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Freeing Ideas from Their Silos

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Freeing Ideas from Their Silos

How the U.S. Army has transformed its approach to sharing knowledge, and what businesses can learn from it.

by Steven Mains and Laura W. Geller

In January 2007, an analyst from the Center for Army Lessons Learned (CALL) embedded at Fort Drum, N.Y., noticed soldiers welding hooks onto the doors of military vehicles — an ad hoc solution for extracting people from vehicles hit by roadside bombs. This innovation, the analyst realized, could be useful in all sorts of attacks and could be fabricated anywhere. Working with the Fort Drum team, the analyst put together a series of instructions for designing and installing the hooks, complete with photographs, and circulated the digital blueprint over a vast information network that links bases and installations worldwide. Within 48 hours, the equipment modification had been adopted at numerous U.S. Army facilities.

That the information for this simple solution to a life-threatening problem benefited so many people so quickly represents an important success story. The Army's bureaucracy has taken hits over the years for impeding the ability to communicate essential knowledge quickly throughout the organization. To address that concern, the Army developed the CALL network in 2006, a surprisingly supple Web-based collaboration system through which new bottom-up concepts like the Fort Drum door hooks are disseminated instantly to those who can benefit from them. In its first year of operation, the network shared more than 15,000 lessons from combat opera-

tions. Of these, more than 4,000 led directly to improvements in unit preparation and training for deployment.

The Army's success should serve as a lesson to the private sector. Most companies are awash in insights and ideas that emerge from specific situations but that could apply broadly across the organization to solve problems, promote efficiency, and even generate revenue. The trouble is that these valuable ideas get stuck in the silos of their origination and are never used to their full potential. As Peter Aiken, professor of information systems at Virginia Commonwealth University, puts it: "Most corporate organizations have no function or formalized processes in place devoted to learning lessons from what's happened."

Technology can do much to disseminate vital information to the people who need it most. For example, under the CALL system, which runs on Microsoft SharePoint, soldiers and analysts subscribe to topics in their areas of interest and expertise. When an analyst posts content to a topic site, subscribers automatically receive an alert with a link to the material. Information is categorized and stored within searchable archives. Network users who need assistance can call on a staff of knowledgeable technicians. CALL also enables analysts to "push" appropriate products, such as handbooks and newsletters, into the organization.

Colonel Steven Mains
(steven-mains@us.army.mil) runs the Center for Army Lessons Learned at Fort Leavenworth, Kan. He has served in Iraq, Afghanistan, and India, and has been developing and implementing collaborative information systems for the military since 2001. He is a West Point graduate and holds a Ph.D. from the College of William and Mary in computer science.

Laura W. Geller
(geller_laura@strategy-business.com) is deputy managing editor of *strategy+business*.

As the Army discovered, however, implementing such a system must begin by addressing two challenges: identifying the right people and processes to serve as the foundation of the network, and, on a larger scale, working around deep-rooted behaviors and sensitivities while slowly changing the culture.

People and Processes. Knowledge systems fail when individuals in the organization are not motivated to read current content or post it to the network. To address this, the Army established a trusted team of 200 analysts — many of whom are retired commissioned and noncommissioned officers — to embed in units at home and abroad, at training locations and schools, and at offices responsible for organizational change. Their primary tasks are to gather, analyze, and disseminate knowledge on the CALL network. All of the analysts have extensive experience in the inner workings of the Army, a deep grasp of the Army's vision, and an understanding of the organization's intricacies. These qualifications not only ensure that the analysts' postings are valuable to enlisted men and women but are also credible to senior leaders. Indeed, because top Army officers are less likely to regularly scan CALL content, analysts also send out "big issues" lists to commanders to focus their attention on critical posts, such as a recent report on new enemy sniper techniques. That observation led to instant alerts to soldiers on the ground and immediate changes in seven training courses for units about to deploy.

Culture. Some Army leaders were initially reluctant to allow CALL analysts to post information about their own snafus because they didn't want such failures broadcast and didn't want to be penalized for errors. But analysts worked around these ingrained anxieties by assuming that if team X is having a particular difficulty, it likely reflects a systemic problem. The analysts will check around the network to see if others are experiencing a similar challenge. And when they get confirmation, they post the problem on CALL in a generic fashion, specifically describing the issues, mistakes, and lessons learned without identifying who, what, when, or where.

Traditionally, Army doctrine has been slow to change, in part because information about new procedures has traveled slowly throughout the organization. But the success of CALL's rapid feedback system is changing minds. Army leaders, for example, found an item on CALL detailing a new approach to managing the overwhelming number of informants approaching soldiers one on one in Iraq. Traditionally, informants were dealt with by specialists operating through an intelligence network. This new approach deviated from the approved doctrine, so the leaders asked the network to take down the post. But analysts investigated further and proved that the post in question was in fact how commanders on the ground were dealing successfully with the situation and identified areas of the doctrine that required updating. The post went back up, offering the entire Army immediate access to a set of helpful ideas that many hadn't known were routine in certain quarters. Army leaders expect that the next generation of military leaders, raised on the Internet, will spearhead an increased acceptance of knowledge collaboration.

Of course, taking a leaf from the military's book isn't easy for most private-sector organizations. The Army runs on discipline and hierarchy, so new initiatives are vastly easier to enforce than they would be in corporations. Still, companies can begin to tap the benefits of knowledge collaboration by building on what they already have — specifically, by establishing a

CALL-like business intelligence "competency center." Many organizations have already developed such an operation to collect best practices and standards. In addition, companies can use their Intranet listservs to post new ideas and questions in real time. These components can form the core of a true knowledge collaboration system, through which ideas that work are shared across business units, and ideas that fall flat become lessons about what to avoid.

Although the private sector does not mirror the Army's strict command-and-control discipline, regulators are demanding that companies become more responsible and accountable. The Sarbanes-Oxley Act, which overhauled corporate governance in the aftermath of scandals at companies like Enron and WorldCom, and, more recently, the 2006 amendments to the Federal Rules for Civil Procedure, which address the discovery of electronically stored information, call for information audit trails to make certain that numerous departments within a company are aware of the organization's activities, starting at the board level and touching on everything from finance to research and development. A CALL-like system would encourage openness among the various business units. By setting up a formalized process for sharing ideas company-wide — the success stories and the failures — executives could introduce greater accountability to their company's culture. As the first generation to grow up networked and collaborative in their social and educational lives moves into the work stream, sharing lessons learned across organizations — public or private — will become all the more plausible and necessary. +

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Center for Army Lessons Learned Web site: Provides unclassified information for other governmental agencies and military family members and serves as a means for authorized people to request access to more sensitive data. http://call.army.mil/

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