Chapter III

What is Soft Knowledge?

In order to further inform the notion of soft knowledge, in this chapter we will explore three areas of literature with different views of how work is supported by knowledge: Distributed Cognition, Common Ground, and Communities of Practice. The different views show, to a greater or lesser degree, that the capture-codify-store approach is probably the wrong metaphor. The exploration of these views also indicates that the simple soft-hard distinction is not as simple as it appears.

INTRODUCTION

So far we have seen that organisations have lost knowledge through the pressures of downsizing and outsourcing and are having to share knowledge as a result of globalisation; that is, they are having to collaborate with other organisations, often in other locations, or they are having to operate in other locations themselves with the result that their staff have to operate in a distributed environment. We have also seen that KM has not been totally successful in helping organisations manage their knowledge, with the result that there is a shift in views of knowledge from knowledge as an object that can be
captured to recognising that there is some knowledge that cannot be captured. KM tends to view these as opposites, but we have also noted a shift in perspectives — away from representationism and more to constructionism. We have used the terms “hard” and “soft” knowledge to try to simplify the different views of knowledge. We can regard the management of hard knowledge as being the result of a representationist view. This is well established. It is soft knowledge that poses the challenge to KM, and therefore, in this chapter, we will explore and refine the notion of soft knowledge in order to ascertain whether it really does map to a constructionist view. We will undertake this exploration by exploring three different views of how work is supported by knowledge:

- Distributed Cognition;
- Common Ground; and
- Communities of Practice.

**DISTRIBUTED COGNITION**

The capture/codify/store approach suggests that knowledge relevant to work can be externalised, made explicit, and embedded in representations that are unproblematically storable by others. A good example of such knowledge is an encyclopaedia. Recent work in the field of Distributed Cognition (DC) has analyzed work practice from the perspective of the way information is represented and propagated around a network of people and technology and shows the important way in which physical artefacts come to embody knowledge relevant to the work practice.

Distributed Cognition is a theoretical framework which has been developed by Hutchins, (1990, 1995a, 1995b) and colleagues. Its aim is to explain cognitive activities as being embedded in the work settings where they occur. Rather than seeing the individual as the unit of analysis it takes “a culturally constituted functional group” (Hutchins & Klausen, 1991), because, generally, most cognitive work is not done in an individual’s head but is spread out between people and across artefacts and time (Halverson, 1994). The importance placed on enculturation indicates that this may be a view that can help refine the notion of soft knowledge.

Hutchins (1995a) points out that DC is to be found in all collaborative work and therefore is of use to the field of Computer-Supported Co-operative
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