The Human Element:
Knowledge Management's Secret Ingredient

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Capturing individual knowledge so that it can be understood and applied by an entire organization is a key objective of most knowledge management (KM) initiatives. As a result, many tools and architectures outline a specific process or technology for organizing large quantities of knowledge so that it can be indexed and disseminated back to its audience. Usually, a logical-order category scheme that enables more effective search functionality is implemented to accomplish this. Marketing messages from many content management and portal software companies illustrate this idea. Some companies tend to paint an elegant, exaggerated, and over-simplified picture of the benefits of implementing their software. They claim that their software can capture an entire enterprise's documents and e-mail messages quickly and then, simply by applying a common indexing scheme and search functionality, enable **anyone** to find **anything** quickly. While there certainly is value in implementing robust search and index functionality across large document volumes, can we truly say that this type of implementation alone enables us to manage and leverage intellectual capital?

A KM initiative that overemphasizes aggregation and indexing can overlook the human side of KM. Central to understanding knowledge in human terms is the idea that the first step in implementing KM, is to identify knowledge that is truly **sharable** by people. Sharable knowledge—knowledge that people can reuse and apply to novel situations—is not contained wholly in the documents and e-mail messages of an organization. In fact, unless a stand-alone document is specifically produced to serve a knowledge-sharing purpose, it typically represents only part of the understanding required to apply that document to a business problem. For example, stand-alone documents often provide only clues about how a colleague tackled a business problem. Simply providing access to documents through a KM system creates an experience much like a typical archeological exhibit in a museum where ancient artifacts are displayed with basic information about their age and composition, leaving visitors to rely on their imaginations to draw conclusions about the application and significance of the artifacts.

This strategy leads to KM applications that resemble "warehouses" or "repositories," where a heavy burden is placed on the end user both to find relevant expertise and to determine how it should be applied. To minimize this impact on productivity and to maximize the return on KM investment, KM applications must make an effort to capture the *context,* not just the artifacts (documents, charts, videos, etc.) of business. To achieve this, KM as a discipline must shift its emphasis from aggregating artifacts to cultivating *expertise*. Currently, this shift in emphasis is compromised by a few key misconceptions about the *implementation* of KM. By examining these misconceptions and discussing strategies that *humanize* how knowledge is represented, organizations can realize their knowledge management objectives to improve productivity, increase organizational competency, and foster innovative thinking.

Misconception #1: If you maximize the number of accessible business artifacts (documents, charts, reports, etc.), you increase the chances of individuals locating precisely what they need to solve business problems.

To believe this, you also must believe the following:

- A large portion of easily obtainable business artifacts have applicability to new business situations.
- Search technology helps people locate relevant information quickly from large repositories.

Generally, as the size of a document repository increases, the number of irrelevant and out-of-date documents also increases. This can be attributed to a simple resource allocation issue: as target size for a document repository increases, resources (people, time, and dollars) allocated for filtering out useless documents become overextended. Over time, the need for sophisticated search technology to compensate increases, which can further decrease resources allocated to filtering. Eventually, these forces conspire to create a KM system consisting of a single search text box that accesses every document in the company. Every organization has lots of useless documents; providing easy access to them carries a tremendous cost that, once recognized, is difficult for most businesses to justify.

Search technology is not utopian. It often requires considerable effort and trial-and-error for locating relevant items. Technology itself is not always the main problem. Often, there is a navigational abyss between people and the items that they are seeking. Employees trying to solve business problems do not always know how to search effectively to locate documents that best satisfy their specific needs (e.g., when needing "help with my quarterly report" or locating "Julie Robinson's financial summary for the Sales and Marketing division").

Individuals must struggle with simple text keyword searches. As a knowledge repository grows, these searches are likely to yield an ever-increasing number of "hits." Frustration sets in from having to sift through hundreds of results. For example, when a large consumer bank conducted a test of search functionality for an online document repository, results typically yielded between 100–900 hits.

Most of us do not have the patience to narrow our search criteria or the time to review 900 documents to locate the desired item.

Humanizing Strategy #1: Capture the top 20% of your available intellectual capital to make relevant expertise easier to find.

Establish the initial criteria and a virtual team of business experts to act as knowledge reviewers for your organization. This team can then use the criteria and their business expertise, to pinpoint the artifacts that provide the most value to the business—the top 20%. This ongoing should analyze new content continuously, as well as purge or modify outdated or misrepresentative examples. Keep in mind that this should not be a top-down approach. For example, the review team should work with leading field experts to solicit the best sample artifacts through an established peer-review process. Time and available resources both play a critical role in determining the best strategy. In addition, technology should be leveraged where possible to **filter** artifacts. A content management application often provides functionality that determines frequently used resources, pages, etc. and then organizes these resources according to their value. This helps eliminate "knowledge noise" and provides more targeted knowledge to an organization.

Misconception #2: If you provide a portal or KM application with submission functionality, it will "maintain itself."

To believe this, you also must believe the following:

- People naturally will devote their time to contribute to a knowledge repository.
- People know the difference between content that should and should not be shared.
- Everything that people contribute is valuable.

The "self-servicing" KM portal is a well-intended theory. However, it does not take into account people's actual work habits. It is very difficult for most people to find time to reflect upon what they know, especially for those who are the top performers in an organization (the ones whose knowledge is most desirable). In fact, top performers usually perceive their own knowledge as the basis for their top performance. It is their *personal competitive advantage*. Why should they share?

