Chapter I

Memory, Learning, and Management: Introducing Basic Knowledge Concepts

Abstract

The importance of mobilising corporate knowledge for organisational success has been widely recognised. Accordingly, the aim of this first chapter of the current volume is to provide an overall introduction to the topic and set the scene for the remaining chapters of the book. In particular, the chapter examines current understanding of the concept of corporate memory, its relationship to organisational learning, and the potential role of knowledge management initiatives in mobilising corporate memory. The challenge is to enhance a firm’s learning capability and thus contribute to its competitiveness.
Introduction

The world economy is currently experiencing a major transition from industrial to knowledge-based economy. In the emerging new economy, knowledge, rather than financial capital, land, or labour, is seen as the main source of competitive advantage of a business organisation (Drucker, 1993; Stewart, 1997). In such an economy, knowledge resources of an organisation not only enable its products and services to be provided, but knowledge itself is for sale as a product, thus ensuring that the organisation has a viable economic life within industry and market context.

The knowledge-based perspective of the firm suggests that an organisation’s knowledge resources can predict its performance in a dynamic competitive environment. Currently, knowledge intensive organisations are at the forefront of organisational performance (Teleos, 2003). However, it is important to note that the basis for achieving competitive advantage from knowledge-based assets is not so much the existence of knowledge per se, but rather the organisation’s ability to effectively apply the existing knowledge to create new knowledge and to take action.

To capitalise on knowledge and maintain competitive advantage, organisations need to mobilise the collective assemblage of all intelligences (referred to as corporate memory) that can contribute towards building a shared vision, renewal process, and direction for the organisation (Liebowitz, 2000). Yet, recent surveys show that most organizations either suffer setbacks from losing key knowledge through employee departures, or believe that much of their needed knowledge exists inside the organisation, but find problematic identifying it, finding it, and leveraging it (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). The often-quoted phrase “if only we knew what we know” catches the regret for missed opportunities to profit and improve from knowledge.

The knowledge problem framework (Sambamurthy & Subramani, 2005) suggests that knowledge problems in organisations can be viewed as a combination of the problems of knowledge coordination, knowledge transfer and knowledge reuse. These knowledge problems reflect the difficulty of identifying and locating knowledge sources required to solve specific problems, the complexity of transferring or obtaining the knowledge required to solve specific problems, and the difficulty of ensuring the application of preexisting knowledge rather than the development of new knowledge when advisable. Such knowledge problems have led to systematic attempts to improve the management of organisational knowledge. However, harnessing knowledge for corporate advantage is not an easy task and many knowledge management initiatives fail. The focus of this book is on identifying those knowledge management solutions that make a real difference to the performance in the context of decision making.

The main objective of this introductory chapter is to explore the concept of corporate memory and present some preliminary thoughts on how it should be managed to maximally contribute to the competitiveness of an organization. First, the chapter
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