



Chapter 13

Social and Cultural Barriers for Knowledge Databases in Professional Service Firms

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Professional Service Firms (PSF), where professionals (consultants, lawyers, accountants, auditors, tax advisors, engineers ...) work, are interested in knowledge management, because their business is heavily dependent from the knowledge of their employees. Core asset is their ability to solve complex problems through creative and innovative solutions, the basis for this is their employees' knowledge. Therefore, PSF are on the forefront of knowledge management. Experiences show that Information Technology (IT) is only one dimension of knowledge management, more important are social, cultural, and organizational dimensions.¹

INTRODUCTION

There is hardly a professional denying that the use of working documents and similar materials produced by others is wise. All PSF are trying to set up collections of knowledge acquired in projects or while processing cases in order to share it and conserve it for reuse. Sharing knowledge between colleagues improves the economical benefits of a PSF's expertise². The network of professionals in most cases can arise significantly better professional advice than any individual. Sharing knowledge is critical for PSF, because "... knowledge and intellect

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grow exponentially when shared,”³ otherwise individual professionals become “atoms of knowledge, and the firm just the sum of individuals.”⁴ Knowledge databases can address what is sometimes called the traditional weakness of PSF: “... narrow specialists who see only their own solutions, self-centered egoists unwilling or unable to collaborate with colleagues.”⁵ Knowledge databases (in any form) are seen as an instrument to foster sharing and collaboration. Only for greater clarity of the argumentation this paper concentrates on PSF; the same is true for other companies or departments in which knowledge is critical.

Although the benefits of sharing and reusing of knowledge are quite clear, many attempts to use knowledge databases failed the expectations: only a few databases are accepted as up to date, the special fields of expertise are covered only in fragments. The access is laborious and uncomfortable. Heterogenous sources (text, internal and external databases, journals, books, comments, codes of law) hardly can be integrated. Especially the lack of actuality and completeness causes massive quality risks if dealt thoughtless and unreflected.

Obviously there is an discrepancy between the expectations and actual benefits, independent whether professionals collect paper documents manually, whether librarians set up such collections, or whether knowledge databases are constructed and maintained by massive use of IT. We analyze the existing social barriers for knowledge databases.

WORRIES OF LOSS

The phrase said to be by Francis Bacon “knowledge is power” is well-known and intuitively correct for many situations. Anybody knowing something may use this knowledge by taking action and enforce his/her influence – those who do not own knowledge are deprived of such capacity to act or to influence. In business perspectives, this is true regarding knowledge about customers, competitors, suppliers, procedures, recipes, methods etc. For PSF the evaluation of special situations and the knowledge about effective solutions is critical. Transferring this knowledge means enabling colleagues to act and grants influence. In this sense someone who passes on knowledge looses the exclusiveness of influence, he/she share this possibility with colleagues. This will function only if there is no unnecessary hard competition between the professionals.⁶

However, the worry about another loss has to be obeyed: with the passing on a monopoly of knowledge is abandoned. Such monopolies tend to be cultivated since they suggest job security and the esteem of others. Anybody who possesses monopolistic knowledge probably wont get dispensable or replaceable easily. And, intelligibly: who wont be happy to be asked by colleagues as an “expert” with rare knowledge? Anybody who shares knowledge frankly probably deprives

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