Chapter IV

Corporate Memories: Tombs or Wellsprings of Knowledge?

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Abstract

This paper explores the nature of corporate memories in enhancing individual working knowledge and performance in a decision-making context. Our findings from a series of experiments indicate that people tended to use effectively up to two-thirds of the encoded knowledge, missing at least one-third of its maximum potential. Our findings also indicate that the effectiveness of knowledge repositories was highly contingent upon quantity, quality and diversity of their knowledge content. Finally, our study suggests that individuals can potentially benefit from additional knowledge management initiatives such as analytical and procedural knowledge, learning histories, guidance or interactive social environments. Future research may look at the impact of these initiatives independently, or at the possibility of a synergy synergistic effect when combined and integrated.
Human society is experiencing a major transformation from an industry-based society to a knowledge-based society. With this transition comes a growing recognition among researchers and practitioners alike for the need to better understand the value of knowledge, what knowledge is, and how it should be managed. In general, the knowledge management literature indicates a widespread recognition of the importance of knowledge with respect to the struggle for economic success (Devlin, 1999; Drucker, 1993; Stewart, 1997), but little shared understanding of the construct itself (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Devlin, 1999; Grayson & Dell, 1998). There are also differences among researchers in what constitutes useful knowledge and the ways in which it is created. A recent review of the knowledge management literature (Baxter & Chua, 1999) identifies two major strategies: codification and personalisation. The proponents of codification show a central preoccupation with organisational databases and explicit knowledge. On the other hand, proponents of personalisation seem to be more interested in tacit knowledge sharing.

As organisations become more knowledge-based their success will depend on how successfully knowledge workers are applying knowledge productively and efficiently. The central task of those concerned with organisational knowledge management is to determine ways to better cultivate, nurture and exploit knowledge at different levels and in different contexts. Knowledge management is seen as central to process and product improvement, to executive decision making, and to organisational adaptation and renewal (Earl, 2001). This opens up new opportunities for research and practice in behavioural decision making.

A knowledge management systems framework (Hahn & Subramani, 2000) suggests that the availability of a KM system such as codified repository should lead to an increase in individual knowledge and result in improved performance. Other frameworks (e.g., Handzic, 2003) propose that KM technology should have an enabling or facilitating effect on managing knowledge processes. Reliable empirical evidence to support these propositions is largely missing (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). The existing KM research is mainly limited to anecdotal stories and descriptive case studies. Therefore, it is necessary to recognise the importance and the need for better understanding of this issue. The main purpose of this chapter is to provide a deeper insight into potential and limitations of codified repositories of business artefacts in enhancing individual working knowledge and performance in the context of decision making.

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