Chapter 12
Social Knowledge Workspace

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ABSTRACT

Over the years, knowledge management in organizations has picked up steam with implementation of various solutions like Content Management Systems, Wiki, etc. However, the ability to find relevant information and capture organizational learning still looks like a distant dream. Also, organizations worldwide are transforming due to changes in worker demographics, globalization of business and technological advances. The knowledge workers of today need tools for effective knowledge capture and team collaboration. Some of the key concerns which will be analyzed in this chapter are; (a) Knowledge fragmentation due to technology, (b) Relevancy of information to a user and (c) Push vs. Pull approach of accessing information. The chapter will also explore how these challenges can be addressed by social knowledge workspaces and what should be some of the key characteristics of these technologies under development.

INTRODUCTION

According to consulting giant McKinsey & Co., nearly 85% of new jobs created between 1998 and 2006 involved complex "knowledge work" like problem-solving and concocting corporate strategy. Malone (2004) has described how today's organizations only use 30 ~ 40% of their employee's intelligence and this will change in the coming years as organizations are now closer to utilizing the full potential of their resources. This according to the author is due to availability of newer and cheaper modes of communication, which places information instantaneously into the hands of team members allowing them to make better choices. This is what he calls democratization of business.

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Peter Drucker (2008) first coined the term Knowledge worker, and proposed that the knowledge worker think and behave like a Chief Executive Officer, which requires them to be able to make their own decision rather than being told what to do. Though this paradigm has been in place for many years the effect of various factors like globalization, collaborative technologies and new economies is assisting the transformation of employees into true knowledge workers.

The goal of this chapter is to highlight some of the challenges faced by organizations in enabling their knowledge workers to capture and share knowledge easily and effectively. Some of the issues explored are (a) Knowledge fragmentation due to technology, (b) Relevancy of information to a user and (c) Push vs. Pull approach of accessing information. The goal is to define a social knowledge workspace and analyze how it could address these issues.

BACKGROUND

As has been seen in the last decade there has been a steady move of jobs in the Information Technology sector from leading countries like USA and UK to developing countries like India and Philippines. Organizations and IT staff in USA and UK have adjusted to this new reality as IT jobs have become more complex and creative. Product design, IT Architecture, Project Management jobs are now held by American employees whereas their Indian counterparts perform the programming and maintenance functions. Thomas Friedman (2006) indicates that in the coming years the best companies will be the best collaborators.

Intellectual Capital is the most important resource for any organization (Stewart, 1997). We have many successful organizations like IBM, GE, Toyota, 3M being able to channel the creativity of their employees into creating cutting edge products and leading global organizations. The former CEO and founder of Information Technology giant Infosys; N.R Narayana Murthy once pointed out to a journalist that the value of Infosys at 9.15 a.m. in the morning when the workforce was in attendance was $19 billion, but when they go home at about 6 in the evening, Infosys' valuation was zero. Little wonder that Infosys has won the Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise (MAKE) award successively. Their tagline appropriately sums up this belief, "Powered by Intellect, Driven by values".

Accelerating Innovation

The competitive edge of the United States of America comes from innovating companies and organizations. If you look at the Nobel Prizes won today you will find that the United States wins almost twice as many as the United Kingdom, which appears second on the Nobel Prize list. Many thinkers recently have indicated that the best way for USA to come out of the current economic challenge is to innovate its way out.

Bell Labs filed on an average a patent a day for more than 75 years of its existence and won five Nobel prizes in Physics. Toyota Corporation's in-house idea generation scheme generated over 2 million ideas a year. Over 95% of the workforce contributes with around 30 suggestions per employee where 90% of these suggestions are implemented. Similarly, IBM conducts an annual idea generation boot camp which generates thousands of new ideas many of which are implemented.

Social collaboration technologies can be effectively used for continuous idea generation in organizations. A simple example is an idea drop box. This box would allow employees to submit ideas throughout the year. The whole process can be made transparent by showcasing ideas encouraging others to build upon the ideas or contribute their own ideas. As some of these ideas are implemented the team can be continuously -updated on the status, giving due credit and motivating others to contribute.