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Goal: Making battlefield experience more accessible

NEW ARMY FIELD MANUAL INTRODUCES KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT DOCTRINE

A new Army field manual on operational knowledge management fills an important gap in Army doctrine and begins a lengthy process improving the service's ability to organize and access the enormous amount of information and expertise it acquires, say Army officials.

"Before this, there was nothing," said Dave Nichols, operations manager at the Battle Command Knowledge System (BCKS) at Fort Leavenworth, KS, in an interview with *Inside the Army* on the new field manual, 6-01.1. "It wasn't until the Army started to realize that, particularly for Iraq and Afghanistan as units rotate in or rotate out, they were losing a lot of experience and knowledge from operations where they learned some hard lessons."

The manual, which was issued Aug. 29, increases the service's advantages in conducting operations by "providing systematic and explicit management of the Army's organizational knowledge and its soldiers' individual knowledge," the text reads. Knowledge management includes data and information, but also experience, insight and expertise, said Sherry Happel, knowledge integrator at BCKS and lead author of the field manual, in a Sept. 11 interview with *ITA*.

This kind of knowledge is most effectively shared face-to-face and through social networks, which is why the Army is making use of online communities and virtual meeting rooms as forums where people can ask each other directly about their experiences on the battlefield, she said.

In the same interview, BCKS officials said creating a knowledge-sharing environment can save lives, money and time, but stressed it is particularly difficult to implement in a hierarchical organization where information normally flows from the top down.

"The smartest guy in the room is usually the guy with the most rank," said Nichols, "But now, because the battlefield is so spread out, not one person can see everything or know everything. The guy who's smart will rely on all these other subject matter experts who may be much lower in rank than him."

Recognizing that the smartest person in the room may be a sergeant just back from morning patrol is a key step in better utilizing the Army's vast collection of knowledge, he said.

CAVNET, a website that functioned like a chat room and was utilized by the Army's First Cavalry division in Baghdad, was pointed to as an example of a recent initiative that successfully made use of knowledge management principles.

After returning from patrol, anyone could write their observations on the Web site. This raw data was then made accessible to other soldiers "up and down the chain of command" who could then apply it to their own experience the next time they went out on patrol, said Nichols.

"So what you had now was hundreds of eyes, instead of just a few sensors or a few official reports," he said.

Gen. Peter Chiarelli, the Army's vice chief of staff, was the division commander at the time, said Joe Koskey, acting director of BCKS, highlighting that Army leaders know these efforts save time, "and they know that it saves lives."

Both Nichols and Koskey admitted that there was risk in making raw data available to a wide audience, but said the value of it often outweighed the danger.

"We have to trust and rely on the experience of [non-commissioned officers] and junior officers to be able pick the nuggets out of this information and make it work," said Nichols.

The real challenge is organizing all of this raw data and operational knowledge in a way that it can be easily and quickly accessed, the officials agreed.

"The Army is real good at bringing in information by the boatload," said Nichols. "They have sensors that can take you all the way down to the lowest organization, down to company and battalion level -- satellite information, signal information. You can get it into the command post, but then you can't organize it or find it."

The field manual lays the ground work for improvement in this area, but the Army is also looking to expand its staff of trained knowledge and information management experts.

The service has held a series of workshops to decide how many people are needed, what skills they should have and what their rank should be, said Koskey.

Officials are also beginning to look at career incentives as a way to increase the service's knowledge management skills, with the goal of making effective knowledge management second nature in the near future.

"We're looking at about a 10-year process, a generation in the Army where eventually the Army will learn to do it for itself," said Nichols.

In addition to the field manual, which answers the "what and the why" questions at the division, corps and brigade level, the Army is working on a virtual knowledge handbook for leaders that will answer the "how" questions, said Koskey.

The handbook is in draft form and circulating only among 15 to 20 people, but eventually it will be made accessible to a wider audience that will be asked for input.

"It's not quite a 'wiki,' but it's using virtual techniques to distribute and disseminate information," said Koskey, referring to collaborative Web sites that allow anyone to contribute feedback, the most famous being Wikipedia. He noted the people involved in the effort are attempting to practice what they preach.

The Army's fourth annual Operational Knowledge Management Conference will take place on Oct. 27 in Kansas
City, MO. -- *Kate Brannen*