The Show Must Go On: Conducting Knowledge Audits in a Pandemic to support KM Strategies for Two UK Organisations

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1. About the Case Organization

Knovolution Ltd. is micro-consultancy specialising in knowledge management for teams and small-medium enterprises. The company is based in Northumberland, UK, and was founded by Janine Weightman in 2019. Janine has 20 years' experience in KM from working in large engineering companies in the energy and automotive sectors, and with clients in the charitable, home appliance, housing and personal development sectors.

This case summary highlights a consultant's journey in establishing a custom methodology for knowledge auditing which could be performed via online and hybrid modes. It describes the delivery, technical and personal challenges Janine faced and how she innovated her approach to meet client requirements under unusual circumstances. The context will be of interest to individual practitioners tasked with knowledge auditing for the first time and remote teams who would prefer an online approach.

2. About the Challenge

The Covid-19 pandemic fundamentally changed the way people worked, causing businesses to adapt to continue with their projects amidst the disruption. Throughout the business world, there was a sudden onset of mass remote working, people were adjusting to overnight-changes in collaboration, staff were 'zoomed-out', and the shape of teams altered daily due to Covid absences. A wide range of digital tools enabled people to collaborate both synchronously and asynchronously in the online space. This shift also resulted in new opportunities and challenges, which altered our perception and expectation around human interaction in the workplace.

Knovolution was commissioned to carry out knowledge audit projects for two separate organizations during the pandemic (see appendices for details), which presented challenges around scoping the audits, project execution, and fostering participation. Effective knowledge audits depend on close interaction and participatory methods to get good insight into the knowledge opportunities and needs in an organization.

The main objective facing Knovolution was to create an online approach to knowledge auditing. It needed to be based on good practice (e.g., in knowledge auditing, online facilitation, user experience design, data capture, cybersecurity), utilise common and low-cost tools, created and delivered within the contract timeframe, produce the required data, and be comfortably delivered by an individual practitioner.

Due to various constraints around participation, Project 1 was conducted asynchronously and Project 2 was conducted in a hybrid mode. For Project 1, it would not be possible to conduct a specific knowledge resource mapping exercise. In Project 2, the client wanted to conduct the audit with two teams simultaneously.

In both projects, the clients wanted to obtain the necessary insight to guide their KM strategies and interventions, and provide justification to leadership teams for further commitment to the KM function. They wanted to understand their current information

resources, challenges around knowledge-sharing, gaps in critical know-how, target areas for improvement, and what specific actions they needed to take. Knovolution's online solution had to cater for the full range of knowledge resources and capture the information needed to inform the various reports (evaluation, strategy, roadmap) as requested by the client.

Janine's knowledge auditing experience at the time was based on a physical workshop environment, and although information in the public domain was valuable from a theoretical perspective, it was not directly transferrable to suit the circumstances of the pandemic. As a consultant, utilising the proprietary methods of others was out of scope both practically and professionally. As an individual, there was pressure to deliver a full-scale audit within the timeframe, as well as designing the approach, presenting results, and operating in the unknown.

3. What We Did
A mixture of digital facilitation tools and no-code platforms were used to create an online knowledge auditing process. This resulted in Knovolution creating a consistent framework and methodology to apply to future audits.

The discovery process involved detailed consultation with the client to determine expectations, restrictions, participant needs and outcomes for the audit. Due to time constraints at the development stage, the design process involved triaging known theory and practice to determine the absolute critical elements that should be built into the approach. Janine had to rapidly evaluate, learn, and bench test existing tools and platforms to find a fit-for-purpose and cost-effective solution prior to configuring the architecture, interfaces and developing the content.

In Project 1, the emphasis was on facilitating an asynchronous online workshop that was an antithesis to Zoom and not another survey. Knowledge management was a very fresh topic for staff and, with limited understanding compounded by constraints around participant availability, it was not feasible to expect staff to create knowledge maps on their own. For this project, Janine trialled her proprietary consulting framework 'The Knovoscope' as the theoretical basis for the audit and created an online workspace for participants in Howspace[1]. The online approach drew on Snowden's ASHEN model, utilised the KM diagnostic cards by Straits Knowledge, and leveraged Howspace's interactive tools to capture and publish participant responses in real-time. Janine also leveraged Howspace's AI functionality to analyse and present results. Additional 1-1 activities such as online interviews and presentations were also incorporated.

