# A Guideline Enabling Knowledge Managers to Communicate Better with Business Managers

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*Aligning Knowledge Management (KM) with overarching business strategies is considered as important for organizational success and sustainability. But this crucial element is often missing in the implementation and operation of KM. This paper explores the concept of "business alignment" within the context of KM, elaborating its critical role in enhancing collaboration, minimizing errors, and supporting optimal outcomes across the enterprise. We suggest a comprehensive definition of KM alignment, where KM activities are strategically integrated with business objectives, ensuring visible and measurable benefits to employees and executives. The research addresses key questions such as what constitutes an organization and how KM can facilitate its survival and growth. An organization is not merely a standalone entity but a collective endeavor that thrives on managing internal and external relationships. We argue that the effective alignment of KM with business strategies ensures that these relationships are optimized, thereby enhancing organizational resilience and adaptability. This holistic perspective visualizes the interconnected nature of businesses and highlights the essential role of KM. Our approach systematically examines business relationships and their alignment with KM practices. We analyze one case study from the construction industry, illustrating how strategic KM initiatives contribute to their sustained success. Additionally, we propose a set of Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) derived from real-world scenarios, linking them to specific business needs and challenges. These KPIs serve as a roadmap for C-level managers, guiding them in integrating KM into their strategic frameworks. The findings underscore the value of KM in mitigating risks associated with poor relationship management. We provide a process and actionable insights for business leaders on leveraging KM to foster innovation, streamline processes, and enhance overall performance. The paper concludes with practical recommendations for implementing KM solutions tailored to different organizational maturity levels and industry contexts.*

*Keywords: knowledge management, business alignment, organizational strategy, key performance indicators, relationship management, business sustainability*

## INTRODUCTION TO BUSINESS ALIGNMENT

The discipline of Knowledge Management (KM) has often struggled to become a top priority for C-level managers. Several factors, including organizational, cultural, and economic challenges, contribute to this. Drucker (1999) noted that many organizations prioritize short-term financial performance over long-

term strategic initiatives. Similarly, Davenport and Prusak (2000) observed that KM initiatives require substantial investment in technology and human resources, with returns that are not immediately visible. Dalkir (2011) reiterated that KM often yields primarily intangible benefits that are hard to measure in the short term.

C-level executives typically focus on initiatives with clear, quantifiable returns on investment. According to Nonaka and Takeuchi (1995), KM is sometimes perceived as misaligned with core business goals or as a support function rather than a strategic initiative.

Other topics, such as digital transformation, cybersecurity, innovation, R&D, sustainability, corporate social responsibility, customer experience, and operational efficiency, are often perceived as having a more immediate impact on the organization's bottom line. Consequently, they dominate top executives' agendas.

For knowledge managers, the contribution of "knowledge" to all these tasks seems obvious – yet it is not prioritized. One way to change this situation is to improve communication. Following Bornemann et al. (2007), this usually starts with some form of inventory – identifying available knowledge assets – and connecting them to the business model. Once the contribution of knowledge becomes visible and understood in terms of its impact on the bottom line, knowledge workers (experts) and C-level managers can align their efforts and collaborate more effectively.

**Challenges in the C-Level**

Over the past decades, many KM initiatives have failed (Kraus, 2015), sharing the same fate as other change management initiatives (Kotter, 1996). Consequently, economic and corporate growth have been lower than expected, and organizations face survival threats. One reason for this failure is that knowledge managers did not adopt the business perspective of C-level managers and thus failed to effectively communicate the relevance of knowledge management. The link between organizational threats, operational problems, and KM as a solution needs to be demonstrated and firmly established.

