



Chapter 20

An Informational Perspective Towards Knowledge Work: Implications for Knowledge Management Systems

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This paper presents an informational orientation towards knowledge work and draws implications of such a perspective on the functionality offered by knowledge management technologies. Discussion ensues on the nature of organizational knowledge and its strong association with information. In light of this discussion, knowledge work is defined as the application of comprehended information and viewed as a set of knowledge creation, distribution, and use processes. Implications are drawn based on this perspective for knowledge management technologies to provide organizational participants with access to information content, the ability to communicate this information with others, and the means by which to utilize this information in work practice. It is argued that by doing so, these technologies can better support organizational knowledge work.

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to present an informational perspective towards knowledge work in organizations and to draw implications for the design of knowledge management technologies.

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To facilitate this objective, the paper is organized into three primary sections. The first two sections discuss the constructs of knowledge and knowledge work respectively. The goal is to provide the reader with a firm understanding of these core concepts highlighting the central role information plays in the creation, distribution, and use of knowledge in organizational contexts. The third section utilizes these insights to make recommendations on the functionality knowledge management technologies need to provide to promote the creation, distribution, and use of knowledge across the firm.

KNOWLEDGE

Knowledge is said to be a powerful organizational resource (Drucker, 1993; Quinn, 1992; Toffler, 1990), but what exactly is knowledge? Various interpretations exist. Some suggest knowledge is “justified true belief,” the capacity for (social) action (Stehr, 1994; Sveiby, 1997), or professional intellect (Quinn et al., 1996). In terms of organizational know-how, Davenport & Prusak (1998) provide a holistic description of the knowledge construct. They state that knowledge is both fluid and formally structured, neither neat nor simple, and offer a working definition of 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 mind of knowers. In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, and norms” (p. 5).

From this definition, knowledge in organizations is viewed as a dichotomous construct that exists both *tacitly* in the minds of people and *explicitly* in formal products and procedures. This distinction is recognized and discussed by Nonaka & Takeuchi (1995) in their classification of two types of knowledge: explicit knowledge, that which can be partly expressed in formal, systematic language and transmitted to individuals easily; and tacit knowledge, that which is personal, context-specific, and difficult to articulate formally (Polanyi, 1966).

These descriptions are enriched by Schultze’s (1998) overview of functionalist and interpretive perspectives towards organizational knowledge. Utilizing Burrell & Morgan’s (1979) paradigms of social and organizational inquiry as a guide, Schultze distinguishes the difference between objective and subjective perspectives.¹ A *functionalist* view adopts a realist ontology and assumes that facts about the world exist and are waiting to be discovered; hence knowledge is perceived as an object that exists in a variety of forms (e.g., tacit, explicit) and resides in a variety of locations (e.g., individuals, culture, work routines, roles, physical setting) (pp. 160-161). An *interpretive* perspective maintains that reality is so-

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