Technology Spotlight

New systems for implementing and advancing KM

The convergence of knowledge and technology

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Is knowledge a resource or a capability? The former assumes that knowledge is a finite resource and defines the role of technology as providing containers for accessing and applying this resource. The latter refers to the role of technology as providing a knowledge platform with processes and tools, which emphasize capability building at the juncture where content and collaboration meet.

When seen as a resource, knowledge is placed in containers to be accessed as needed to provide re-use and avoid the duplication of effort. When technology provides an integrated platform for content and collaboration, it becomes the engine of dynamic advantage in the market by leveraging the way people work and collaborate to enhance capability building. When a technology platform provides an integrated approach for content and collaboration, the building of capability becomes embedded in how work gets done.

Explaining knowledge

The metaphor often used to describe knowledge is that it's a finite resource that lies inside the human head. This container metaphor for knowledge implies that since heads are finite, its contents can be extracted and put into another container – the electronic database. This assumes that knowledge is a resource that can be contained.

This metaphor may work for more simple forms of rather straight-forward applications of knowledge to pre-defined situations. However, it comes short of capturing the full potential of technology as it currently exists: it fails to take into account the full potential of what can be done by leveraging technology to collaborate and exchange knowledge effectively.
It simply fails to take into account the significant value creation potential that can spring from the technology-enabled exchange of knowledge. If you take experienced and knowledgeable people and you present them with a challenging problem, new knowledge is generated that could not possibly have been extracted as a finite resource. The knowledge does not pre-exist the situation, but it's actually produced in the engagement between experts and problem or, even better, between cross-disciplinary team and new challenge. It's clear that this more complete definition of knowledge has much more significant implications for organizational performance. It's worth noting that knowledge and innovation become closely linked in this context.

The limits of technology

What are the implications of this wider understanding of knowledge? First, even if you could somehow freeze a person's state of experience and knowledge and contain it somehow, they could still generate beyond this an infinite body of explicit knowledge through ongoing engagement in different contexts. It's misunderstanding of human nature to think that we can somehow capture the knowledge held by people and organizations and put it into the containers now being provided by technology.

Instead of being contained in people's heads, knowledge is best seen as mostly tacit, as value in waiting ready to be realized through relationships and interactions. From that point of view, we don't contain knowledge as much as we are contained within knowledge, which lies in wait to be created in order to resolve problems and meet challenges as they are encountered. This is the difference between reading a book by an expert and having the expert in front of you to engage in discussion on real problems as they emerge.
The kind of knowledge that gets captured in databases is the kind of knowledge that gets constructed when an expert becomes engaged with the task of filling a database.

Although it only gives us the tip of the iceberg, it is very useful to capture knowledge objects as they allow us to detect where we can find more by following the network to the originator of the object. The ability to provide dynamic access to content remains essential but incomplete. You can't fill a database through the use of unique, intriguing questions, precisely because their uniqueness and infinite variety makes them unsuitable to the database. This is the logic that leads to the conclusion that the knowledge resides in the networks, which are now made readily available by technology. Collaboration and the conversations that take place in networks become essential because conversations provide the context required to be able to take action with confidence. Collaboration therefore constructs relevant and innovative knowledge, which cannot possibly be obtained through pre-defined data structures in containers.

More than just providing containers of knowledge as a resource, the tremendous power of the emerging technology resides in its ability to provide a platform for collaboration as well as the dynamic generation of relevant content shaped and validated in the fire of the action. KM REVIEW

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