We formulate the following hypotheses:

***H1:*** *KM can improve the operational situation of organizations.*

***H2:*** *Linking KM to organizational problems and vice versa effectively gets management's attention.*

***H3:*** *Connecting KM solutions to organizational problems and tying them to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) increases value creation.*

***H4:*** *Tying KM to the personal priorities and KPIs of C-Level executives increases chances for implementation.*

The foundations for H1 are discussed in the conceptual background section and are supported by cited literature. Similarly, H2 aligns with mainstream KM thought, culminating in Drucker's frequently cited adage, "what gets measured gets done," implicit in his early work (e.g., Drucker, 1967). H3 follows these ideas, similar to the strategy implementation recommendations by Kaplan and Norton's "Balanced Scorecard" (BSC) since 1992. While not all attempts to implement BSCs have been successful, the general idea has become part of the business mainstream. Since the early 2000s, measures and KPIs for KM have been developed. The remaining challenge is to suggest a scalable method to implement H4 and test the results, which will be demonstrated in section two. Some of the operations problems, which increase the chance to get the attention of business managers are listed in random order in **table 1**.

**TABLE 1**
**SELECTION OF OPERATIONAL PROBLEMS THAT TYPICALLY ATTRACT MANAGEMENT ATTENTION**

| | |
|---|---|
| Project teams exhibit slow progress due to insufficient collaboration among individuals or business units | Frequent reinvention of solutions due to inefficient information retrieval or lack of oversight |
| High rate of specialist retirements | Prolonged onboarding time for new employees |
| Need for upskilling through cross-domain knowledge or information transfer | Lack of comprehensive oversight for effective action |
| Increasing complexity in process coordination due to insufficient communication between administrative units | Customers struggle to find answers independently, leading to excessive reliance on human support |
| Inefficient information retrieval | High turnover of knowledge workers |
| Suboptimal resource utilization | |

Linking KM solutions to these operational problems and contributing to resolving them will increase the likelihood of winning C-level attention and becoming a long-term partner. A KMGN project team presented a detailed guideline (Kraus, 2024).

### Interpreting Value as More than Shareholder Value

The concept of maximizing shareholder value, developed by Rappaport (1998) and others, builds on Jensen's Agency Theory (1986) and Stewart's Economic Value Added (1991). However, these authors did not emphasize Drucker's crucial point: prioritizing customer interests to generate profitable outcomes. Drucker expanded the idea of value creation from merely focusing on financial metrics to considering the entire value chain, including the customer perspective (Drucker, 1954). He further elaborated on the essential role of knowledge workers in value creation (Drucker, 1969), a discussion that continues today (Denning, 2022).

Corporations should focus on their purpose ("Why are we here?") and how value is created. The alignment of knowledge workers emerges from clear leadership on vision, transparency on resources and processes, and performance status (Drucker, 1973). Principles of self-organization (von Foerster and Zopf, 1962) may apply but require the organization's and KM systems' context (ISO 30401). These are all prerequisites for a sound business model that defines how and through which processes value is created.

## CONCEPTIONAL BACKGROUND ON KM AND ALIGNMENT

We follow Kraus et al. (2020) and Oberschmid (2007) in their definitions of Knowledge Management (KM) as the "targeted design of framework conditions and processes in an organization, with special consideration of the production factor knowledge. The focus here is on creating and networking individual knowledge and applying this in value creation processes" (Oberschmid, 2007). This definition aligns with ISO 30401 (2018) and other academic scholars such as Drucker (1959), Mandl (1998), and Probst (1999).

To continue the discussion in the context of "business aligned KM", we suggest the following working definition: *Knowledge management (KM) is considered business aligned when:*

1. The strategy of KM activities is firmly tied to the business strategy or other relevant aspects that ensure the survival of the organization.
2. This alignment is clearly visible to the business personnel, especially to executives.

Business alignment is a well-studied field, particularly in the context of KM. The alignment of KM strategies with business strategies is crucial for ensuring organizational survival and effectiveness. Several authors in the field of KM have discussed this topic:

- Nonaka (1994) emphasized the importance of aligning knowledge-creation processes with business strategies.
- Teece (1997) discussed the dynamic capabilities framework, which includes strategically managing knowledge resources to align with business strategies for innovation and competitiveness.
- Davenport and Prusak (1998) presented research on the strategic management of knowledge and how aligning KM practices with business strategies can enhance organizational performance.
- Zack (1999) explored the necessity of aligning KM initiatives with organizational strategies to support decision-making and innovation.

