Chapter 29

A Research Model for Knowledge Management

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Knowledge has been identified as the key issue to gaining competitive advantage in any business. A successful company is one that can create new knowledge, disseminate it through its organization, and embody it in its products and services. All this is possible by careful planning and building a culture for creating and sharing knowledge. In this chapter, a research model for KM is suggested. The various components of KM are described in detail so as to explain the process of KM. Then, using the research model as a reference, two case studies, one of Buckman's laboratories and the other of the Nippon Steel- British Steel alliance, are analyzed to study the process of KM.

INTRODUCTION

In today's volatile global business environment, characterized by fierce competition, increasing interorganizational cooperation, and alliances, knowledge management is not only challenging but also necessary. Knowledge management can be viewed as a proactive approach that help organizations gain and sustain competitive advantages (Porter, 1998; Havens & Knapp, 1999). Increasingly, companies view knowledge management as critical to the success of businesses. The

reality is that lack of knowledge management could result in slow product development and poor customer services and can be detrimental to companies in the near future (Havens & Knapp, 1999).

The practice of knowledge management has been around just as long as businesses have been around. However, the "conscious" realization of it has been a recent event. In today's market economy knowledge is becoming more and more "fragmented" and "redundant" (Zack, 1999) as more and more knowledge is created. On the other hand, organizations are becoming more and more distributed and dynamic. Consequently, comparing KM in any traditional business environment, knowledge management today has become more complex and requires greater effort.

Then, what is new in knowledge management? Apart from large volumes of knowledge, the use of information technology (IT) in managing knowledge has given KM a new dimension. It is important that the use of technology and the "social process of technology use" are harmonized (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Implemented properly with appropriate strategies, IT can help to carry out and maximize the benefit of many of the management initiatives, including knowledge management.

Therefore, it can be fairly said that knowledge management is not a technology; however, technology is fundamental to the knowledge management process. Knowledge Management (KM) is defined as "a process that drives innovation by capitalizing on organizational intellect and experience" (Daffy, 1999). KM is intended to promote and support the creation of new knowledge, thus contributing to innovation, an essential ingredient in business success. KM also:

• Capitalizes on both explicit and tacit knowledge;
• Supports business objectives and revenue generation;
• Stresses human interaction as the focal point;
• Capitalizes on lessons learned.

In addition to adhering to these principles, it is important to emphasize the relationship between sources of knowledge and knowledge and to ensure that participants (knowledge managers, consumers and contributors) are able to contribute and take advantage of the KM process.

There are a number of technical and business issues that need to be considered before initiating the KM process. Some of the technical issues important for the success of the KM process are providing assistance in setting up electronic delivery strategies for information, identifying information sources and services, re-architecting decision support tools, supplying data and/or document mining tools, and dealing with the whole information life cycle (i.e., avoid having irrelevant knowledge). Some of the business issues revolve around promoting a knowledge-centered environment in organizations, understanding information flows,

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