In Project 2, Janine combined the insight she gained from Project 1 and a knowledge auditing workshop delivered by Straits Knowledge to create a hybrid format for her next client. Working with the client's KM function and accommodating two distinct teams, the knowledge audit was delivered in person with some sessions conducted online due to participants' schedule constraints. To prepare participants for the in-person workshops, Janine created a pre-workshop learning portal with guidance and supporting materials using Kartra. The actual audit approach was heavily influenced by Straits Knowledge methodology to determine operational and cultural pain points, and defining specific knowledge resources, which the company delivers via their proprietary software Aithin[2]. It wasn't practical for Janine to use Aithin on this project and she wanted to avoid using Excel or post-

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[1] https://howspace.com/
[2] https://www.aithinsoftware.com/

it notes due to the post-workshop effort required on her part to process the information. Instead, Janine used Airtable[3] to create a custom database structure and interface to identify pain points and capture data about knowledge resources. Solution ideation was conducted on Miro[4] using the framework defined by Straits Knowledge.

Drawing on the experience of these two projects, and the Straits Knowledge workshop, Knovolution's solution now uses these technologies to deliver:

- pre-workshop communications,
- digital support programme for participants,
- pre-workshop virtual activities,
- an online environment to conduct the knowledge audit, and
- a post-audit reporting process.

Knovolution's solution was innovative in its novel use of technology (platforms, AI) and adaptation of known methodologies to create workable solutions on the fly. It gave Janine the opportunity to 'battle-test' her consulting framework with real business problems and scale her service with a fully digital approach. For the clients, the flexibility of Knovolution's approach made it easier to deal with the logistical challenges of the pandemic while still giving them rich insight via alternative user experiences.

4. Challenges and Lessons Learned
In addition to pandemic-related challenges, Janine faced hurdles and barriers around scheduling, defining methodologies, and framing the audit context.

Challenges
Slotting in with other business activities was useful in gaining buy-in and momentum for the audit. However, Janine also experienced conflicts in schedules, aligning motivations, and justifying the relevance of the audit as an 'add-on' project.

Framing the audit context required insight and communication skills to ensure understanding where staff were unaware of KM (Project 1) and acceptance where staff had misconceptions about KM and leadership needed to connect it to business benefits (Project 2). Furthermore, the clients' request to audit non-standard or in-flux business processes influenced how Janine needed to position the audit.

A short timescale (Project 1) put pressure on delivery and technical execution. The longer, phased timescale (Project 2) secured participation but reduced momentum and affected comprehension between phases. Regardless of timescale, access to staff also became difficult due to ongoing projects, remote working, pandemic lockdowns, and participants missing sessions due to Covid.

Delivering the virtual workshop using existing technology required careful evaluation. Finding fit-for-purpose digital tools that would also align with client security protocols was fundamental to design. Janine also had to strike a balance between implementing good theoretical practice and shaping the approach to work with the available functionality.

In terms of methodology, knowing what to ask in a custom approach required extra thought to ensure relevance, quality of data, and avoid bias. Processing results efficiently became an

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[3] https://www.airtable.com/
[4] https://miro.com/

issue as the amount of data increased, and the time to evaluate results on behalf of the client was underestimated.

Janine also recognised that the solution itself could complicate the process and that rapid learning and validation of Janine's personal understanding of knowledge auditing was key to avoiding the risk of limiting the potential of the solution.

Lessons Learned
Key learning points were centred around delivery and user experience.

Timescales are often imposed due to client schedules and budget. Janine needed to respect the constraints and negotiate the timing of the audit activities to get the best results for the clients. There are pros and cons to longer or shorter timescales. The key is scheduling to ensure it meets the specific participants' requirements as the audit depends on their input. For shorter timescales, provide guidance outside of workshops. For longer timescales, ensure participants retain their frames of reference between sessions to make it easier to kick-off the next session.