These discussions connect organizational knowledge and capabilities with implications for innovation, competitiveness, and strategic decision-making.

**Storytelling and KM**

For successful KM, it is ideal that executives and knowledge workers support each other in achieving organizational objectives. Storytelling is an effective management method to facilitate this alignment (Brown, 2004; Schein, 2010). When both groups tell the same stories, alignment is more likely to be achieved. This supports our hypotheses H1 and H2.

Storytelling is effective in KM because it narrates and explains the connection between KM and business operations:

- Simplifies Complex Ideas: Storytelling translates complex KM concepts into tangible narratives, making them easier to understand.
- Engages Stakeholders: Stories are engaging and can capture the attention of both knowledge workers and executives.
- Creates a Shared Vision: When knowledge workers and executives share the same stories, it fosters a shared understanding and vision.

**KM Emerges in Four Levels as Suggested by David Gurteen**

David Gurteen's framework for KM includes four levels: Information Management, Knowledge Sharing, Sensemaking and Decision Making, and Behavior, Community, and Leadership (Gurteen, n.d.). While Gurteen presents these levels in an ascending order, we believe they can be implemented flexibly. Importantly, the fourth level—Behavior, Community, and Leadership—is crucial for the success of the other levels.

Four Levels of KM:

- **Information Management**: Centralized capture, storage, and distribution of information using IT systems and databases.
- **Knowledge Sharing**: Peer-to-peer learning through tools like peer assists and communities of practice, emphasizing personal knowledge sharing.
- **Sensemaking, Decision Making, and Innovation**: Utilizing facilitated discussions to create shared context, make informed decisions, and innovate.
- **Behavior, Community, and Leadership**: Empowering individuals to act on knowledge and fostering a community where leadership is a shared practice, not confined to formal positions of authority.

The four-level categorization is useful because many organizations have very different understandings of KM. In some organizations, KM is limited solely to information management and information technology. This corresponds to the "basic KM level" by Gurteen. Other companies might focus mainly on "networking among experts". According to Gurteen, the third and fourth levels have almost nothing concerning technology or IT.

**Connecting MBO and KPI to Align KM with Business Objectives**

The role of knowledge managers is to take a holistic view, identify critical areas, and determine how to make targeted improvements in knowledge and information management. Defining these targets involves selecting KPIs that align with those agreed upon with C-level executives during their annual performance appraisal.

*Define MBO and KPI:*

- **Management by Objectives (MBO):** A performance management approach where managers and employees work together to set, monitor, and achieve specific objectives.
- **Key Performance Indicators (KPIs):** Measurable values that indicate how effectively an organization is achieving its key business objectives.

**Steps to Align KM with Business Objectives.**

1. Identify organizational objectives and goals.
2. Define specific KM targets that support these objectives.
3. Develop KM KPIs that align with C-level executives' KPIs.
4. Monitor and adjust KM activities based on KPI performance.

**Categories of Goals and KPIs:**

- **Viability:** Ensuring the organization's survival is a top priority.
- **Operations:** Enhancing the organization's value creation capacity is essential.
- **Market:** Addressing stakeholder impacts, including customers and suppliers.
- **Technology:** Managing technological constraints and leveraging enablers.
- **Regulation:** Integrating regulatory requirements that impact the organization's opportunity space.

Table 2 provides examples of goals, challenges, and KPIs categorized into four perspectives: Viability, Operations, Market, Technology, and Regulation. Each perspective includes specific goals and KPIs that align with business objectives and help measure the effectiveness of KM initiatives.

