

Creating a Learning Organization at i-flex - through a KM portal

Harnessing knowledge – challenge for a growing organization

The last time Samir attempted retrieving a presentation related to a client win, it was an exhausting task. Finally, after digging the required document from an obscure folder in a networked computer he found to his dismay that the document was not accurate and consistent.

Apart from the frustration of unavailable, easy to access 'decision enabling' information, employees were confronted with the hurdle of guessing the currency of it.

That was a year ago. Since the launch of *i-share*, i-flex's Knowledge Management portal on the corporate intranet, collaboration has become the mantra.

Corporations worldwide are slowly discovering that harnessing corporate knowledge is a major component for strategic growth and creating a learning organization.

For i-flex, the reasons were manifold. Post its name change from CITIL (Citicorp Information Technologies Industries Limited), the technology arm of the Citigroup behemoth, re-organizing its knowledge resources was challenging.

Scattered sources, expansion plans and a new management focus made gathering information into a common repository a Herculean task. Also being a multi-location entity with development centers spread across six different cities in India and office all over the globe, there was an urgent need to tap the abundant knowledge that existed.

Furthermore, the financial services industry demanded quicker 'time to market' needs, which can be, fuelled by easy access to decision-making information.

Getting the focus right

At i-flex, our focus was to make the knowledge initiative 'people driven' from the start. While setting our objectives, easy access to organizational knowledge, sharing best practices and converting in-house talent into assets were key goals agreed upon.

In seeking to achieve these objectives, a company wide survey among employees was conducted to gauge the expectations of a KM initiative, sharing of knowledge, awareness of KM as an important asset apart from ideas on capturing tacit information.

Inculcating a practice

i-flex's approach to inculcating a knowledge sharing habit evolved as the company grew in number and size. At CITIL, a smaller, cohesive unit - experts were accessible and available, but with the new company exceeding 2000 knowledge workers, there was a need to create a sitemap of resources and a forum for knowledge sharing.

To maximize intellectual capital, *i-share*, a dedicated KM section was launched. Housed on the corporate intranet: *i-opener* (viewed from a collaborative approach, *i-share*, the name encapsulated the purpose of the portal. The 'i' was partly a reflection of the web based initiatives and i-flex's global strategy) it hosted a spectrum of interactive platforms for employees to exchange, learn and develop themselves.

As an Ernst & Young 'Executive Perspectives on Knowledge in the Organization' Survey conducted across 431 firms showed that 87% of the respondents named knowledge as critical to

competitiveness. The respondents saw chief barriers as top management failure to signal importance (32%), lack of shared understanding of strategy or business model (30%) and organization structure (30%).

The conscious decision of using the intranet as the medium to piggyback ride the KM portal was due to the following factors.

First, the intranet was viewed as a reliable form of communication within the organization.

Existing tools and media in the market were researched and found to be inappropriate and expensive.

Also content was difficult to generate and collate across locations – therefore *i-opener* seemed the ideal media to share valuable information.

Getting the buy-in

With senior management consent, the KM portal was presented as the core focus of the intranet's business objectives and employees were requested to participate wholeheartedly. 'Starting small, growing organically' was how the team driving the initiative envisioned this tool to mature.

For many organizations, knowledge is not shared between people and teams. This was also the case in point at i-flex. Yet, by facilitating quicker and better-informed decision making, *i-share* could make processes more efficient, more effective and substantially cheaper.

The goal was to achieve synergy in the organization, reaching new levels of collaboration, consistency, efficiency and productivity, by enabling partners (employees and business alliances) leverage knowledge, tools, procedures and information. This degree of change requires championship by senior management. They were absolutely convinced that this system was critical to their success and thus willing to take the time out of their schedules to sell it to i-flexers.

An unstinted support and involvement from all levels of management, their full commitment to the KM initiative in terms of their continuous effort to break down cultural and behavioral barriers contributed to the success of *i-share*.

Collaboration is key

No knowledge management initiative is successful without the involvement of the various partners internal and external.

The KM team mapped the different business groups to ensure they were ultimately benefiting from the entire exercise. From the Training group to the Human Resources department, employees were allowed to participate and contribute through links like i-Contribute, K-Forum, Yellow Pages and Tech-Corner.

The Software Re-Use team also had a role to play in creating a central repository of usable components for software assignments for customers thereby saving costs and effort for the company.

Marketing the portal

Thinking about, communicating and sharing an organization's intellectual capital does not come naturally. This is a process, which must be purposefully encouraged, rewarded and facilitated. Making the portal easy and accessible, keeping it fresh and reliable, building loyalty into the portal usage are good enough reasons to promote it internally.

An internal communications program was run in partnership with the Corporate Communications Group. It involved a poster campaign both online and offline alongside senior management interactions with employees.

Road shows were conducted at all offices and the events were given sufficient coverage on the corporate intranet. Presentations and web casts were driven via the online media while participation was encouraged through innovative online treasure hunts, quizzes and contests. The winners of these activities were rewarded at informal gatherings, which also selected *i-share* 'champions' who would work as evangelists for the forum.

Arriving at the benefits

Although many factors within the i-flex knowledge management strategy were tangible and could be easily measured, such as central repositories, faster publishing time and streamlined costs, there are just as many intangibles that are equally critical to the initiative's success.

The hard dollar cost savings – reduced printing costs and headcount – were relatively straightforward to note, compared to evaluating the soft benefits - such as improved access and increased employee productivity.

Measuring the impact on employee and end-user satisfaction, evaluating the quality of knowledge management content and capital itself and its ability to influence behavior, for example, are factors that were linked to the overall bottom line, a difficult task for any project champion.

The road ahead

Under present day circumstances, management of intellectual capital is still in its initial stage. Any effort that attempt towards achieving the goal of a learning corporation needs a climate of trust and patience. Making employees responsible for the corporate knowledge is finely balanced based on the level of acceptance within the organization.

It is always better to know that knowledge management initiatives that begin with management directives often end there; and grass root level networks that start without management support may not go far. Taking the portal to the next level of interaction and accessibility would mean giving employees the ability to use knowledge effectively, thereby giving the organization a competitive advantage.

It is the combination of incisive intellectual capital and smart networking that will ultimately make a dynamic knowledge company.

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