

MBA CAPSTONE PROJECT:

TURNING INSIGHT INTO IMPACT

MIND OVER MATTER: MBA STUDENTS HELP SYNGENTA RETHINK KNOWLEDGE SHARING.

Hours of valuable work time can be lost when employees have to hunt for documents, search for emails, or track down budget information. When you multiply all this downtime by a worker’s hourly wage, the value of an effective knowledge management system (KMS) becomes quite clear.

But finding the best system – and then getting staff to use it – can be challenging for many companies.

Syngenta recently asked graduate students at the Bryan School of Business and Economics to help tackle this issue at the company’s North American operations division in Greensboro. Through the school’s capstone project, four MBA students worked with company leaders to identify the best system and then create a plan to put it into practice.

“We have Teams, SharePoint, OneDrive, and Zoom, and we use it all,” says Jackie Bontempo, the transformation and change manager for Syngenta’s production and supply department in Greensboro. “The students were asked to research a number of possible knowledge management systems, look at what we do at Syngenta, and determine the best fit for us.”

Over the course of the semester-long project, Sridevi Kesavarapu, Hugh Le, Evan Newland, and Hannah Shakil visited the agribusiness company’s campus in Greensboro, interviewed staff and leaders, and researched best practices. They found that, at Syngenta, knowledge management is vital to protect the company’s science, foster innovation, and ensure compliance. It also smooths the effective transfer of information among and between teams.

“We have people that have been with our company for 45 years, and when they retire, that knowledge walking out the door is so hard to capture,” Bontempo says. “Also, when we hire new staff, we want to get them on board effectively and help them learn their roles.”

But without strong support for any one KMS, information can become fragmented or duplicated, documents can be hard to find, and email becomes a main source of sharing information. Armed with case studies, the students presented to company leaders how effective knowledge management can improve productivity, streamline decision making, and reduce operational costs (see sidebar).

Students then evaluated five possible systems and determined that SharePoint, which Syngenta already had, offered the most capabilities yet was being underutilized. That’s when their efforts took on a new focus.

“**People will only use something if it’s making their lives better... if they see value in it.**”

Syngenta employees shared these thoughts about the need for an effective knowledge management system during interviews with the capstone project team.

“Our project then became about persuading leaders and employees to buy into the system they already had,” Newland says. He and the other team members recommended ways to communicate and optimize SharePoint; suggested incentives, recognitions, and educational programs to boost its use, and offered timelines to implement and manage the change.

Syngenta leaders were impressed. “It was obvious that they were prepared and went that extra mile,” Bontempo says. “They took this very seriously and were committed to this project.” Their efforts led to strong actionable results.

“All of their research and digging confirmed that, at the end of the day, our success would come from having leadership support and buy-in for one system and then effectively managing change around that,” he says. “I think their work will make a huge difference.”

April Miller ’19 MBA served as an executive mentor to the team. She believes the capstone project is a unique offering of the Bryan School – one that provides students with valuable, real-world experience while helping area companies and organizations solve problems. She saw her mentees develop tremendously in their writing, presentation, and critical thinking skills.

“The main thing I want the students to get out of this course is that they can solve any problem with the right tools and resources,” she says. “These students are now well-equipped to be excellent problem solvers, and that is what the Bryan School promises them.”

THE CASE FOR A KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEM

Students’ research showed that an effective knowledge management system (KMS) can improve productivity and efficiency. For instance:

- Siemens reported a 20% reduction in project timelines after implementing a KMS.
- Other industry research shows knowledge management systems can boost productivity by up to 40%.
- Deloitte reported a 15% boost in performance through improved collaboration and innovation.
- Overall, implementing a KMS can reduce the time employees spend searching for information by as much as 50%, according to a 2023 report by Bloomfire.

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