**TABLE 2**
**CHALLENGES AND KPIS RELEVANT FOR SURVIVAL OF ORGANIZATIONS GROUPED IN FOUR LEVELS**

| Perspective | Information Management | Knowledge Sharing | Sensemaking, Decision Making, and Innovation | Behavior, community and leadership |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Viability** | Analyzing financial risk for the organization | Lack of employees for sustainable a viable operation | Underestimated application of AI | Foreseeing and counteracting lack of business continuity |

| | | | | |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| **Operations** | Media disruption | Processes improvements | Increased productivity or capacity, incl. time and cost savings | Missing technology adoption / Low technological adoption |
| **Market** | Ambiguity | Disregarded changes in customer needs | Loss of relevance in the market in growth or market share | Sales discontinued due to impaired social acceptance of products or operations |
| **Technology** | Lack of shared taxonomies and information architecture | (not addressed) | Sales discontinued due to outdated technology (process or product) | Resistance to change |
| **Regulation** | Lack of compliance regarding information storage and regulatory standards | Legal and regulatory risks | Limited freedom of operation | Underrated ecological sustainability and related regulatory aspects |

Tables 3-6 contain the KM reference points related to our categories. We found a positive influence of these reference points to attracting C-Level attention. Please note that not all categories are supported by reference points.

**TABLE 3**
**KM REFERENCE POINTS ON LEVEL 1 BY CATEGORY**

| Category | **Reference points on level 1** |
|---|---|
| Viability | Simultaneous change management from old status to the new one. |
| | Securing management consensus on the impact (KPIs) of this action upon the business process and context. |
| | Continuous improvement on the guidelines and information management process. |
| | Capture measurable impact directly within a business process and context. |
| Operations | Bring all the stakeholders together and harvest their expectations and needs. |
| | Harvest all previous and current good practices regarding business initiatives. |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Fast access to relevant information based on the business context and user needs. |
| | Fast understanding and learning from information within context. |
| | Speedy operational action based on understood information. |
| Market | Become aware of all types of information relevant to the business context. |
| | Continuous communication of the impact (KPIs) of KM actions on the business process and context. |
| Technology | Selection of IT Tools and IM practices that support all the following steps. |
| | Create an information architecture and taxonomy relevant to the business context. |
| | Creation of high-quality information (Guidelines and Training). |
| Regulation | Clarify who needs what kind of information access and how quickly. |
| | Agreed rules among stakeholders for information handling and management. |

**TABLE 4**
**KM REFERENCE POINTS ON LEVEL 2 BY CATEGORY**

| Category | **Reference points on level 2** |
|---|---|
| Viability | Identify and focus on areas where there are business risks. |
| | Capture the benefit of learning activities and resulting actions and make them tangible. |
| | Continuous communication of tangible results to executives, thus further promoting and embedding these activities. |
| | Time to competence (time it takes for employees to be fully productive in their jobs). |
| | Pre- and post-measurement intervention. |
| Operations | Help people to turn their personal learnings (from work) into re-shareable and re-usable learnings (Teaching + Documentation). |
| | Motivation for knowledge sharing by SMEs and willingness to learn on the part of knowledge recipients. |
| | Promote a culture of turning failures into learnings. |
| | Foster learning activities within a shared context with SMEs (1:1 or as a CoP). |
| | Making personal access to internal subject matter experts affordable (1:1). |
| | Connect sharing activities and SMEs to defined processes and process steps (Anchor Points). |

| | |
|---|---|
| | Platform connecting SMEs with learners using business context, e.g., regular CoP meetings. Trust is essential through rules and culture. |
| | Define time and place to share knowledge and learn that leads to actions within business process and context. |
| | Use mentors to promote 70-20-10 learning, which will make knowledge more redundant and prevent re-inventing the wheel. |
| Regulation | Create a list of subject matter experts and a taxonomy of internal subject matters. |

