

# Creating a Career in Knowledge Management

BY CAROLANN KOWALSKI

*(HINT: You're probably already doing most of it...)*

I WAS CALLED for jury duty recently, and as the 40-plus juror participants stated their name, occupation, and city of residence, the judge only stopped and questioned one person: me. He wanted to know what a knowledge manager does. I'm sure many of you have experienced the same look of confusion when answering, "technical writer," or some other technical communication title. Trust me, it's worse when you're a knowledge manager.

Occasionally I give a snarky response like, "I manage the knowledge." But truthfully, it took a little while to wrap my head around what a knowledge manager does. Knowledge management comprises practices and strategies for identifying, organizing, and distributing information within an organization. As director of knowledge management for Edmunds.com Inc. (which I will refer to as Edmunds), my responsibilities have spanned such a potpourri of topics that most folks think me and my team are involved in everything. And the assumption isn't too far off.

Before knowledge management, I worked for seven years as a technical writer and information designer, creating a range of documentation from hardware and software operating manuals to online policies and procedures. Four years ago I took a chance and applied for the first knowledge management position offered at Edmunds, which publishes websites that help automotive consumers, enthusiasts, and insiders. A private, family-owned company with approximately 500 employees, Edmunds.com launched in 1995 as the first automotive information website, and it needed help to organize the tremendous amount of information that flowed through the company.

I was initially brought on board to manage the enterprise adoption of new tools and processes. I had no previous experience with Agile (a project management methodology that emphasizes iterative development), but am now a Certified ScrumMaster and have acted as project manager for multiple teams at Edmunds. I also had the opportunity to product manage the creation of several internal products, such as the training module we currently use to manage sign-up for internal instructor-led trainings.

After the team that was managing our wiki-based intranet dissolved, I volunteered to take over. In addition to the intranet, I now manage several of our corporate

communication systems, including our micro-blogging application and our idea management tool. By "manage," I mean that I ensure new employees know that these resources exist and how to access them, oversee feature implementation, help departments/teams maximize the tools' capabilities, and of course, wrangle incidents.

In late 2010 Edmunds made a bold move to turn our product creation process on its head by adopting user-centered design. Instead of asking our project teams to execute on product ideas delivered by our executive team, the responsibility of defining product roadmaps now lies with the teams themselves. All team members received user-centered design training, and now routinely complete tasks like interviewing real users regarding their pain points in the car research and purchase process. Teams speak in terms of personas, fictional people created to represent bands of research/buying behaviors and attitudes. Where common product conversations might have begun, "I wouldn't use this feature," they now sound more like, "Would Roberto use this feature?" I played a key role in the adoption of user-centered design and have led two teams through the process.

Now the most common response I hear when I explain what a knowledge manager does is, "My company needs one of those." And I think that sentiment will become more and more common. As technical communicators, we naturally possess many of the qualities that make a good knowledge manager: interpreting business requirements from stakeholders, organizing information in a logical manner, and communicating it to those who need it. All these skills come into play in knowledge management. So whether you are looking for a job or simply a change of pace, try looking in the knowledge management world. Opportunities abound and as a technical communicator you're in a good position to take advantage. ■

*To find out more about Edmunds and how we work, read our Harvard Business Review-McKinsey M-Prize for Management Innovation entries that I helped to write:*

- ▶ *How a Shopping Cart Transformed the Way We Work: "User Centric & Employee Driven"* [www.managementexchange.com/story/how-shopping-cart](http://www.managementexchange.com/story/how-shopping-cart)
- ▶ *Become a Social Samaritan: Rewarding employees for engaging with their social network at work* [www.managementexchange.com/story/become-social-samaritan-rewarding-employees-engaging-their-social-network-work](http://www.managementexchange.com/story/become-social-samaritan-rewarding-employees-engaging-their-social-network-work)