a focus on knowledge?

What are the issues that you keep you awake at night? Instead of thinking ROI, focus on the impact that you would like to see on these issues and measure this instead. (Reduce the amount of rework? Enter new markets profitably? Develop staff capability more quickly? Sell more products per customer? Build stakeholder confidence in your operations? Manage water resources more efficiently?)

Where do I start?

Many organisations experience success by first focusing on improving the efficiency of core operational processes: better supporting each phase of the process with appropriate information, expertise and organisational experience.

Start small, with passion and energy, and keep on going.

