



ISRC Notes – April 1999

Working Knowledge & Knowledge Work: The abiding
roles of people, process and technology
Based on a Presentation by Dr. Thomas H. Davenport

The largest group of attendees this year heard two complementary presentations by Dr. Tom Davenport, Professor in the MIS Department at Boston University and Director of the Andersen Consulting Institute for Strategic Change. His featured presentation addressed the current status of progress in the field of knowledge management along with strategies for advancing the role of knowledge management within the organization. (According to Dr. Davenport, Houston is the “best practices” in knowledge management activities.) His second presentation was a natural follow-on discussion dealing with managing attention.

Introduction and Overview

In Tom Davenport’s mind knowledge management is not a fad and it is most certainly not a dead issue. It is a timeless concept that has been misrepresented and misunderstood. Many organizations are now recognizing the value of managing the knowledge database within the company and the need to store, categorize and retrieve that knowledge. For example, Coca-Cola now has a Chief Learning Officer. We need to view knowledge management as a process and start with the more visible, higher return applications before advancing into the areas more difficult to measure.

Where are We Now?

Imaging and document management are not knowledge management; but it does exemplify the problem of properly defining for Management the benefits and uses of a knowledge management system. Right now there is a technology push through the Internet and applications such as Lotus Notes and a business pull due to downsizing and globalization that drive the effort toward developing systems to protect the organization’s knowledge base. Efforts to date have resulted in many small, function-specific projects that tend to be successful but not earth shaking. They are not transformational in nature.

According to Tom, there has been too much haggling over definitions, contrasts between learning and knowledge, and one size fits all applications. He also does not support the notion of putting some sort of value on knowledge and putting it on the balance sheet. In order to advance knowledge management concepts we need a place to get started. A domain with clear business value and a business problem where we can obtain quick results. Then, to advance, we need top management support and a strategy for developing partnerships across knowledge functions.

As users mature every business process, and function becomes knowledge-intensive. We need to move from knowledge inventory building to knowledge supply



chain management. To do this, it is important to focus on the process of knowledge management and dissemination rather than on simply building the stock of knowledge.

People as a Part of the Knowledge Process

Knowledge works through organizational networks. People with common cultures and interests form “clubs” and these clubs have expeditors/facilitators and their own "book of knowledge". Using these clubs and turning them into virtual networks will advance the knowledge management capabilities of the organization. These concepts can be applied on a global basis and do in turn advance the interests of the clubs. The focus should be on the knowledge leaders.

The Knowledge Process

The knowledge process is a self-perpetuating circle of Create, Capture/Store, Refine, Distribute, Use, and Monitor. Participation is the key to improving the knowledge process. This process must be linked with the other business processes that are the knowledge supply chain must integrate with the value chain of the business. Issues of ownership and control of knowledge can become significant barriers to this integration.

Technology as a Part of the Knowledge Process

The basic set of knowledge tools and infrastructure are already in place for most organizations. PCs on every desk and LANs in every office, common applications and dedicated databases are the basic infrastructures needed. Web access, search engines, and discussion forums or document management applications form the basic tools. The advanced technologies are being created by various vendors at an impressive rate. These tools are good for turning data into knowledge and work best in networked environments.

Strategies for Developing a Knowledge Management Environment

According to Tom Davenport, you should begin with a domain that has a business value. Initially all doors should be left open to capture maximum content. Then some structure should evolve to more systematically manage KM efforts. This implies the need for metaknowledge (data about data), organizing taxonomies, and sophisticated search capabilities.

Once the knowledge management engines are operating, the business value of the improvements must be measured and reported in order to sustain top management interest and support. These measures can be even more difficult than the measurements we have utilized for years to justify projects in other areas. Normally, you have to first attempt to



measure the activity –hits, users, items; then measure the business process that the process was designed to help –e.g., better customer service or reduced time on hold. Then, finally you have to translate the measures into explicit business value. Initially delivering short-term value may prove a more effective way to win support than focusing on long-term applications that may show limited initial payoffs.

Managing Attention

A successful program of KM leads to the need to focus on attention management. Today in organizations people are bombarded with information and managing attention becomes a major concern. Tom defined attention as:

1. Doing effective business in an information and knowledge storm
2. Generating focused mental engagement to key business issues
3. Creating a basis for behavior

It is important to know how to capture and hold someone's attention when they are surrounded by massive amounts of knowledge. It is especially difficult when you consider that attention is invisible (you can't tell that you have someone's attention or not) and easily diverted. Attention is influenced biologically and is strongly correlated with time. The average US manager sends or receives 190 messages per day; voice, fax, email, paper. Attention is zero sum. Attention spent in one direction is attention not spent in another direction.

The symptoms of attention deficit outlined by Dr. Davenport are:

- Unable to turn data into knowledge
- Trying in vain to multi-task
- Trying to fake attention through mass automation
- Inability to focus
- Feeling stress or guilt
- Wasting lots of money
- Having little slack time left over for really important matters

The economics of attention are: (1) if attention is scarce it becomes valuable, (2) if you want someone's attention you have to offer something in exchange, and (3) if you have someone's attention, you can usually get more.

Summary

Data becomes information when it is useful and information becomes knowledge when it can be used to create new information. The knowledge resources of an organization need the same controls and protections afforded other company assets. Knowledge is too easily lost when a knowledge worker is downsized or leaves the organization. Replacing lost knowledge is a waste of Company resources. But effective



knowledge management brings with it a cost. Information overload and the resulting lack of attention can be almost as bad. Good knowledge management must also include good attention management.

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Comprehensive website on information about knowledge management

