Chapter 2.5
E-mail and Knowledge Creation:
Supporting Inquiring Systems and Enhancing Wisdom

Sharman Lichtenstein
Deakin University, Australia

Craig M. Parker
Deakin University, Australia

Margaret Cybulski
Deakin University, Australia

ABSTRACT

The real promise of organizational communication technologies may lie in their potential to facilitate participative discourse between knowledge workers at all levels in distributed locations and time zones. Such discourse enables the exchange of sometimes conflicting viewpoints through which resolution and symbiosis, organizational knowledge can be built. This chapter presents a case study of a Singerian inquiring organization which illustrates how a fluid dynamic community of employees can use email to build knowledge, learn, make decisions, and enhance wisdom through a cycle of knowledge combination (divergence) and knowledge qualification (convergence). The chapter offers new theoretical perspectives on the enhancement of wisdom in inquiring organizations and provides practical insights into the use of email for supporting effective knowledge creation in inquiring organizations.

INTRODUCTION

In today's globalized business environment, many companies recognize the strategic role of the generation, capture, and dissemination of knowledge in developing inimitable competencies, innovations, and competitive advantages. In particular, the constant creation of new knowledge has been identified as a key business objective. While some experts see the value of ongoing knowledge creation in terms of accelerating

innovation (Sharkie, 2003), others focus on its value for enhancing a firm's ability to act—the hallmark of a learning organization (Loermans, 2002; Senge, 1990). When such an approach uses a systematic method for justifying knowledge claims about complex social alternatives, the company evolves into an inquiring organization, employing inquiring systems.

Inquiring systems were originally conceptualized by the pragmatist philosopher Churchman (1971), who strongly believed that knowledge should be created for practical problem-solving purposes and that its creation should be ethically grounded. He specified five archetypal inquiring systems to assist with complex problem solving, each corresponding to a particular philosophy for discovering knowledge truth. A comprehensive view of inquiring systems proposes that they systematically generate knowledge, resolve complex problems, and enhance organizational learning capability, leading to continuous learning and improvement (Courtney, Chae & Hall, 2000).

In the past decade, a diverse body of knowledge has accumulated around identifying, understanding, and linking the key concepts of inquiring systems and organizations. Some of this work has focused on the development of design frameworks for inquiring systems. In a recent development, Hall, Paradice, and Courtney (2003) described a conceptual model for a Learning Organization Knowledge Management System (LOKMS) that portrays a design for an environmentally aware extended inquiring system. Their model shows how key information and knowledge can be continuously and systematically captured and employed to hypothesize and select new states or goals. To achieve these goals, alternative solutions are generated, each based on a recognized mode of inquiry. From among the alternatives, the best option is selected in a decision-making process. A key feature of LOKMS is its reliance on an organizational memory comprising a constantly verified and updated knowledge base and a store of extraneous accumulated knowledge which, while not immediately useful, may acquire validity at some future time. Monitoring of the external environment introduces new and updated knowledge into the organization.

While such designs appear promising, we still lack ways to support such organizations and systems and also need a greater understanding of the underlying concepts. One way to explore and understand the constructs and their support is to study environments where the systems are in evidence. We noticed in the discourse of the ubiquitous organizational tool electronic mail (email), the enactment of some of the key processes appearing in LOKMS—in particular, information and knowledge discovery, the creation of organizational knowledge from the resolution of multiple perspectives, decision support, and the building of organizational memory.

These knowledge processes were discovered in email conversations between people collaborating in distributed networks to solve practical problems. The linchpin knowledge process identified in the conversations was knowledge creation, suggesting to us that in the group appropriation of email for collaboratively solving problems, characteristics of inquiring systems might emerge through the patterns of discourse. We wondered whether discourse found in the simple tool, email, could support some of the components of inquiring systems and organizations. Reaching for wisdom, it was also worth considering whether email could support the enhancement of wisdom.

In this chapter, we explore the potential of email for supporting inquiring organizations and enhancing wisdom. We begin the chapter by looking at an information hierarchy that shows how data can be transformed into knowledge and wisdom. Knowledge creation and other key concepts of inquiring organizations and systems are then reviewed, guided by a simplified conceptual model of inquiring systems in inquiring organizations that incorporates wisdom development structures.