

An Intranet within a Knowledge Management Strategy

Udo Richard Averweg

eThekweni Municipality and University of KwaZulu-Natal, South Africa

INTRODUCTION

An Intranet (or internal Web) is a network designed to serve the internal informational needs of an organisation (e.g., a municipality) using Internet concepts and tools (Averweg, 2007; Turban, McLean & Wetherbe, 2004). The cost efficiency of utilizing Internet technology has opened the door for organizations to use this same technology to share information within the organization (Botha, 2004). Information technology (IT) thus plays an important role in organizations. Given that advances in IT have made it easier to acquire, store and disseminate knowledge than ever before, many organizations are employing IT to facilitate sharing and integration of knowledge (Kankanhalli, Tanudidjaja, Sutanto & Tan, 2003). An Intranet is an application of technology within an organization for the purpose of information dissemination, communication, integration, and collaboration (Telleen, 1997).

Knowledge Management (KM) describes “the primary focus of these efforts has been developing new applications of information technology to support digital capture, storage, retrieval and distribution of an organization’s explicitly documented knowledge” (Zack, 1999). In this chapter it is argued that, when aligned, organizational strategy and technical resources (e.g., IT) provide a sound framework to support KM within an organization. However, the question arises as to whether an organization is making the best investment in its IT resources and whether it is managing knowledge in the right way. One technical IT resource in an organization is an Intranet.

Every major organizational process should be regularly evaluated and the evaluation should be *purposeful* and *completed* (Debowski, 2006). One method of evaluation is a survey. Debowski (2006) suggests that survey “evaluations take a number of forms ... and may be conducted via telephone, e-mail or mailouts”. In this study the evaluation selected by the author is e-mail since the purpose and benefits of an e-mail survey justify the cost.

BACKGROUND

There is a need for KM practices in the workplace to enable managers to promote the sharing of knowledge and allow the organization to acquire and retain intellectual capital.

For example, eThekweni Municipality in South Africa is “committed to using Information Technology to make a real difference ... municipal decisions have to be based on sound research and information management in order to ensure [service] delivery” (eThekweni Municipality, 2006). KM initiatives in organizations are increasingly becoming important as organizations are making significant IT investments in deploying KM systems (Hahn & Subramani, 2000).

INTRANET AND INTRANET TECHNOLOGY

Tiwana and Ramesh (2001) contend that the Intranet is well suited for use as a strategic tool within the domain of KM owing to its ability to support distribution, connectivity and publishing. According to these authors, the Intranet should be seen as integral to an organization’s KM system and should therefore be designed and tailored to enhance an organization’s knowledge-sharing activities. This rationale raises the question whether an organization’s existing Intranet facilitates knowledge-sharing and KM processes. The exploration of this question creates an opportunity for research within a field of application that seems particularly appealing: a metropolitan municipality – eThekweni Municipality in Durban, South Africa. The appropriate context and appeal arose from the fact that the author is situated within the organization’s Information Services Department. Furthermore, given eThekweni Municipality’s Integrated Development Plan (IDP), this study was considered pertinent and relevant. In surveying the parameters of the question, the overriding premise was established as follows: If knowledge is used effectively, it may well provide meaningful utility to the organization. Clark (2001) notes that “knowledge management initiatives are unlikely to be successful unless they are integrated with business strategy.”

Intranets create a common communications and information-sharing system. Brelade and Harman (2003) suggest Intranets can be used on a “push” basis, where information is presented to employees, and on a “pull” basis, where employees may seek out and retrieve information for themselves. These mechanisms are described more fully as follows:

- “Push” technology is used when it is important that certain material is presented to employees at their

workstation. It ensures that no other function takes place until all the information is correctly accessed; and

- “Pull” technology allows employees to decide when to pull down information from the Intranet that they wish to view. The “views of the end users are more important than in most other studies” (Skok & Kalmanovitch, 2005).

To provide a seamless experience between viewing pages on the Web and viewing information on an Intranet, access is usually via a standard Internet browser. The commonly used Internet browser in eThekwini Municipality is Microsoft Internet Explorer.

WHAT IS KNOWLEDGE?

The question of defining knowledge has occupied the minds of philosophers since the classical Greek era and has led to many epistemological debates (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Given the differing views of knowledge (e.g., a state of mind, an object, a process, a condition of having access to information or a capability), Carlsson, El Sawy, Eriksen, and Raven (1998) suggest that this leads to different perceptions of KM.

Many current theories and practices indicate that knowledge (and the management thereof) may prove useful if the scope and utility of knowledge is aligned with an organization’s strategy. For this reason KM must have a business focus. It is therefore critical that KM aligns with the organization’s business strategy and that it is structured in such a way that it articulates with the organization’s purpose and goals. It may be further argued that knowledge should be viewed as a resource in the business, and that it should therefore tie in with the resource-based approach to strategy.

Although this chapter seeks to review the role of the Intranet and its contribution to a KM strategy, it also proposes that KM should be set on a broader scale than merely IT, that is, it is argued that the management of knowledge should go beyond a narrow technical focus and encompass other less tangible themes within an organization. Zack (1999) clarifies the intangible “as the knowledge existing within people’s heads, augmented or shared via interaction and social relationships”. This chapter draws together the technology, the notion of shared interaction and the creation of an opportunity for knowledge transfer.

Knowledge Management (KM)

Precisely what is KM? Kwalek (2004) suggests that “the literature on knowledge management is disjointed and disconnected”. Pfeffer and Sutton (2000) indicate that KM “tends to treat knowledge as a tangible thing, as a stock or

quantity, and therefore separates knowledge as some *thing* from the use of that thing”. While there are different views on what KM is, Nomura (2002) suggests that the “objective of KM is to directly enhance corporate value according to business strategy.” From a review of the literature and for the purposes of this chapter, the following definition of KM will be adopted: “KM is the organizational process for acquiring, organising and communicating both tacit and explicit knowledge (so that people may use it to be more effective)” (Gray, 2006). The argument for this selection is based on the recognition that the combined knowledge and expertise of people within an organization is what makes an organization unique.

The basic role of technology in KM can be briefly summarised in functional terms into the areas of:

- Facilitating communication;
- Enabling collaboration
- Collecting information;
- Storing information;
- Analysing information;
- Disseminating information; and
- Updating information (Brelade & Harman, 2003).

KM is not a centralized database that contains all the information known by an organization’s workers. It is the idea of gaining business insights from a variety of sources – including databases, Websites, employees, and business partners – and cultivating that information wherever it resides into corporate value. Business insight emanates from capturing information and giving it greater meaning via its relationship to other information in the organization. It should be stated that KM is not about making plug-and-play workers dispensable because all they know is recorded for the next person who fills their shoes – it is about delivering information to knowledge workers, business processes and technology to make organizations and people successful and effective. The Intranet, the in-house version of the World Wide Web (the Web) browser based on Internet technology, creates a common corporate communications and information-sharing system (Brelade & Harman, 2003).

eThekwini Municipality in South Africa

eThekwini Municipality comprises six clusters/service units (Office of the City Manager, Treasury, Governance, Sustainable Development and City Enterprises, Corporate and Human Resources and Health, Safety and Social Services) and employs approximately 20,000 employees. The Information Services Department is located in the Office of the City Manager. eThekwini Municipality has some 6,000 networked desktops (personal computers, thin clients and laptops) and electronic communication (i.e., e-mail) takes place via Novell’s GroupWise (Client version 6.5). A total of

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