Chapter XVIII

The Knowledge Edge: Knowledge Management and Social Learning in Military Settings

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ABSTRACT

This chapter reports on the methodologies used and the findings of the research done by the Enterprise Social Learning Architectures (ESLA) Task into learning processes occurring in two diverse environments, tactical and strategic at the Australian Defence Organization (ADO). The research focused on identifying factors that enable and act as motivators for social learning. More specifically the chapter describes a number of environmental, cultural factors, processes and strategies that when positively applied, facilitate social learning and knowledge management within organizations. These factors fall into two categories: Motivators—characteristics in the organisational environment and culture that provide a context and motivation for the individuals to learn. The second category comprises Enablers—processes and strategies that if present in an enterprise, can facilitate social learning. The chapter concludes with a set of recommendations that could be implemented by managers who seek to enhance social learning, knowledge management and knowledge sharing in their organisations.

INTRODUCTION

Imagine, for a moment, asking a group of practitioners from various organisations and disciplines what they understand to be effective knowledge management. It is likely that, before too long, such a survey would turn up a considerable array of loosely accepted formalisms, personal experiences, and intuitions based on ‘gut-feeling.’ Consensus in such a group (regardless of whether it is desirable or not) would indeed be a surprising finding. Not because the true meaning of “knowledge management” resides in the minds of only a privileged few, but because the essence of what it means to ‘manage knowledge’ is difficult to ascertain, and hence comes to mean different things to different people.

In the Australia Defence Organisation (ADO), the military Executive often refer to the importance of maintaining the ‘Knowledge Edge.’ As with ‘knowledge management’ a shared understanding of the Knowledge Edge is difficult to formulate, even though it is used frequently in Defence Executive publications. What can be said, though, is that the concept of the Knowledge Edge has little to do with how ADO personnel perceive their day-to-day work, how they acquire knowledge and how they share it with others. Our use of the term represents its acknowledged shortcomings, rather than its benign acceptance.

We do know, however, that knowledge exists in the minds of individuals and is generated and shaped through interaction with others. In an organisational setting, knowledge management must, at the very least, be about how knowledge is acquired, constructed, transferred, and otherwise shared with other members of the organisation, in a way that seeks to achieve the organisation’s objectives. Put another way, knowledge management seeks to harness the power of individuals by supporting them with information technologies and other tools, with the broad aim of enhancing the learning capability of individuals, groups, and in turn, organisations.

The research reported in this chapter provides a deeper understanding of the ways in which day-to-day work activities have a direct impact on an organisation’s ability to maintain the knowledge advantage. With such an understanding workers will be better able to see and therefore modify their day-to-day activities to help their organisations achieve and maintain the competitive edge.

Researchers interested in knowledge management are increasingly employing qualitative methods, specifically ethnography, to understand the interplay of social, organisational, and information systems (Myers, 1999). This chapter reports on the use of such a methodology by the Enterprise Social Learning Architectures (ESLA) team of the Defence Science and Technology Organisation in Australia. Broadly speaking, the ESLA task is a three-year research study investigating social learning within the Australian Defence Organisation (ADO). Social learning is defined as learning occurring within a group, an organisation, or any cultural cluster and includes the procedures by which knowledge and practice are transmitted across posting cycles, across different work situations, and across time; and the procedures that facilitate ‘generative learning,’ that is learning that enhances the enterprise’s ability to adjust to dynamic and unexpected situations and to react creatively to them.
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