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## Working Knowledge

### Employees contribute to the enterprise as knowledge managers

By Katherine C. Adams

In the contemporary enterprise, all workers need to function as information brokers and knowledge managers. That is, employees are required to deploy the collective knowledge of an organization to achieve business goals. As a business philosophy, knowledge management (KM) maintains that the explicit and tacit knowledge of employees can transform an organization's ability to solve problems and create new knowledge.

KM is, most fundamentally, about enhancing an organization's capacity for knowledge creation. In an enterprise context, librarians, researchers, and others are functioning as bridges to essential knowledge. Playing the role of information brokers, these workers negotiate access to relevant information and help end users interpret the significance of resources. This article examines how employees can become enterprise knowledge resources and also looks at how organizations can encourage workers to contribute their expertise.

### Information Literacy

One way to act as a knowledge manager within an organization is to launch a high profile, Web-based project. Leveraging digital tools allows you to twin technical know-how with the unique demands of your business. Many analysts argue that the primary focus of KM is finding ways to connect groups of people. Information technology offers effective ways to create and support communities of practice, and in fact, most KM programs take the form of portal construction projects.

Business librarians, business intelligence (BI) researchers, and marketing analysts are emphasizing their abilities to analyze information. Digital media offers access to more data than we have time to synthesize and integrate into our lives. Noted information designer Richard Saul Wurman popularized the idea of "information anxiety," which describes the ever-expanding gap between what we understand and what we feel we should understand. This is where knowledge managers come in. Information literacy for knowledge managers consists of cultivating abilities to critically evaluate the utility and reliability of key resources.

### New Knowledge Models

According to Stephen P. Bradley and Richard L. Nolan, in *Sense and Respond*, the internal models by which businesses organize themselves are shifting. The contemporary enterprise has been transformed by accelerated business cycles, advances in digital technology and changing business models. IT and digital tools have reconfigured how organizations are run. Fundamental business processes such as data flows, procedures, and managerial responsibilities have been dramatically altered since 1992. Knowledge workers must navigate this exciting yet challenging business environment.

Companies are moving from a "make-and-sell" model of organizational design to a "sense-and-respond" framework. The make-and-sell system of business organization dates from the Industrial Revolution and centers on capital assets, mass production, and economies of scale. In the make-and-sell system, companies build standardized, "shrink wrap" products that are marketed to consumers. In contrast, a sense-and-respond framework emphasizes delivering customized products in response to customer requests. In this model, employees put themselves in the customer's shoes and strive to meet all their needs, even those desires customers aren't able to articulate.

As enterprises increasingly move into the sense-and-respond model of corporate behavior, managers and information end-users increasingly need the following:

1. Access to information at all times of day and night
2. Access to information regardless of format (research reports, database records, internal proprietary memos, electronic journals, and so on.)
3. Contextual integration of both internal and external content
4. Timely, relevant data
5. Content from trustworthy sources.

The sense-and-respond organizational model places new demands on knowledge workers. Responding to these challenges can be a complicated process because corporate information is increasingly composed of "free text" or natural language documents. Software and other IT tools help companies meet the above demands.

## **Knowledge Manager Roles**

As businesses continue to adopt a sense-and-respond model of internal organization, the role of corporate workers has expanded to include the duties of information broker, knowledge manager, and information intermediary.

One way of highlighting your role or your staffs' roles as knowledge managers is to initiate a KM project. An integrated database or knowledge repository is often the first step along the KM path. Because KM should be part of everything an organization does and part of everyone's job, the easiest way to implement a KM initiative is through networking and computing. Two examples are listed below:

- **Virtual library:** Publishing an electronic index or catalog on an intranet transforms the way information is delivered to end users. When posted to an intranet, an electronic or card catalog becomes a virtual library and allows employees to access authenticated, organized information from a variety of internal and external sources without leaving their desks. Virtual libraries integrate information across media (databases, electronic journals, Web sites, email messages, pamphlets, or books) into a seamless whole according to customized criteria. For instance, if an auction house employee wanted to locate an artist's biography, track down recently passed legislation concerning copyright, or find an internal expert on ceramics, she would only have to consult the personalized information site created on the corporate intranet.
- **Project archives and digital workspaces:** Project archives are an excellent way to encourage virtual teamwork and dialog. They are clearinghouses where communities of interest have access to current and past project information. A project archive functions as an electronic workspace that both stores information and provides a focal point for collaboration. For instance, "Best Practices" and FAQs offer the collective wisdom of the organization to each worker. Integrated databases are important because they hook people together and promote interactive problem solving.

Automating essential information services and moving them onto a Web platform frees you to perform higher-level tasks. Once workers can answer many of their own reference questions, information brokers are free to serve on teams and address the strategic use of information resources.

## **Ordering Enterprise Knowledge**

Adding structure to information by organizing and integrating the intellectual assets of a corporation is an important KM goal. Aggregating the recorded data, corporate lore, third-party information, and the tacit knowledge of employees is a daunting task. Developing a system that manages the intellectual assets of an enterprise is neither easy nor obvious. A successful portal project is all about creating knowledge structures that help connect workers and provide context for information retrieval. Only by understanding how specific types of information relate to your business goals can KM efforts achieve real business value.

The only way to ensure effective information access is through carefully planned information structures. Information structures — such as Yahoo-style subject directories and animated taxonomies — help workers find the information they need. These tools integrate data from discrete repositories and illustrate the conceptual relationships that exist within and between topics.

For example, browsing a hierarchy devoted to "Administrative Documentation" is a good way for employees to learn about organizational budgets, the location of necessary forms, formal statements of company policy, and the like. If a worker wants to research the company's organizational chart, this taxonomy would serve as a logical starting point.

Knowledge organization software can be divided into two major groups: automatic classification technology and data visualization tools. Some vendors such as Semio Corp., Mohomine Inc., and Sageware Inc. sell products that automatically funnel documents into hierarchical directories. These products produce subject directories with minimal human intervention.

On the other hand, animated taxonomies, sold by Inxight Software Inc. and TheBrain Technologies Corp., graphically represent large amounts of data. This software translates enterprise knowledge into an animated tree or Web structure.

While both automatic classification software and animated taxonomies share the goal of facilitating access to information, they employ different techniques. One important difference between classification and visualization tools is that animated taxonomies do not physically reorder content. Yahoo-style directories physically catalog documents in a virtual library or business portal. Data visualization tools, by contrast, graphically link similar content together regardless of where material is located. Animated taxonomies are navigational devices (as opposed to cataloging tools) that promote knowledge retrieval.

## **Culture and Strategy**

Intranets and portals are tools designed to spur effective communication. Corporate information is complex and needs to be examined in its totality. That is, successful portal projects depend on three variables: end users, content of the information resources, and business strategy. The information structures outlined here link users and information but this doesn't happen in a vacuum. KM projects are deployed against the backdrop of an organization's business strategy and internal culture.

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## RESOURCES

*Information Anxiety 2*, by Richard Saul Wurman. Que Publishing, 2000

**Inxight Software Inc.:** [www.inxight.com](http://www.inxight.com)

**Mohomine Inc.:** [www.mohomine.com](http://www.mohomine.com)

**Sageware Inc.:** [www.sageware.com](http://www.sageware.com)

**Semio Corp.:** [www.semio.com](http://www.semio.com)

*Sense and Respond: Capturing Value in the Network Era*, edited by Stephen P. Bradley and Richard L. Nolan, Harvard Business School Press, 1998

**TheBrain Technologies Corp.:** [www.thebrain.com](http://www.thebrain.com)

**Wurman, Richard Saul:** [www.wurman.com](http://www.wurman.com), [www.understandingusa.com](http://www.understandingusa.com)