**TABLE 5**
**KM REFERENCE POINTS ON LEVEL 3 BY CATEGORY**

| Category | **Reference points on level 3** |
|---|---|
| Viability | Advocate Innovation as a masterstroke to remain ahead of competition. |
| | Measure the impact of context decisions both qualitatively and quantitatively. |
| | Develop feedback mechanisms on all of level 3 activities to become a learning organization. |
| Operations | Promoting a culture of cross-silo collaboration, enabling CoPs. |
| | Build an environment to co-create/manage and contribute to innovation, growth and satisfaction. |
| | Set-up CoPs that use a portfolio of innovative KM techniques, interaction formats or workshop designs aimed at supporting business strategy and processes. |
| | Resulting in sense-making through alignment, conversations, visualizations and workshops leading to decisions out of shared context. |
| | Make this KM portfolio a standard methodology that is systematically used and integrated within daily business processes. |
| | This means bringing people together within business and subject matter context (CoP). |
| | Leading to business and bottom-line relevant decisions and actions based on understanding of shared context. |
| Regulation | Alignment of business needs and strategy with CoPs providing knowledge to cover key business areas. |
| | Continuously communicating CoPs and KM techniques to management as standard procedure to make decisions. |

**TABLE 6**
**KM REFERENCE POINTS ON LEVEL 4 BY CATEGORY**

| Category | Reference points on level 4 |
|---|---|
| Viability | Empowered leadership by either executives or collaborators - company culture and trust. |
| | Support the deeper understanding of people and the business case. |
| Technology | Regular utilization of KM techniques and their enforcement in day-to-day business processes by employees and line managers. |
| Operations | Connected to current business campaigns. |
| Market | Establishing customer understanding to make sensible trade-offs among contradictory factors (quality, cost, time). |
| Regulation | Create the ability to act on regulation based on practical and conceptual experience. |

Level 4 (behavior, community and leadership) has had a strong impact on all levels before. For example, we cannot implement a sound information management system without leadership support. Additionally, collaboration is required to implement any solution at any of the first three levels.

Empowered leadership by both executives and collaborators is fundamental to fostering a company culture based on trust. Solid psychological security within the organization ensures that individuals feel capable and confident in their actions. Leaders, human resources (HR), and organizational development (OD) professionals must be well-versed and trained in knowledge management (KM) techniques and methods. Employees and line managers must regularly apply and enforce KM techniques in everyday business processes. Transformative behavioral change should be built upon a shared understanding and deep insight. Finally, supporting a deeper understanding of both individuals and the business case at hand is important.

## EXAMPLE AND DISCUSSION OF ALIGNING KM TO C-LEVEL CONCERNS

This section illustrates how aligning KM initiatives with C-level concerns can be achieved using a case study from the construction industry (Schoos, 2018). We will discuss the use of storytelling and connecting KM activities to management goals and KPIs.

### Case Study: Construction Industry

In the construction industry, a significant challenge was identified: a lack of knowledge among employees, leading to financial risks for the organization. This problem was broken down into specific causes and consequences using methodologies like Root Cause Analysis (RCA) and Failure Mode and Effects Analysis (FMEA) – see figure 1.

*Problem Identification*

- **Primary Problem:** Lack of knowledge among employees.
- **Causes:** Insufficient experience as contractors and project managers; Limited direct personal interaction; Isolation on construction sites.

*Consequences*

First Tier Consequences:

- Loss of time due to inquiries and insufficient experience.
- Waiting for information due to limited interaction.
- Repeated errors in construction and project management due to isolation.

Second Tier Consequences:

- Delays in construction completion and additional costs for the building owner.
- Work overload for employees due to repeated errors.

Third Tier Consequences:

- Lack of resources for follow-up projects.
- Increased reliance on external resources to compensate for internal inefficiencies.

Fourth Tier Consequence:

- Financial risks for the organization.

The structure of this problem-resolution process aligns with RCA and FMEA principles by demonstrating how initial problems propagate through a series of intermediate effects to impact organizational objectives. This cascading effect is crucial for understanding the broader implications of seemingly isolated issues.

