Chapter 106
Mentoring Knowledge Workers

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Category: Social Aspects of Knowledge Management

INTRODUCTION

In an economic environment where organizations have been forced to take a step back and reevaluate their core competencies and ability to innovate, organizational knowledge has come to the forefront as a valuable strategic asset (Haghirian, 2003). While the concept of knowledge management (KM) is not new, the focus on knowledge management as a strategy has increased in recent times as organizations realize the importance of knowledge as an intangible asset contributing to the enhancement of competitive advantage (Bolloju, 2000). In the 21st century, it is believed that successful companies are those that effectively acquire, create, retain, deploy, and leverage knowledge (Cecez-Kecmanovic, 2000). Knowledge work is the ability to create an understanding of nature, organizations, and processes, and to apply this understanding as a means of generating wealth in the organization (Boland & Tenkasi, 1995). Evidently, the focus on knowledge management as a strategy has become central to organizations (Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Ichijo, Von Krogh, and Nonaka (1998) view knowledge as a resource that is unique and imperfectly imitable, allowing firms to sustain a competitive advantage. Additionally, knowledge management as a formalized organizational strategy is supported; it should not be left unintentional to become unsystematic and random (Ichijo et al.). This article provides an example of knowledge workers and experts collaborating to implement successful training and learning programmes to support knowledge-management activities in their organization. The authors hope that the case discussed will inform researchers of an appropriate model in designing an interactive learning environment that enables a positive knowledge-sharing environment and in turn contributes to the growth of an organization's memory.

BACKGROUND

The intensity of competition in the business market, advances in technology (Crossman, 1997), and a strong shift toward a knowledge-based economy have each contributed to the demand for Web-based mentoring systems (WBMSs). According to Emerson (1843), "There is no knowledge that is not power," and the organization (public or private) that can utilize its knowledge resources more effectively than its competitor will persevere (Laudon & Laudon, 1998). An effective mentoring system between knowledge workers and experts can provide an organization with a strategic advantage in the market (Benjamin & Blunt, 1993). Mentoring environments can help create and maintain skills and, therefore, the corporate knowledge base (Garvin, 1993). They both alleviate the strain on corporate resources and facilitate employees' changing training needs (Driscoll, 1998) through knowledge sharing. Therefore, the majority of organizations face the enormous challenge of supporting their employees' thirst for expanding their skill bases and corporate assets effectively as "[k]nowledge implies a knower; the rest is just information." In the case under consideration in this article, the organization implemented a successful mentoring system in order to develop employee skills and knowledge in both IT and managerial issues such as knowledge management. This article is focused on the development of a Web-based mentoring system to mentor workers and enhance learning (Neville, Adam, & McCormack, 2002). The case study indicates a strong requirement for the utilization of such an environment to both increase support for and collaboration between the knowledge workers.

MAIN FOCUS OF THE ARTICLE

Mentoring is a traditional method of teaching that strengthens the concept and objectives of learning and training (Benton, Elder, & Thornbury, 1995). The Oxford dictionary defines the word mentor as a "wise counselor, who tutors the learner in intellectual subjects..." When this model is applied to a learning network, the student is called a teleapprentice who studies using appropriate methods (Levin, 1990). The teleapprentice reads messages, answers questions, participates in discussions, and conducts research online to master his or her subject. Mentorship is a method of teaching that has been used for hundreds of years; this design is incorporated into learning and knowledge networks to develop more effective learning and collaborating practices (Eisenstadt & Vincent, 1998), and to provide additional support and mediation to the learners and workers (Alexander, 1995). Access to experts is one of the many advantages provided through learning networks (Harasim, 1995). Networks are, in fact, modeled on this method (Harasim, Hiltz, Teles, & Turoff, 1995). Therefore, WBMSs allow students and workers to communicate with experts in a field and collaborate with their peers (Crossman, 1997; Dick & Reiser, 1989). WBMSs can be described as learning delivery environments in which the World Wide Web (WWW) is its medium of delivery (Crossman, 1992; Driscoll, 1998; Neville et al., 2002). The possibilities of WBMSs are limited only by constraints imposed by the university or organization in question, such as technological or managerial support (Neville, 2000). Innovative companies and universities are using this implementation for a number of reasons, specifically to keep employees or students abreast of emerging technologies in their fields and to provide effective training to both staff and customers on new products and skills (Khan, 1997). Designing a WBMS requires a thorough investigation into the use of the Web as a medium for delivery (Driscoll; McCormack & Jones, 1997; Ritchie & Hoffman, 1996). The designer must be aware of the attributes of the WWW and the principles of instructional design to create a meaningful support environment (Driscoll; Gagne, Briggs,

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