Chapter VII
Organizational Knowledge Sharing Networks

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the ways that Knowledge Sharing Networks support the flow of organizational knowledge within a firm. Based on the assumption that tools people need to work with others are different from the ones they need to work alone; it demonstrates how the use of groupware permits "anytime, anyplace" collaboration within the organization. Furthermore, it takes a close look at information technology tools that enable leaders not only to encourage their employees to share knowledge personally, but also to put their knowledge in a form that others can easily access it now or in the future. In doing so, Knowledge Sharing Networks play an important role in preserving organizational memory.

"In the end, the location of the new economy is not in the technology, be it the microchip or the global telecommunications network. It is in the human mind." Alan Webber (1993, p. 27)

INTRODUCTION

In the course of this book, the term *organizational memory* is used to describe the preservation of organizational knowledge. The following definition, proposed by the Editor in his call for chapters for this book, has served as a starting point:

Organizational memory is the body of knowledge, past, present, and future, required to achieve the strategic objectives of an organization. Enabled by technology, leadership, and culture, organizational memories include repositories of artefacts, communities of people, and organizational knowledge sharing processes, which focus on achieving the organizational vision.

The key objectives of this chapter are to explore how knowledge repositories, as part of a Knowledge Sharing Network, may best support the flow of organizational knowledge within a

firm, and to describe ways, through which, in the future, they will best serve for preserving organizational memory. The chapter is organized as following. In the following section we examine two different approaches that are utilized for the flow of information and the organizational knowledge transactions within organizations; namely internal knowledge markets and internal knowledge communities. The section sub headed Supporting Collaboration starts with the assumption that tools people need to work with others are different from the ones they need to work alone. Everyday activities like communication and interaction, or decision making and problem solving are examined under all possible same/different time or same/different place conditions. We demonstrate how the use of groupware permits 'anytime, anyplace' collaboration within the organization.

In the following section, under the title Supporting Organizational Memory, we consider organizational knowledge as an intellectual capital asset under the knowledge-based theory of the firm. We take a close look at IT-tools that enable leaders not only to encourage their employees to share knowledge personally, but also to put their knowledge in a form that others can easily access it now or in the future. In the section sub headed Knowledge Sharing Networks, knowledge repositories are presented as the most important element of a Knowledge Sharing Network (KSN) and their contribution in both Integrative and Interactive Knowledge Management (KM) applications is presented. KSNs and their architecture are weighed against codification and personalization strategies, which certain researchers, departing from different perspectives, consider appropriate for a number of organizations. Closing this core section of the chapter, we focus on problems related to the effective use of KSNs, as we consider them the KM and IT-tools that mostly affect organizational performance.

Finally, our conclusions are presented in an effort to assist managers in the difficult task of successfully managing and sharing organizational knowledge.

ORGANIZATIONAL KNOWLEDGE FLOW

For the purpose of our investigation it is important to examine the channels that permit and facilitate organizational knowledge to flow inside and within an organization. Two are the main types of information-handling activities: The procedure-based ones (related to the procedures that employees are involved in their every day practice) and the knowledge-based information-handling activities. We shall focus our interest on the Information Systems (IS) aiming on supporting knowledge-based activities. IS that support employees in performing information-handling activities in order to work together, share expertise and knowledge, and solve problems. As of their nature, these IS must support activities that do not follow the same or similar process every time and that deal with information and knowledge that cannot be easily captured.

There is more than one pattern that allows this flow of information and knowledge in organizations. Cohen (1998), in his well documented Report on the First Annual U.C. Berkeley Forum on Knowledge and the Firm, distinguishes among two different approaches to knowledge transactions in organizations: Internal knowledge markets and internal knowledge communities. It is obvious that the choice of one of the two viewpoints is of significant importance, as it affects action. According to Cohen, the proponents of knowledge markets are mainly talking about knowledge interactions between individuals and may emphasize on incentives as they tend to consider that knowledge is a 'thing' that can be transferred. The devotees of knowledge communities focus on the group and give more attention to encouraging connections between people, which may lead to more exploration of the process of knowing.