Chapter V

Groupware:
Enabling Knowledge Sharing
Across Time and Space

Abstract

This chapter reports on usage and effectiveness of various technologies available for knowledge sharing among employees in a global organisation. Clearly, different types of technologies were preferred in different application contexts. E-mail was preferred in different-time-same-place and different-time-different-place, presentation software in same-time-same-place, and voice conferencing in same-time-different-place contexts. Jointly, technologies used in same-time contexts were perceived as more effective than those in different-time contexts irrespective of place.
A great deal of knowledge within organisations resides in the minds of its employees. To capitalise on individual knowledge, organisations need to turn it into organisational knowledge through “sharing.” Nonaka’s (1998) SECI model describes organisational knowledge development as a dynamic process involving a continual interplay between explicit and tacit dimensions of knowledge through processes of socialisation, externalisation, combination, and internalisation. The model identifies socialisation and externalisation as modes that enable tacit and explicit knowledge to be transferred from one individual or group to another within the organisation. These processes correspond to Hansen, Nohria, and Tierney’s (1999) personalisation (person-to-person) and codification (person-to-document) strategies for managing knowledge. The concept is also found in many other process-orientated knowledge management frameworks under different names including social learning, knowledge sharing, and knowledge transfer (Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

The assumption is that personalisation (or socialisation) enables tacit knowledge to be transferred between individuals and groups through shared experience, space, and time. Examples include spending time working together or in social meetings. With respect to codification (or externalisation), the notion is that it allows wider dissemination of explicit knowledge within the organisation through shared documents and files. Generally, knowledge sharing is considered as one of the most challenging processes for a knowledge-based enterprise due to employees’ possible reluctance to share what they know. It is suggested that in its absence, the gap between individual and organisational knowledge can widen. It is also noted that knowledge sharing is the most susceptible process to the effects of various influencing factors (Ford & Chan, 2003). However, there is a major disagreement within the knowledge management research community regarding the nature and relative importance of various sociotechnological factors to knowledge sharing (Snowden, 2003; Swan, 2003). The focus of this chapter is on technology.

Handzic’s (2003) integrated framework places technology among major enablers and facilitators of knowledge processes and thus, sharing. The framework further suggests that context impacts the choice and implementation of knowledge sharing technologies. The contingency perspective warns that no one technology is best under all circumstances (Handzic & Hasan, 2003). Taking the view that technology does have a contingent role to play in knowledge sharing; the main objective of this paper is to explore which technologies are being most used to share knowledge in organisations and how effective they are in different application contexts. In the global economy, of particular interest are different place and time contexts.
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