

Message from the World Customs Organization

International Customs Day 2011

Knowledge is now a definitive part of today's political and business environment. Terms such as a 'knowledge-based society', the 'knowledge economy' and 'knowledge management' now abound and it stands to reason that knowledge has become just as important for Customs administrations and their international trade stakeholders.

Indeed, harnessing knowledge and using its power to become visionary, relevant and indispensable is one of the keys to success. The WCO realised this in 2008 when it adopted its Customs in the 21st Century vision in which 'a professional, knowledge-based service culture' is recognized as one of the ten building blocks of a modern Customs administration.

Hence my decision to designate 2011 as the WCO Year of Knowledge with the theme: "Knowledge, a catalyst for Customs excellence". Excellence is what we should be aiming at as a Customs community and I firmly believe that knowledge is indeed a catalyst, a critical tool that will help us to excel in what we do best: protect society, secure the supply chain, facilitate trade, and ensure the integrity of borders.

In our fast-moving world, Customs administrations need to continuously adjust, often rapidly, to social, economic and political developments. They have to change in response to their experience; monitoring their operations, their environment, and their partners for clues to the efficiency and effectiveness of their performance and delivery.

If we want to remain visionary, relevant and indispensable, we need to adopt a new approach to knowledge and learning. It is crucial that we consider knowledge as a means to empower the WCO and its 177 Members because it is an essential Customs resource that needs to be rationalized, managed and applied as part of a continuous learning process.

At the organizational level, Customs managers need empirically-based and thought-provoking research, quality information and reliable intelligence on which to base their strategic decision-making and leadership in order to manage change and guide their organizations cogently.

On the other hand, at the operational level, the continuous strengthening of know-how and competencies is fundamental if Customs managers want to maintain their efficiency and performance to respond confidently to the many challenges posed by the international Customs environment.

Knowledge creation is triggered by dialogue and collective reflection: information comes from an individual's experience and understanding; subtle techniques accumulated over time. This body of experience and information becomes knowledge that can easily be processed and disseminated thus enabling others to be enriched too.

The different meetings and events organized by the WCO and its partners throughout the year facilitate dialogue and interaction. For this reason, I strongly encourage all WCO Members and other global trade stakeholders to actively participate in these meetings so that information can be shared and knowledge built from this pool of experience and expertise.

Technology too has an important role to play in taking forward our knowledge agenda. People are now able to meet and exchange information online. The WCO took advantage of these developments when it launched its own online think-tank, known as Club de la Réforme; a virtual meeting place for Customs officers and researchers to enhance their knowledge on topical Customs and international trade issues.

Academic research is also a source of knowledge. The WCO has established partnerships with universities to promote research on a range of issues that impact Customs and trade with many of them now offering high-end education which meets international standards for the Customs profession. Also, the research team which I set up in 2009 as part of my undertaking to create a WCO knowledge-based center of excellence now undertakes valuable research which is published on our website and in renowned trade journals.

This leads me to encourage WCO Members to begin a dialogue with national academics on Customs topics that could benefit from research as this can reinforce professionalism. Partnerships with technical and other professional institutions of learning can also provide Customs with relevant and useful expertise. These actions and more will help to promote a learning culture in our organizations.

In fact, the high levels of performance and service delivery needed today require learning, lots of learning. I believe that success and continuity of reforms are only possible if Customs managers and officers who put them into practice have the necessary support. Learning to do something or to do something better is enormously rewarding and personally satisfying. Building a learning culture is a win-win situation as it provides opportunities to achieve extraordinary performance for all involved.

Of course the WCO is aware of the many human resource challenges that some Customs administrations face and the pressures put on them to do more with less and faster. To support the training needs of Customs officers, the WCO offers its Members a comprehensive capacity building programme which includes Customs specialists skilled in training, quality e-learning modules, and a global Regional Training Centre network.

Mention should be made of our brand new learning platform called CLiKC! – Customs Learning and Knowledge Community – which offers access to online courses and opens up a new world of possibilities for WCO Members to take ownership of their training initiatives and professional development. I am confident that WCO Members will take advantage of this new tool as well as others that are available as they take up the challenge of making learning a watchword for success.

It would be amiss of me if I did not touch on the concept of knowledge management, defined as a systematic discipline and a set of approaches to enable information and knowledge to grow, flow and create value in an organization. Some Customs administrations are already implementing these practices and others are exploring them. I intend to create opportunities for Customs to share more on knowledge management methodologies and practices; the IT sector may be able to assist us in this dialogue which will be a useful continuation of last year's Customs-Business Partnership theme.

I hope the focus on knowledge in 2011 will galvanize the Customs community to give more thought to human capital development, management development, knowledge management and the better use of research capacity and learning tools. Knowledge is imbedded in WCO instruments, standards and tools, and can act as a catalyst for Customs excellence of this I have no doubt.

Let me conclude by quoting Benjamin Franklin, one of the Founding Fathers of the United States, who so aptly said, "An investment in knowledge pays the best interest." It certainly does and this is reinforced in an old saying that an investment in knowledge is an investment in our future.

Wishing you all a joyful International Customs Day!

Kunio Mikuriya
Secretary General
26 January 2011