Chapter IX

On Knowledge Management: A Field Study

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Introduction

It is widely acknowledged that knowledge is one of the most important assets of today’s organizations. According to Davenport and Prusak (1998), knowledge is often a company’s greatest competitive advantage in a global economy. How to support the company’s knowledge-intensive work processes (e.g., quality support, product design or strategic planning) is therefore becoming a vital issue in many organizations worldwide. Identification, analysis and characterization of the knowledge-intensive work processes become essential in order to qualify a discussion of how to support knowledge management processes.

This chapter presents, discusses and reflects upon findings from a study of how highly skilled actors manage information and knowledge, i.e., how information is gathered from a wide range of sources, structured according to needs and relevance for the users, and disseminated to the relevant suppliers in the organization. The aim of the chapter is two-folded: first, to contribute to the general empirical body of knowledge about knowledge-intensive work, especially focusing on the central characteristics of the knowledge management processes; secondly, to initiate a discussion of which overall requirements...
we must set up for how knowledge management processes could be supported by means of information and communication technology.

Knowledge-intensive work processes often concern collaborative problem-solving and mutual support that require effective ways of handling information and knowledge between different people, both in short-term and long-term situations. The distributed and dynamic nature of knowledge management work also imposes a high degree of complexity involving many different actors with different conceptualizations, interpretations, perspectives, needs, etc. of the knowledge produced and approached. The various actors have different perspectives on the concept of knowledge. The work needed to articulate knowledge and make information and knowledge accessible becomes extremely demanding and complex. Often face-to-face interaction is required. However, in complex and collaborative work settings the problem of articulating knowledge by rich interaction and communication is obvious. The actors are distributed both geographically and temporally. There is a need for computer-based mechanisms for interaction and coordination of information and knowledge (cf. e.g., Carstensen and Wulf, 1998).

It is, of course, difficult to discuss knowledge management and computer support without some kind of definition of the term ‘knowledge’. We will not pretend to provide a definitive account to this here. Instead we employ the working definition provided by Davenport and Prusak (1998). Their definition expresses both the aspects of knowledge that makes it valuable for organizations and the aspects making it hard to manage. They define knowledge as:

“a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of the knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms” (Davenport and Prusak, 1998. p. 5).

According to Nonaka (1995) the concept of knowledge can be understood only in combination with the situation in which it is created. In order to become knowledge, information must be interpreted and applied in a specific situation by a human actor and hereby be conceptualized to a certain level of abstraction (Sandberg, 1994).
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