Chapter XVI

Success Factors in Leveraging the Corporate Information and Knowledge Resource Through Intranets

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The chapter presents the empirical findings of two large organizations’ attempts at competitively leveraging the knowledge and information sharing capabilities of intranets. The work sought to identify the organization and management requirements that are critical to the realization of business benefits of intranet investments. The qualitative analysis suggests that intranets do provide a communications infrastructure that enables communities to exploit their information and knowledge resources for improved business performance provided a number of enabling changes is implemented. Next to the provision of continual user training, the user community must compile the business case, appoint the content manager, and negotiate guidelines for use. Unless these organizational and management changes constitute an integral part of the implementation strategy, the intranet will fail to deliver its investment objectives.

One of the most visible information systems (IS) and information technology (IT) trends of the nineties has been the rapid proliferation of intranet applications in organizations both in the public and private sector. After the downsizing experience of the recent decade, organizations are advised to recognize the growing significance of global information and knowledge sharing to achieving more with fewer resources (Taylor, 1997). In the emerging global economy, organizations need to exploit their information and knowledge resources in supporting individuals and teams to work together effectively across spatial and geographic boundaries. Effective communications, however, bear importantly on a community’s capability to share knowledge, ideas and experiences (Bohlin, Shand & Whitehead, 1997). Information and knowledge sharing is a complex process that poses significant challenges to the design of the communications infrastruc-

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ture and process, especially across spatial boundaries. Among the existing communications technologies, intranets are seen to provide a technological platform capable of providing a solution to this challenge (Wachter & Gupta, 1997).

Because of the crucial role of communications in information and knowledge sharing, the study of the capabilities of intranets in supporting these processes has to build on a conceptual framework that accommodates theories of communications, technologies, and information and knowledge sharing. We consulted the relevant IT-enabled communications, the knowledge sharing, and the business benefits literature of IS/IT investments to frame an analysis of the organization and management conditions that need to be implemented in order to leverage intranet-based knowledge sharing. In the following section, we present a synthesis of that body of knowledge and introduce the research framework we constructed to guide our research.

INTRANET-BASED INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE RESOURCE SHARING: A LITERATURE REVIEW

By convention, we start the presentation of the theoretical framework by briefly defining the core concepts employed in this research. The term ‘intranet’ is used to describe a private computer network that extends Internet standards and protocols to the organization to enable its members to communicate and collaborate independently of spatial and temporal boundaries (Greer, 1998). Compared with internets and extranets, the intranet provides a closed communications infrastructure, access to which is exclusive to the members of the organization. Knowledge management and knowledge sharing are distinct because they relate both empirically and conceptually to different aspects of the knowledge resource. We draw on existing definitions of knowledge management in relating it to “the process of identifying, capturing, and leveraging knowledge to help the company compete” (O’Dell & Grayson, 1998). Knowledge sharing, in contrast, is defined in this paper as the transfer and active exchange of knowledge amongst an organizational community (Nonaka, 1991).

Technologies for Knowledge-Sharing

Reviewing the intranet literature we found the majority of the work is written for technical designers and network managers (cf. Greenberg & Lakeland, 1998; for a World Wide Web-published reference resource cf. Kotlas, 1998). Expert reports that argue the revolutionizing effects of the intranet technology lack any theoretical and empirical foundations (Scott, 1998). In light of the scarcity of inquiries into the effectiveness gains of intranet applications in organizations, we approached the general communications technology literature with the aim of building our study upon theories of effectiveness developed there. The body of literature on communication technologies is voluminous. Our account of that literature is therefore highly selective, but two aspects appeared particularly relevant: views of effectiveness in traditional and in IT-enabled communications environments in organizations.

Communications theory that views communication as a social process focuses on the user of the technology and the social context of use (cf. Fulk, Schmitz & Ryu, 1995; Poole
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