

Chapter 3.11

Virtue–Nets

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INTRODUCTION

David Skyrme (1999) has observed that knowledge workers exploit knowledge generated from business activities and turn it into business opportunities. Technical infrastructures enable knowledge workers and improve knowledge processes (Von Krogh, Ichijo, & Nonaka, 2000). Improving knowledge awareness requires creating a dynamic and generative environment for organizational workers (Senge, 1990). Organizations are faced with developing communication strategies that maintain centralized and fully accessible knowledge bases while at the same time trying to compete in a highly decentralized marketplace. Technological solutions for enabling and enhancing communication among knowledge workers are used for activities such as scheduling, negotiating, checking e-mail, revising documents, making reservations, connecting laptops remotely to the Net, problem solving, and decision making. There are numerous electronic

devices for communicating between knowledge workers. These networked devices serve the purpose of connecting human-knowledge capital. For many companies, human-knowledge capital is a significant source of competitive advantage, and the dispersion of this capital without effective communication networks can greatly hinder the decision makers and the overall corporate decision-making process. One place to start examining the practices of knowledge workers is to study the networks in which they work.

This article explores knowledge networks and their advantage in grouping data based on qualitative attributes to support knowledge work. Such networks support and enable individual interactions with knowledge systems to enrich understanding. The next section provides a survey of communication technologies and theories to support the need to develop a network infrastructure to enable intelligent business practices. The next section on knowledge sharing proposes a virtue-net network architecture to support net-

work connectivity using qualitative measures as a method for leveraging knowledge networks. The article concludes with a brief discussion and ideas for future research in this area. A glossary of terms for the virtue net is provided as an appendix to the article.

BACKGROUND

Knowledge management (KM) was popularized in the 1990s at a time when the dominant organizational metaphor was “organizations as computers” (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Knowledge management can be defined as “the process of identifying, capturing, and leveraging knowledge to help the company compete” (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998). Knowledge is key to organizations learning from and about customers, competitors, business partners, and staffs. Skyrme (1999) lists creating, identifying, gathering, organizing, sharing, learning, applying, exploiting, protecting, and evaluating in his representative sample of KM practices reported as key elements of knowledge-management programs.

One basic assumption of knowledge management contends that resource constraints such as time, capital, and understanding limit the ability to reasonably expect that all necessary and relevant knowledge can be captured and disseminated throughout an organization. Nonetheless, mechanisms to capture, encode, and store process knowledge in organizations provide (a) a starting point for future projects, and (b) a basis for avoiding similar mistakes in future projects. Knowing the how and why (i.e., process knowledge) behind the what (i.e., factual knowledge) leads to greater abilities to generate insight and better understanding.

Knowledge-Sharing Networks

Individuals seek information for both normative and informational reasons. Normative-influence

theory suggests that human beings usually seek approval, a sense of belonging, and communality, which in some cases could account for the individual decision maker’s drive for knowledge and for his or her communication with other knowledge stakeholders (Huang & Wei, 2000). Shared understanding is a relatively strong component that binds individuals in organizational and group settings. Informational-influence theory suggests the search for factual information and task truth can also act as a driver for decision makers seeking knowledge, including those seeking knowledge confirmation (Guenther & Braun, 2001). This sort of environment requires highly efficient, responsive, and self-adaptive information systems. Ideally, the systems are designed to be able to collect and classify information automatically and keep the system updated promptly. Interconnective knowledge-sharing structures are better ways for today’s companies to construct their internal knowledge-sharing mechanism. Interconnective knowledge-sharing structures establish a two-way communication pathway across the intranet. The nodes in the system include individuals as well as aggregates of individuals, such as work groups, departments, and organizations within a company.

There are numerous challenges to overcome to effectively share knowledge among organizational members. Many organizations are faced with their own sets of unique challenges. Literature in knowledge management has shown that studies on knowledge reuse need to consider both the knowledge search and transfer processes simultaneously in order to get a full understanding of how knowledge is reused within an organization (Kraemer, 1998). Locating relevant knowledge sources for reuse during problem solving incorporates two separate processes: locating relevant experts and locating relevant expert knowledge (Housel & Skopec, 2001).

Ackerman and Mandel (1995) suggest that decision makers seek expert knowledge either in the form of knowledge artifacts or connections

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