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Chapter XVII

Knowing How Intranets Enable Knowledge Work: An Exploratory Study in Public Health

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ABSTRACT

This chapter explores the role of intranet technology as an enabling technology for supporting the knowledge worker, knowledge work and various forms of knowledge management. The Earl-Hopwood model is utilized to map the intranet enabled knowledge management practices to the work patterns of the knowledge worker. This mapping process yields a greater understanding of the likely impacts of IS developments on the activities of knowledge workers. The research consisted of longitudinal case studies conducted in two Irish public sector hospitals. A wide diversity of knowledge management utilization patterns was found to exist in both organizations with, training, the presence of critical information and ease of use positively influencing the use of the Intranet as a knowledge management tool. Inhibiting factors identified include lack of recognition of the intranet as a knowledge management system, the absence of a knowledge management champion and the lack of strategic intent. Cumulatively, these factors resulted in suboptimal knowledge management usage patterns.

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INTRODUCTION

Knowledge management has been identified as a core competency for building and maintaining a competitive advantage (Stonehouse, Pemberton & Barbor, 2001; Teece, 1998). Knowledge management is also recognised as a change management process which involves changing organizational information technology to support knowledge management but more importantly, it changes company culture to achieve a collaborative environment (Lewis, 2002). Knowledge management has been broken down into a three step process of knowledge acquisition, knowledge production and knowledge integration (Weidner, 2002).

Drucker (1993) asserts that the knowledge-based economy has superseded post-industrial society and consequently knowledge has become the main competitive tool of this new economy. Sustainable competitive advantage will be enhanced by knowledge that is irreplaceable, difficult to imitate and easily transferable within the firm (Lubit, 2001). However, our understanding of knowledge worker productivity is wholly underdeveloped (Davenport, Thomas & Cantrell, 2002; Drucker, Dyson, Handy, Saffo & Senge, 1997).

The term knowledge worker describes members of the workforce who possess competencies, knowledge and skills in an organization (Lee & Yang, 2000). The ability to increase the productivity of knowledge workers would significantly enhance innovation, long-term organizational sustainability and growth (Davenport et al., 2002). Finding ways to increase the productivity of knowledge workers is thus imperative for any company seeking to sharpen its competitive edge (Wang, 2000). The objective of this chapter is to explore how Intranet technology supports knowledge work by mapping the Intranet enabled knowledge management processes to the work patterns of the knowledge worker.

THE NATURE OF KNOWLEDGE

A common distinction drawn in knowledge management literature is the distinction between explicit (codified) and tacit knowledge (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Polanyi, 1958; Smith, 2001; Teece, 1998). Explicit or codified knowledge is equated with knowledge that can be expressed in words, numbers, and formulae and is often technical, scientific or academic in nature (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Smith, 2001; Tuomi, 1999). The formalized nature of explicit knowledge facilitates easy transmission between individuals and groups (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995). Conversely, tacit knowledge is knowledge that is not easily codified. Tacit knowledge is often explained by the dictum “we know more than we can tell” (Teece, 1998). Some authors further divide tacit knowledge into technical, as in the sense of a skill or craft, and cognitive, which includes beliefs, values, schemas, and mental models (Nonaka & Konno, 1998; Smith, 2001).

Knowledge in the Organization

Exploring the concept of knowledge in the organization has lead to the identification of individual knowledge and organizational knowledge as being distinct, yet interrelated concepts (Bhatt, 2000, 2002). Organizational knowledge is dependant on individual knowledge. However, its value is more than the sum total of all the individual knowledge

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