The Role of Stories and Simulations in the Lessons Learned Process

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ABSTRACT

One of the major challenges of any organizational lessons learned system is how to ensure that this content is actually implemented: that employees can find and learn from them. While we are guided by a number of theories on how newly acquired knowledge can become institutionalized such that it becomes “the way things are done,” there is very little theory or evidence-based practice to guide us on specific implementation strategies. This paper presents specific strategies that were used to ensure that lessons learned became embedded in the organization through digital storytelling and simulation environments. Organizational stories are often very well suited to capturing and conveying complex tacit knowledge. The role of information and communication technologies such as digital libraries will be discussed and recommendation on how to best ensure individuals, groups and the organization itself can learn and continuously improve through the institutionalization of digital storytelling and simulation.

KEYWORDS
Digital Library, Lessons Learned, Organizational Learning, Organizational Memory, Simulation, Storytelling

INTRODUCTION

Organizational learning is a process that occurs at three levels: individuals, groups or teams, and the organization itself. The process of organizational learning is mediated by some form of organizational or corporate memory: a persistent system that may be comprised of technology, people and old-fashioned paper archives. Individuals can learn by accessing this memory, either on their own or as part of a corporate training program. Lessons learned are the key objectives or content to be integrated.

Most lessons learned are documents that are meant to be read. Additional refinements would include annotations, metadata indicating when, where and how to implement this lesson as well as pointers to additional resources (references and people knowledgeable about the event, the solution, the technique and so on). These refinements apply to best practices in their entirety as best practices are successful outcomes whereas lessons learned document failed outcomes.

In many organizations, learning occurs through a social or group setting in addition to one-to-one tutoring or mentoring. The focus of this paper is group learning through organizational storytelling using simulations. Digital and oral stories have long proven their worth in teaching very complex knowledge firmly anchored in a realistic context. Organizational storytelling is a potentially strong means to ensure that lessons are learned by a group of employees.
ORGANIZATIONAL STORIES

Burghausen and Balmer (2014) developed a conceptual framework called “Repertoires of the Corporate Past” which serves as a good framework upon which to situate organizational stories. Their objective was to formulate a more consistent way to understand and use corporate history, or what we refer to as the corporate memory. The mere existence of different terms and the lack of a consensus on what to call organizational learning components illustrates that this field is still an emerging one. To this end, the authors propose the following seven levels or means of referring to organizational history:

1. Corporate past
2. Corporate memory
3. Corporate history
4. Corporate tradition
5. Corporate nostalgia
6. Corporate provenance
7. Corporate heritage

Corporate past is the broader, more all-encompassing term that refers to any past event that occurred in the history of that particular organization: “all that ever happened.” Corporate memory serves as a bridge between the past and the corporate history, tradition and nostalgia. They are all retrospective ways of looking at, analyzing and learning from what happened in the past. A retrospective perspective means we must rely on traceable artifacts such as documents, objects, policies as well as orally transmitted anecdotes – stories. A corporate memory is defined as: the remembered and forgotten past of a company – or, “all that is known.” Corporate memory is necessarily an imperfect subset of the corporate past. Stories then are “socially constructed forms of an individually embodied corporate past ...that are collectively shared, communicated and enacted” (p. 11). Corporate history is the narrated and storied past, or “all that is told” since organizational memory, much like human memory, is necessarily selective. Corporate tradition is what we also refer to as organizational culture: the enacted or embodied past, or “all that is done.” Corporate nostalgia contains the collective values and perceptions or, “all that is felt” about the company. Corporate provenance refers to the origins that situate the past or, “all that is rooted” and corporate heritage refers to those aspects of the past that are still preserved as they are still worthwhile, or “all that is (still) relevant.”

Organizational stories are thus those past events that have been deemed worthy to elicit organizational learning. They have been selected, documented and “packaged” to be communicated. Employees discover and rediscover them but also add to them, revise them, update them as they learn from the past.

Organizational stories are defined by Swap et. al (2001) as a detailed narrative of past management actions, employee interactions, or other intra- or extra-organizational events that are usually communicated informally within the organization. Stories have been part of the human existence since before we could write, as they formed oral histories that we passed on through generations (Gill, 2001). Stories are part of the cultural artifacts that we produce during the course of our lives. These artifacts are studied in ethnographic research in order to better understand the tribe under study. “Corporate anthropologists” conduct similar research to better understand corporate “tribes” or organizational culture has (Snowden, 2003). Most stories serve a learning purpose – what to do, what not to do, the consequences (often negative) of actions and decisions. In short, the moral of the story creates a lesson to be learned.

Denning (2005; 2000) had an epiphany when he realized that organizational storytelling could serve the same purpose – namely, to catalyze learning. Learning could be triggered at the individual, group and organizational levels. Powerful stories would evoke a change in attitude, perspective, foster new understanding and, ideally, lead to action. Denning termed these “springboard stories” as they...
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