

Knowledge Management Attracts Powerhouse Vendors

IBM/Lotus, Oracle, Siebel, Microsoft, SAP and PeopleSoft offer foundational technologies for knowledge management, signaling the beginning of the end for smaller vendors or a validation of the market.

In 2002, there has been a resurgence in interest in one user interface, one data repository and one vendor. Enterprises are looking to leverage previous technology investments as much as possible, which is understandable in a year when IT budgets have been tight. A complementary trend has been for enterprises to try and obtain as much technology as possible from a single vendor. The best-of-breed approach, normally associated with Type A (early adopter) enterprises and fast-moving economies, has given way to the “good enough” strategy. The underlying logic is simple: One vendor means fewer integration projects, and therefore, more control over IT spending; fewer licenses, fewer consultants and lower costs. The “powerhouse” vendors aim to capitalize on these trends by extending their offerings outside their traditional areas of functionality and expertise.

In this Spotlight, we look at the major knowledge-management-oriented offerings from the powerhouse vendors. IBM/Lotus and Microsoft have evolved from their early offerings of groupware — basic e-mail, calendaring and scheduling — to more and more (or more or less) sophisticated suites of applications that, if used together, might be said to comprise a knowledge management technology stack — what Gartner dubs the “smart enterprise suite.”

Is a Knowledge Management Project a Technology Project?

Knowledge management projects are not technology projects. Knowledge management is a management discipline, driven by business objectives whose aim is to create business value. Without the intent to meet such objectives, knowledge management technology is useless. Although knowledge management is, at its heart, a matter of business processes, organization and motivation, interest in knowledge management programs remains high in the knowledge-driven enterprises that comprise Gartner’s client base.

Knowledge management benefits tremendously from the use of IT. Much of the technology used to support knowledge management may not be unique to knowledge management or always have knowledge management as the motivation for its implementation. However, there is continuing evolution of the relevant technology base, which may make use of such technology more attractive, cost-effective and viable.

What, then, are the components of this knowledge management technology stack and how well do the powerhouse vendors support it? Without getting into the finer philosophical points of whether knowledge can truly be managed or even captured and shared, a working consensus has emerged during the last four or five years as to what might comprise a reasonable set of applications for managing intellectual assets. The purpose of those applications is to create, capture, organize, access and use the intellectual assets of an enterprise — in other words, to support the knowledge management business discipline.

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Leveraging Explicit Knowledge: Content Management, Knowledge Organization and Information Retrieval

Most enterprises focus on the management of explicit knowledge as the first step in knowledge management; some mistakenly think this is the only form of knowledge management. Many clients' questions, which they are labeling as regarding "knowledge management," are actually problems of document or content management, information organization, and retrieval or access. Explicit knowledge is not the only kind of knowledge that is valuable, of course, but it is where most enterprises need to start when looking at knowledge management programs. The unstructured information contained in content and document management systems, retrieved by search engines, organized by taxonomies and automatic indexing tools, and accessed via Web-based portal interfaces, is the focus.

Explicit knowledge also is contained in structured databases and the applications built to access them. Explicit knowledge can be re-purposed — given the correct design criteria and goals — thus creating additional value for the enterprise. Technical documentation, for example, can be printed out in manual format as a reference work. With the addition of metadata, the same documentation can be repackaged to serve as course content for an e-learning system to deliver a technical training course. Learning management systems, learning content management systems and e-learning infrastructure platforms can take advantage not only of unstructured content, such as that found in manuals, but also of structured data about employees that resides in an enterprise resource planning (ERP) system. An e-learning application — a suite that stores or access learning content, presents it to students, records their use of the material and assesses their mastery of it — is another potential element in a knowledge management technology stack that is interrelated and interdependent.

Sharing Tacit Knowledge: Collaboration, Community and Expertise Location

Collaboration is built on communication, process and shared work products, which typically are documents. There are a range of technology choices to support collaboration, from the ubiquitous e-mail, calendaring and scheduling applications, to instant messaging, chat and virtual team rooms. Collaboration enables people to participate in communities, and share interest and expertise. Community technology enables knowledge seekers access to tacit knowledge through one-to-one or one-to-many communication, or by searching community content. Vendors are focusing on technology for developing communities, managing a community and integrating community technology into portals.

Expertise location is another way of sharing tacit knowledge. Digitized content can serve as a basis for profiling human experts in the enterprise and for providing answers in a knowledge-based approach. Expertise location can also take the form of online presence detection, routing knowledge seekers to human experts who may be accessible via synchronous (instant messaging) or asynchronous (e-mail) channels.

What About the Powerhouse Vendors?

Business application vendors are increasingly recognizing that the types of data and decision making that have been associated with knowledge management also fall within their sphere of interest. Line-of-business applications have conventionally focused on transactional data and operations. Business processes — whether design, supply chain management, customer service and support, customer relationship management or ERP — also depend on knowledge. These vendors have different characteristics and strengths, coming from different backgrounds. Where they end up on the spectrum of full support for all types of knowledge management functions depends on their heritage.

Since its acquisition of a portal business, SAP is leading in developing knowledge-management-related technologies as a platform for applications; but other vendors, such as PeopleSoft and Oracle, are pursuing the same path. Siebel Systems has begun to market itself as an e-learning vendor and to position itself more broadly as a business-to-employee information or knowledge management platform. Microsoft and IBM/Lotus have had collaboration and knowledge management on their agendas, implicitly or explicitly, depending on the marketing trend of the day, since the mid-1990s.

The powerhouse vendors have realized that they are ideally positioned to integrate multiple perspectives in the enterprise — they own the transactional data, create the business intelligence, store documents, encode processes and allow information retrieval. The human resources systems store employee data that can be used for expertise location purposes or to administer e-learning programs. The powerhouse vendors have explicitly entered the knowledge management and collaboration markets.

Features

“IBM/Lotus: Reducing Emphasis on Knowledge Management” — IBM/Lotus has de-emphasized knowledge management, but its strategy remains the same. **By Simon Hayward**

“Microsoft Ambivalent About Knowledge Management” — Microsoft, Lotus’ nemesis, still does not offer a workable knowledge management solution. **By Simon Hayward**

“Europe Won’t Wait for KM From Lotus and Microsoft” — Vendors are searching out new markets, but stronger knowledge management messages are needed to capture European mind and market share. **By Regina Casonato**

“SAP Projects Strong Knowledge Management Message” — SAP has a grand vision of what the combination of structured enterprise resource planning data and unstructured information can bring to the enterprise. **By Nikos Drakos, Mark Gilbert, Debra Logan and Gene Phifer**

“Oracle Shows Potential as Knowledge Management Vendor” — Oracle is attempting to integrate the core knowledge management functionalities of collaboration, community and team support. **By Simon Hayward and Debra Logan**

“Powerhouse Vendors Take On Document Management” — SAP, Oracle, Microsoft and IBM/Lotus’ document management capabilities are compared to determine when good-enough functionality is really good enough. **By Garth Landers, Debra Logan and Karen Shegda**

“Viewing Powerhouse Vendors Through the Lenses of KM” — A complete knowledge management offering will likely never be produced by any vendor — even a powerhouse vendor. **By French Caldwell**

Recommended Reading and Related Research

“E-Learning Infrastructure: The Battle for the Marketplace” — Enterprise resource planning vendors have converged on e-learning and content management as the first logical steps in their knowledge management offerings. **By Kathy Harris, Debra Logan and Jim Lundy**