Scoping the audit is crucial and worth spending extra time on as this feeds into participant guidance, business positioning, and processing results. Being clear on the reasons for auditing is essential when circumstances change, which Janine experienced when it was necessary to tweak the scopes mid-audit in light of the pandemic and relevance to participants.

Facilitation was essential both online and in-person. For asynchronous online activities, self-service content such as videos were useful as well as in-place guidance within the online tools. Outreach communications such as emails or platform notifications during the process would have supported the participant's journey more effectively and encouraged extra participation. For in-person sessions, keeping participants on track in terms of discussions and when to use the tools was critical to timekeeping and productivity.

Making sure participants can use the technology both from a corporate security and user access perspective reduces interruptions and administration effort. It was necessary to adapt the Howspace and Airtable interfaces mid-audit based on feedback, which could have been avoided through extra initial testing time.

Guidance
Janine's advice for other consultants, practitioners or teams attempting similar projects relates to scope:

- Work with the people 'in the room'. Find out how participants prefer to interact with the process and each other. Tailor the audit approach to suit or provide enough pre-workshop guidance to help them contribute successfully.

- In an online solution, it can be tempting to implement a range of useful activities. Note however that these activities will generate data that needs to be relevant and evaluated within the timeframe.

- Be prepared to innovate. Get the utmost clarity on the purpose of the audit then calibrate your approach on your client's needs, your participants, and your tools. Uphold theory and practice, however flex and innovate the delivery to achieve the best results under your unique circumstances.

- Understand what happens when you leave the client so that they are confident in implementing the results and the audit has not just been 'another exercise'.

5. Impact and Benefits

The knowledge auditing experiences described enabled Janine to create and evolve proprietary services for Knovolution that had been designed for, tested and delivered in both real business settings and remote working practice. Through the process, Janine has identified a sweet-spot for conducting knowledge audits that would suit teams and small-medium enterprises in terms of scale, budget and usability.

From a client perspective, Project 1 helped the client develop the justification needed to support ongoing internal development of their KM practice and secure buy-in from the business's change programme for funding and resources. Project 2 equipped the teams with new insight on knowledge-sharing challenges that were influencing operational performance, teams identified immediate quick wins and new ideas to old problems, and the audit attracted executive leadership support which raised the business's attention around KM.

From a process point of view, Janine observed a *'positive Trojan horse'* effect when conducting the knowledge audits. Whilst the goal was to identify and establish relationships between knowledge resources, operations and culture to inform wider KM activities, there were spin-off benefits for the clients e.g., mini culture shifts in teams, greater awareness of the value of knowledge, recognition of internal experts, cross-silo discussions, and generation of social capital between otherwise disconnected staff.

Janine attributes the success of these projects, and the development of proprietary services, to:

- The disruptive period of the pandemic forcing the need to innovate in the moment, supported by a general trend in people's attitude to embrace change and put the normal rules of work on pause in favour of achieving outcomes.

- Working with rather than against the constraints to enable faster decision-making and a more relevant solution.

- Creating rapport with open-minded clients and having transparent discussions to identify requirements and improvements.

- Learning fast using a range of resources to build understanding of problems and solutions e.g., interviews, technology tutorials, free trials, attending a range of online workshops.

- The evolution of no-code platforms which enabled Janine to configure solutions efficiently and effectively.

6. Next Steps

Knovolution's next steps involve:

- Promoting Janine's online service to support teams and small-medium-enterprises with knowledge auditing using Airtable.

- Conducting more Knovoscope sessions as a conversational method to auditing and defining initial directions for KM strategies.

- Releasing the Knovoscope web app for public access in October 2023 (currently in development).

- Using Howspace to deliver virtual and hybrid workshops.

- Finalising the research and creating a suite of KM diagnostics specifically for small-medium-enterprises.

Appendix A – Project 1: Knowledge Audit for The British Psychological Society

The British Psychological Society (BPS) has been the UK's voice and home of psychology since 1901. For more than 120 years, BPS has championed psychology, psychologists and the wider psychological professions, supporting more than 65,000 members through every stage of their careers. With around 170 employees, the professional society is headquartered in London.

