Designing OMIS-Based Collaboration for Learning Organizations

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INTRODUCTION

Today, the view that knowledge is a valuable organizational resource has become widely recognized and accepted in the business community. This is largely due to the emergence of the knowledge-based economy (OECD, 1996), characterized by a highly competitive and turbulent business environment. One consequence is the increase in organizations’ efforts to deliberately manage knowledge. Organizations are realizing that their competitive edge is mostly the intellectual capital (brainpower) (Stewart, 1997) of their employees, and they are particularly interested in harnessing their human resources in order to stay ahead of the pack, through their soaring attention on specific aspects of knowledge management (De Hoog, van Heijst, van der Spek et al., 1999), which deals with the conceptualization, review, consolidation, and action phrases of creating, securing, combining, coordinating, and retrieving knowledge. Undeniably, with Web-based and intranet technologies (Dunn & Varano, 1999), the connectivity and possible sharing of organizational knowledge (bits and pieces of individual know-how scattered throughout the organization) are greatly enabled to cultivate the knowledge culture of the organization. In a knowledge-creating organization (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995), employees are expected to continually improve and invent new methods to deal with unexpected difficulties, and to solve immediate problems and share these innovations with other employees through some effective communication channels or knowledge-transfer mechanisms. In fact, complete organizational knowledge is created only when individuals keep modifying their knowledge through interactions with other organizational members. The challenge that organizations now face is how to devise suitable information system (IS) support (Vat, 2000, 2002a, 2002b) to turn the scattered, diverse knowledge of their people into well-documented knowledge assets ready for deposit and reuse to benefit the whole organization. This article presents some learning organization perspectives of employee-based collaboration through the design of a specific IS support called the organizational memory information system—hence, the term OMIS.

THE BACKGROUND OF A LEARNING ORGANIZATION

The concept of the learning organization took seed several decades ago and gained major recognition with the incredible success of Peter Senge’s 1990 book, The Fifth Discipline. Senge describes a learning organization as a place where people continually expand their capacity to create the results they truly desire, where new and expansive patterns of thinking are nurtured, where collective aspiration is set free, and where people are continually learning how to learn together. At the core of the learning organization are five essential learning disciplines—personal mastery, mental models, shared vision, team learning, and systems thinking—that may be briefly described as follows. Personal mastery has to do with individual learning and can be seen as the basic building block through the actualization of which the learning organization is typically constructed. Mental models are about how individuals reflect on their own knowledge, using such models to improve the internal understanding of an organization’s functions and processes. Shared vision implies a sense of group commitment to a matrix of organizational goals, while team learning describes a sharing and utilization of knowledge involving collective thinking skills. The purpose of systems thinking is to understand relationships and interrelationships, as well as the context and the forces that affect the behavior of a system or organization. For the early half of the 1990s, the idea of learning organization had been criticized as the mere reincarnation of earlier ideologies, such as organization development and total quality management (Rasmussen, 1997). Nonetheless, as more entities adopt the practices underlying the learning organization, it appears that the learning organization concept is passing from buzzword status to a meaningful expression of best organizational practices. Nowadays, many organizations that are engaged in constantly revamping and retooling themselves may be seen as reaching for that ideal goal of learning organizations. In fact, in this modern age of information technology and swift change, learning has become an integral part of the work of an organization run along principles intended to encourage constant reshaping and