Additionally, prolific knowledge contribution can lead to a repository dominated by a few individuals with a strong commitment to KM. Over time, a repository dominated by a few contributors can discourage the participation of the majority of an organization's experts who may eventually perceive the KM application as not being fully representative of the business.

Humanizing Strategy #2: Treat experts like experts.

You want experts to contribute to your KM initiative because they hold that elusive top 20% of knowledge that is truly valuable to the rest of the organization. Usually, experts are an organization's top performers. Not having to think hard about how to do something is precisely what differentiates these people from the rest of the organization. With rare exceptions, it is very difficult for experts to explain their expertise to others. To capture this expertise initially takes in-depth, one-on-one interviews. While this process demands commitment and patience, the resulting content however, will be rich in the detail that makes it possible for others to understand, transfer, and apply the mindset of the expert. Consider the benefits realized from every person in an organization understanding how the best people perform key business activities. As a KM system matures, an organization can rely on standard methods of representing expertise and can then capture much of this content through direct voluntary contributions.

KM systems do not eliminate entirely the need for personal dialog with experts. Experts also need to be asked about their expertise; it serves as an invitation to share. There is a powerful emotion associated with being asked for one's opinion. Experts often need this for validation; they may be unaware that they are considered experts because no one has ever asked them to contribute what they know to the business. By directly soliciting expertise, your organization wins in two important ways:

- Reinvesting expertise gained from individual experience back into your business.
- Experts become more aware of their role (as experts) and are more likely to contribute voluntarily through formal KM channels or informally through day-to-day interaction with colleagues.

Financial incentives and a culture that supports knowledge sharing can certainly help build momentum behind a KM initiative, but neither compares to the immediate value of working individually with your experts to capture what they know.

Misconception #3: If you generalize your expertise, then it will apply to a wide audience.

To believe this, you also must believe the following:

- People believe everything they read.
- Nuance and contextual detail in business communications is unimportant.

Consider the following situation: An expert sales representative recalls a story to a knowledge manager about how he saved a big account by reworking pricing on a deal through creative discounting. The knowledge manager recognizes the value in sharing this experience and asks the expert sales representative to outline the steps taken so others can avoid reinventing the wheel. The sales representative drafts a step-by-step, high-level bulleted list that tells other sales representatives how to apply discounts. The knowledge manager removes specific references to the customer and generalizes some of the steps to make them more applicable to the entire sales force. The list is then posted on the KM portal under the heading "Discounting Procedure."

Although the whole sales force has access to the discounting procedure, so much contextual knowledge has been omitted or removed that there is a risk that the other sales people may never apply the procedure properly. Consider the potential questions raised in the mind of the person trying to apply this knowledge:

- Is this legitimate? Who put this out here?
- Has this been validated by management?
- When should I apply this—always, or are there exceptions?
- Whom should I ask about this?
- How old is this procedure? Is it up-to-date?
- My account is unique; I'm not sure this applies to my situation. How can I be certain this is relevant?
- I think I need to add some discounts to a proposal I am working on. Is there an example somewhere that shows how to represent the discounts in a proposal?

In making a set of guidelines widely applicable, the information that people need to interpret and apply them to novel situations is often lost. At best, people misinterpret the guidelines and make minor mistakes. At worst, the "official" guidelines lose credibility and people "wing it" or rely on a trusted colleague (who may or may not be an expert). Productivity, consistency, and quality are all left up to chance in these cases.

Humanizing Strategy #3: Capture the individual experiences that form the basis of best practices.

Having a bulleted list to provide guidance for a business activity is not bad. In fact, it is great for people already familiar with the activity. But until they are familiar, a bulleted list does not provide enough detail for application to novel business problems.

As you build resources that document organizational best practices, go beyond generic guidelines by capturing and including links to detailed information that can help people understand how to apply best practices.

Examples of these knowledge resources include the following:

- **Expert references:** contact information for people who can answer questions about a best practice or subject. Include names of people who contributed to or approved the development of a best practice, validating its legitimacy in the eyes of the workforce.
- **Examples:** documents or other work deliverables that show how an expert applied part or all of a best practice.
- **Demonstrations:** rich media representations of a best practice in action.
- **War stories:** anecdotal detail by an expert recalling how he or she applied a best practice.
- **Tools:** applications that help automate some or all of the steps of a best practice.
- **Learning scenarios:** simulations that allow a person to try out a best practice before applying it to a real business problem.

The bottom line is that people do not usually take advice from a computer well; they need a little more *human element* to raise their comfort level. Preserving the ties between abstract information and real experience helps to validate the superiority of a best practice. It also gives individuals the necessary background to judge how they should apply best practices to new situations.

The Big Tradeoff

Knowledge managers face an investment choice as they consider the development of KM applications: technology vs. content. Obviously, you need both, but too often the wrong emphasis is on technology. **Consider the alternative approach: a simpler KM application that provides access to a lower volume of higher quality content, transformed, and tailored to the needs of its audience.** Trade in a portion of your investment in sophisticated indexing and search technology for the resources and time required for interviewing the experts in your organization on an ongoing basis. Ultimately, knowledge management needs to be more than **facilitating** knowledge management, which is what happens when you implement a self-service portal without addressing the content. KM efforts need to be about **managing (or leveraging) knowledge**, which can only be achieved by paying attention to the source of knowledge—people.

Adopt a technology-focused approach to KM, and you are likely to build KM systems that are easy for the IT department to install and maintain. Adopt a human-focused approach and you are likely to build KM systems that make it easier for your knowledge workers to capture and share knowledge. For most, this is a much wiser investment.

About VisionCor

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