BPS was forming its Knowledge & Insights function. The intention of the knowledge audit was to support the initial evaluation of BPS's opportunities and challenges related to KM to form a strategy and roadmap. The audit would also provide specific insight to developing information architecture and understanding how their systems support knowledge management.

The project was conducted from December 2020-March 2021, at a time when the society was undergoing a large organizational change programme. This made it difficult to audit processes and activities as systems and functions were in mid-transformation and staff were already occupied outside of their day jobs, as well as coping with the stress of the pandemic.

KM was a new concept for the organization however they had strong experience in information management. The longevity of the society meant that content was spread across different systems and ways of working had become less efficient. There was a need to optimize access to internal knowledge and insight, improve internal knowledge-sharing culture and mechanisms, and develop new practices to expedite knowledge creation to better support its members and the public on key topics.

Key factors in this online knowledge audit were:
- Timescales – the audit needed to be designed and delivered within January 2022.
- Scope – BPS wanted an organization-wide audit, rather than an audit of specific processes. As the first step in their KM approach, they wanted high-level insight to identify where to target their efforts and help staff build awareness.
- Participants – A stakeholder map was created and key participants identified. Since it was achievable with the online solution, the majority of the organization were invited to participate. 142 employees were invited, 90 employees participated including 3 leaders, and it was facilitated by Janine and the 2-person KM team.
- Technology – Howspace was instrumental to the success of the project, providing an enjoyable digital facilitation space that could capture responses, reveal results in real-time, and provide AI functionality to analyse results.

Key lessons were:

- Be careful what you wish for – inviting many participants champions inclusion and cognitive diversity, but also amasses a great deal of data that needs to be evaluated.
- Potential bias – in an asynchronous space, there is potentially more contribution from some individuals rather than others depending on who engages. This needs to be accounted for when analysing responses.
- Asking the right questions – there is danger of asking too much rather than what you actually need to know.
- Facilitation – more asynchronous interaction such as facilitator check-ins, monitoring and prompting responses, or drip feeding the online workshop over a period of time can help maintain connection to participants to foster participation.

The main outcome for the client was gaining support from the organizational change programme to develop KM further. The audit shaped the vision and strategy for KM and was instrumental in developing initial awareness in staff.

Appendix B – Project 2: Knowledge Audit for Manufacturer in the Oil & Gas Sector

A knowledge audit was conducted to support the KM team in a large UK manufacturing plant for the Oil & Gas sector. The project was conducted between February 2022-November 2022 in a phased approach starting with planning and scoping, identifying pain points, mapping knowledge resources, solution ideation, and reporting results.

The goal was to support the KM team in evolving the company's proprietary knowledge base by identifying knowledge gaps and identifying an improved approach to maintaining it as it had become administratively complicated. The team wanted to focus on two specific areas of the manufacturing function that was represented by two different teams. The objective was to understand the impact of knowledge loss on operational performance.

Janine worked with the Knowledge Manager to develop a business case for the audit, recruit participants, deliver a hybrid workshop and report the outcomes to the leadership team.

Key factors in this hybrid knowledge audit were:
- Format – the audit was to be delivered in-person however Covid and participant schedules meant that some sessions needed to be delivered online or in-person with some members joining virtually.
- Timescale – the phased approach over a longer timeframe was necessary for participant schedules and running simultaneously with other company initiatives.
- Technology – Airtable was the foundation of the online solution used to capture audit results inside and outside the workshops.
- Participants – some participants missed sessions which affected individual comprehension and audit results. People who could benefit from the audit discussions were invited as observers to help their understanding.

Key lessons were:
- Continuity - linking between sessions for stronger context and comprehension for participants.
- Engagement – understanding how to attendees prefer to interact and matching the approach to the team culture.

- Ambiguity – creating intrigue around the process rather than lack of clarity or context.
- Facilitation – maintaining focus in discussions and encouraging ideation after identifying pain points and knowledge resources.

The main outcome for the client was the identification of quick wins mostly around communication challenges, stronger relationships with subject experts, clarity on areas for improvement, and greater attention from leadership teams.