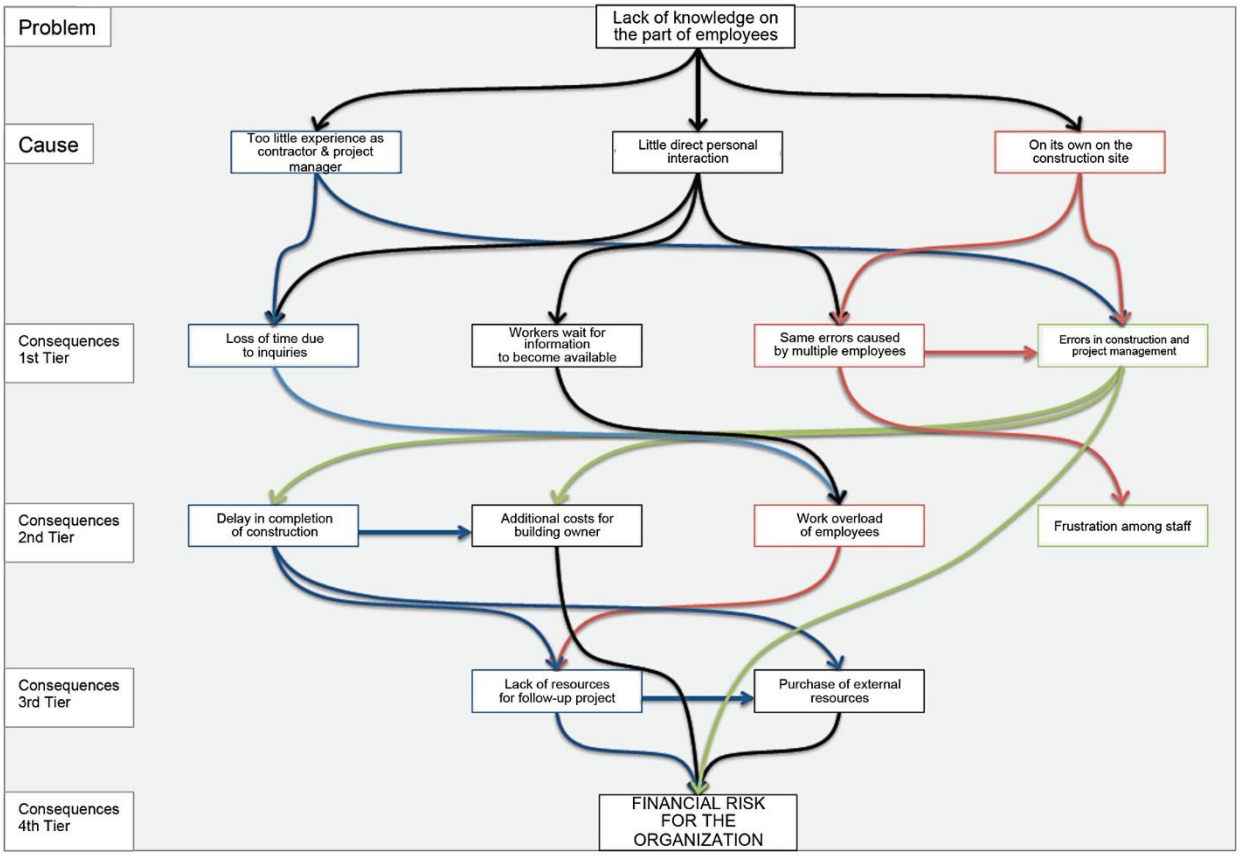
**Connecting KM to Management Goals and KPIs**

To align KM initiatives with management goals, it is essential to identify relevant KPIs and demonstrate how KM can impact these metrics. Based on this case study the following goals and KPIs support our categories:

- **Viability:** Reducing project delays and costs to ensure organizational survival.
- **Operations:** Enhancing knowledge sharing to improve operational efficiency.
- **Market:** Improving customer satisfaction by delivering projects on time and within budget.
- **Technology:** Utilizing advanced KM tools to streamline information flow.
- **Regulation:** Ensuring compliance with industry standards through better knowledge management.

