

Glossary

Bulletin Boards

A Bulletin Board is an electronic message centre for exchanging messages on a network. Bulletin Board Systems (BBS) became the main online community in the 1980s and early 1990s before the advent of the World Wide Web (WWW). Users could dial in via modem or telnet and could read and post simple messages. Early BBS were operated through a text-based command line; however, most current versions have an interactive graphical interface. Some BBS are general but most are dedicated to a specific subject. Despite the advent of the WWW, BBS remain popular.

Champion

Product champions have been identified as playing a key role in bringing about change and innovation. The role was first identified by Schon (1963, p. 84):

“Essentially the champion must be a man willing to put himself on the line for an idea of doubtful success. He is willing to fail. But he is capable of using any and every means of informal sales and pressure in order to succeed.”

The champion is the person in an organisation who is a committed and passionate advocate of change (Ginsberg & Abrahamson, 1991) who will ‘sell’ a new technology or a project by providing the energy and enthusiasm to help it overcome organisational inertia. (See also *sponsor*.)

Collaborative Tools

Collaborative tools are software tools that allow a group of users to collaborate on a project or task. The software can have a range of functionality; for example: it can act as a central repository for documents and offer the facility to jointly work on documents - both in real time and at different times. There may be functionality to connect people, e.g., discussion forums, chat rooms. An example of a collaborative tool is Microsoft's NetMeeting. This application was developed by Microsoft Corporation to help users work collaboratively. It is incorporated into Internet Explorer (Microsoft's web browser) and supports chat sessions, whiteboard, application sharing and document sharing.

Engagement

Wenger (1998) describes engagement as a source of identity, which becomes a mode of belonging in a community. He described (p. 174) it as:

“A threefold process, which includes the conjunction of: 1) The ongoing negotiation of meaning, 2) The formation of trajectories, 3) The unfolding histories of practice. It is in the conjunction of all three processes—as they take place through each other—that engagement becomes a mode of belonging and a source of identity.”

He further explains (p. 175) the character of engagement, thus:

“... there are obvious physical limits in time and space: we can be only in one place at a time and dispose of only a finite number of hours per day. In addition, there are physiological limits to the complexity that each of us can handle, to the scope of activities we can be directly involved in, and to the number of people and artefacts with which we can sustain substantial relationships of engagement.”

Equivocality

The term equivocality refers to the existence of ambiguity, i.e., a situation where a particular stimulus is capable of having multiple, and possibly conflicting, interpretations. Because of this, in highly equivocal situations, people may not even know what questions to ask in order to begin to resolve the situation. Although equivocality and uncertainty are often used interchangeably, they are subtly different. Acquiring and processing more information can reduce uncertainty while discussions and face-to-face meetings are usually seen as the means to reduce equivocality. (See also *Media Richness*.)

Explicit Knowledge

Explicit knowledge is knowledge that is easily expressed, captured, codified, stored, and reused. It is easily transmitted as data and is therefore found in databases, books, manuals, reports, and messages.

Homophily

The theory of homophily, credited to Lazarsfeld and Merton (1954), is that human communication is most likely to occur between people who are alike (i.e., homophilous; having a common frame of reference). Homophily is the degree to which individuals share similar attributes, such as values, beliefs, occupations or education. The phrase ‘birds of a feather flock together’ is a good example of homophily (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001).

Knowledge Repositories

A repository in this context is basically a database. A number of types of information can be held and all can be loosely called Knowledge Repositories. In this book a number of examples are listed:

- 1) A database of best practice
- 2) A repository of work done in a community of software developers. If a developer produces some good work it can be put into the repository and made available to other developers in the community
- 3) In one chapter, a database of documents is termed a knowledge repository as it is used in electronic knowledge exchange
- 4) An archive of messages in an online community
- 5) A store of tools and discussions that have been used by the community members

Media Richness

Media richness theory was originally proposed by Daft and Lengel (1984). It views media choice as a rational process in which individuals match the objective characteristics of the communication medium with the content of the message. Communication media are seen as varying in their capacity to handle message complexity. High levels of message complexity are termed ‘richness’ and low levels of complexity are termed ‘leanness’. Communication media are seen as having a hierarchy of richness from face-to-face as the highest, through to telephone, electronic mail, personal written text, formal written text, formal numeric text and computerised data as the lowest. Rich messages require rich media, that is, media that are capable of communicating complexity and equivocality. Media low in richness are appropriate for resolving uncertainty

through the processing of standard, objective data that defies inconsistent interpretation.

