



## **Chapter 7**

# **Facilitating Sensemaking in Knowledge Integration within Geographically Dispersed Cross- Functional Teams**

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*This paper looks at knowledge management within geographically dispersed, cross-functional teams. In particular, it describes an electronic knowledge management system, LiveNet, that combines support for rational innovation processes with collaborative support mechanisms. These collaborative support mechanisms extend previously available group support systems by incorporating sensemaking tools.*

## **INTRODUCTION**

The creation and integration of knowledge within organizations have been recognized as an essential competitive advantage in dynamic industries. Grant (1996: 377) suggests that knowledge “accounts for the greater part of value added” and that “the barriers to the transfer and replication of knowledge endow it with strategic importance..” This is especially true for knowledge-intensive organizations, such as consultancies and, investment services. Such organizations recognize the importance

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of improving their ways of managing existing knowledge and creating new knowledge to gain competitive advantage in volatile environments. Knowledge creation in this context includes the creation of new products, services, and ideas. It requires the capture and combination of both tacit and explicit knowledge from a number of specialized areas and experts. For example, Xerox developed a Web site for its technical representatives to allow them to post their tips and insights, or receive feedback. The Web site acts as a way to test ideas, collect evidence, and allow electronic discussions about ideas. This process also allows a peer-review team to validate or refine ideas, and if a consensus is not reached quickly an expert may be called in as referee. Tips that are validated will subsequently be posted for worldwide distribution (Brown, 1999).

One issue that has scarcely received research attention within organizational knowledge integration concerns the process of sensemaking (Weick, 1995). When making sense, individuals rationalize phenomena that do not appear to be inherently sensible at first sight, using the categories available to them in their everyday organizational languages and modes of rationality. Sensemaking is a crucial organizational capacity. As Brown (1999) has observed, managers increasingly engage in making sense rather than products for their stakeholders. They interpret the market, the forces shaping the competitive landscape, and the risks and opportunities presented to their company.

As Grant (1996) observed, most research on knowledge integration issues has focused on cross-functional teams in new product development. In many cases, cross-functional project teams involve geographically dispersed members. For example, film production increasingly involves electronically facilitated, remote collaboration, with team members dispersed all around the world (Mizer, 1994). Knowledge integration in general, and sensemaking in particular, can be problematic in such geographically dispersed, cross-functional teams. Firstly, sensemaking must translate individual, departmental, and functional knowledge into team-based knowledge. This can be difficult in cross-functional teams where language and meaning differ greatly across functions, the language of accounting differs markedly from that of manufacturing engineering. Communication, let alone sensemaking, within cross-functional teams is often complicated, since effective communication relies on common language and shared meanings. Secondly, sensemaking in cross-functional, face-to-face teams is generally supported by non-verbal and contextual cues. In geographically dispersed teams, such facilitators of sensemaking are often missing, especially where dispersed teams rely on electronic means of communication. According to Weick (1985: 51), electronic representations are often flawed, because the data “contain only what can be collected and processed through machines. That excludes sensory information, feelings, intuitions, and context” – all of which are important for sensemaking.

A variety of group-support tools exists to facilitate cross-functional collaboration electronically, either within one locality or across several localities (Huseman and Miles,

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