Linking KM activities to these goals and KPIs allows knowledge managers to demonstrate the value contribution of KM. For example, reducing project delays through improved knowledge sharing can be directly tied to financial performance metrics, making it easier to justify KM integration to C-level executives.

**FIGURE 1**
**KM STORY EXAMPLE FROM CONSTRUCTION INDUSTRY (BASED ON SCHOOS, 2018)**




**Practical Implementation**

To implement KM solutions effectively, knowledge managers should follow a structured approach:

1. **Identify Critical Areas:** Use methodologies like RCA and FMEA to pinpoint key knowledge gaps and their consequences.
2. **Develop a Narrative:** Create a compelling story that links KM initiatives to organizational challenges and goals.
3. **Define KPIs:** Establish clear KPIs that align with management goals and measure the impact of KM activities.
4. **Engage Stakeholders:** Communicate the narrative and KPIs to C-level executives and other stakeholders to gain their support.
5. **Monitor and Adjust:** Continuously monitor the impact of KM initiatives on the defined KPIs and adjust as needed.

Aligning KM initiatives with C-level concerns requires a clear understanding of organizational goals and the ability to communicate the value of KM through compelling narratives and relevant KPIs. A structured approach helps knowledge managers demonstrate their activities' impact on the organization's success.

## CONCLUSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

This paper explored the alignment of Knowledge Management (KM) activities with organizational objectives, underscoring the importance of aligning KM efforts with the goals of senior management. Our

findings indicate that alignment is achieved when KM activities meaningfully contribute to organizational success. This necessitates an initial analysis of managerial goals to facilitate this alignment.

To bridge the gap between KM initiatives and organizational priorities, we developed a method for knowledge managers to articulate the necessity of KM to C-level executives. This method maps knowledge gaps to critical business issues, empowering knowledge managers to demonstrate the essential role of KM in achieving organizational objectives. The direct effect of KM activities on business outcomes surpasses the opinion of Davenport that KM returns are not immediately visible.

The effectiveness and efficiency of this method were illustrated through real-world case studies, each clearly linking knowledge issues to their consequences across four tiers. The hierarchical structure of these consequences supports building a compelling narrative. The more KM solutions address these consequences, the more relevant the KM program becomes.

**H1: KM can improve the operational situation of organizations**

Our case study showed that KM initiatives, such as improved knowledge sharing and information management, led to more efficient operations. For example, reducing project delays and errors through better knowledge management resulted in increased operational efficiency. The positive impact on operational efficiency, as demonstrated in the construction industry case study, confirms that KM can significantly improve the operational outcome of organizations.

**H2: Linking KM to organizational problems and vice versa is an effective way to get management's attention**

Linking KM initiatives directly to organizational challenges, such as financial risks and project delays, supports capturing the attention of C-level executives. This connection was crucial in demonstrating the relevance of KM to business performance. The use of storytelling and clear communication of how KM addresses specific business problems effectively gained management attention and support.

**H3: Aligning KM solutions to organizational problems and tying them to Key Performance Indicators (KPIs) increases value creation.**

Establishing KPIs that align with organizational goals and measuring the impact of KM initiatives on these KPIs helped demonstrate KM's value. Tracking the reduction in project delays and cost savings provided tangible evidence of KM's contribution to value creation. The alignment of KM activities with KPIs related to organizational goals, such as operational efficiency and financial performance, increased the perceived value of KM solutions among C-level executives.

**H4: Tying KM to the personal priorities and KPIs of C-Level executives increases chances for implementation.**

Personalizing KM initiatives to address the specific priorities and KPIs of C-level executives, such as improving operational efficiency and reducing costs, increased the likelihood of implementation. This personalized approach ensured that KM initiatives were seen as directly relevant to executive priorities. Tailoring KM activities to the personal goals of C-level executives facilitated their buy-in and support, leading to successful implementation of KM solutions.

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