Narration

Narration takes the form of story telling and is a key means by which CoP members share knowledge. This was shown as a central part of the transition from newcomer to old-timer in Lave and Wenger's (1991) community of non-drinking alcoholics. Orr (1997) also showed that the qualities of the stories bestowed members of his copier repair engineers with a form of legitimation and confirmed their status in and membership of the community.

People Finders

This is another term for an Expert Locator, i.e., a system set up within a community or an organisation to help people find an expert in a specific field. (See also *Yellow Pages*.)

Portal

A Portal is a website that offers access to a wide range of services (e.g., e-mail, forums, search engines, online shopping). Some of the larger search engines have made themselves into portals to try to obtain a larger audience. A portal might exist to serve a single market sector; for example a website might be set up with a lot of content but it might also serve as a gateway to other sites and services serving that particular market.

Pure-Play

This refers to interaction that is entirely online.

Routers

A router is a networking device connected to at least two networks. It forwards data packets and communicates with other routers to determine the best route between the sending computer and the receiving computer.

Skunkworks

“A skunkworks is a group of people who, in order to achieve unusual results, work on a project in a way that is outside the usual rules. A skunkworks is often a small team that assumes or is given responsibility for developing something in a short time with minimal management constraints. Typically, a skunkworks has a small number of members in order to reduce communications overhead. A skunkworks is sometimes used to spearhead

a product design that thereafter will be developed according to the usual process. A skunkworks project may be secret.”

(From SearchCIO.com http://searchcio.techtarget.com/sDefinition/0,,sid19_gci214112,00.html [July 7th, 2003])

Sponsor

A sponsor is essentially the client. The sponsor is usually a member of senior management who has overall responsibility for a project and who will work to convince other senior managers of the potential or viability of the project. (See also *Champion*.)

Tacit Knowledge

Tacit knowledge, according to Nonaka (1991, p. 98) is:

“... highly personal. It is hard to formalize and therefore, difficult to communicate to others ... Tacit knowledge is also deeply rooted in action and in an individual’s commitment to a specific context—a craft or profession, a particular technology or products market, or the activities of a work group or team. Tacit knowledge consists partly of technical skills - the kind of informal, hard-to-pin-down skills captured in the term ‘know-how’ ... tacit knowledge has an important cognitive dimension. It consists of mental models, beliefs, and perspectives so ingrained that we take them for granted and therefore cannot easily articulate them.”

An important aspect of tacit knowledge is that it is extremely difficult to articulate. In fact, there are different opinions about whether tacit knowledge can be articulated at all. Some people feel that tacit knowledge can be captured (Huang, 1997). Some feel it cannot be codified without being invalidated (Buckingham Shum, 1998) whereas others feel it cannot be captured or codified at all (Star, 1995; Chao, 1997; Leonard & Sensiper, 1998).

Threaded Discussion

Earlier discussion forums were bulletin board systems where users posted messages that could be read by other users. Threaded discussions differ from the earlier systems in that postings are stored and made visible only within the topic (or thread) to which they refer. This means that when a user wants to read the discussion about a specific topic (s)he can read all the postings in order. (See *Bulletin Boards*.)

War Stories

These are stories told based on the teller's experience and which are told to illustrate a point, perhaps as a contribution to problem solving. The teller's colleagues may learn something from the story. It may even make them think of something else, or lead them to come up with something new and innovative. It can be part of a creative process. (See also *Narration*.)

Yellow Pages

These take their name from the telephone directories with listings according to service. In terms of Knowledge Management, Yellow Pages are directories of experts within the organisation.

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