Chapter XIX

A Case Study of Project Champion Departure in Expert Systems Development

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Research on project champions has focused on the characteristics of this individual and how to provide encouragement and support. An understanding of the role of project champion is shortsighted, however, without a realization of what can happen to an expert system (ES) project and what can be done, should this individual depart. This paper discusses the ES project champion by examining the experiences of Ciba-Geigy Corporation with an ES project impeded by the departure of the project champion. The OpBright expert system, developed to support the identification of appropriate optical brightener products by sales representatives, was intended to provide a competitive advantage through superior customer service. With the promotion and transfer of the vital force committed to the project's success, the ES encountered a stalemate. The difficulties in maintaining momentum for the ES without a project champion are discussed. Finally, suggestions are presented to guide organizations away from the same fate.

INTRODUCTION

Since the time of Schon's (1963) seminal work, the role of project champion has been recognized as a vital force in successful project development and implementation. A project champion for information systems (IS) projects has been defined as "a key individual, whose personal efforts in support of the system are critical to its successful adoption" (Curley & Gremillion, 1983, p. 206). The role of project champion for expert system (ES) projects in particular has been recognized

as critical to the successful application of this technology (Hayes-Roth & Jacobstein, 1994; Sipior & Volonino, 1991; Wong, 1996).

What makes champions of ES projects different from those of other projects is the additional need to identify and manage internal areas of knowledge and expertise to the benefit of the organization. It is widely recognized that effective knowledge management expertise can impact business performance (Alavi & Leidner 1999; Hansen, Nohria & Tierney, 1999; Zack, 1999). The expertise employees have acquired over the years is a valued resource. The development of organizational processes to effectively capture and share employee knowledge and expertise is important in managing this resource. In response, ES provide the capability for documentation and distribution of knowledge and expertise, facilitating knowledge-sharing.

Perhaps the role of project champion for ES nonetheless does not differ from that of other projects. However, ES have still not achieved widespread application. There still is a lack of awareness of the capabilities offered by ES in documenting and distributing expertise, how ES are developed and maintained, and how ES can beneficially be integrated into corporate operations. Successful ES implementation requires not only an appropriate domain, functional completeness and correctness, and tight integration with existing systems and business processes (Hayes-Roth & Jacobstein, 1994; Mattei, 2001), but "a significant amount of organizational and managerial effort to cause its adoption" (Sviokla, 1996). ES technology has advanced to the point where unsuccessful implementation is often the result of mismanagement of technology, rather than failings of the technology itself. Thus, an understanding of the role of an ES project champion can provide insight to organizations seeking to apply this technology. Although the current literature does not directly address the loss of the driving force behind an ES project, an understanding of the role of the project champion is shortsighted without a realization of what can happen to a project and what can be done, should this individual depart.

This paper first addresses the need to manage corporate expertise. To exemplify the characteristics and importance of the ES project champion, the experiences of Ciba-Geigy Corporation with an ES project are examined. The OpBright expert system, developed to support the identification of appropriate optical brightener products, was intended to provide a competitive advantage through superior customer service, a recognized benefit of expert system applications (Mattei, 2001). With the promotion and transfer of the vital force committed to the project's success, the ES encountered a stalemate. The difficulties in maintaining momentum for the ES without a project champion are discussed. Finally, suggestions are presented to guide organizations away from the same fate.

THE NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

The necessity to manage knowledge and expertise is particularly acute for knowledge-intensive industries such as chemicals, electronics, financial services,

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