Chapter 27
Evidence–Based Best Practices Collections

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INTRODUCTION

For capturing and transferring knowledge between different projects and organizations, the concept of a *Best Practice* is commonly used. A similar but more general concept for knowledge capturing is often referred to as a *Lesson Learned*. Both best practices and lessons learned are frequently organized in the form of knowledge collections. Such collections exist in many forms and flavours: From simple notes on a white board, to paper file collections on a shelf, to electronic versions filed in a common folder or shared drive, to systematically archived and standardized versions in experience and databases, or even specific knowledge management systems.

In the past few decades, many organizations have invested much time and effort in such specific knowledge collections (e.g., databases, experience repositories) for best practices and/or lessons learned. The driving force behind all these activities is to disseminate knowledge about proven solutions to their workforce. Ultimately, the goal is to avoid mistakes and improve the overall workflow and processes to possibly save money and gain a competitive advantage.

Although originally such collections were confined to a single organization, lately, portal solutions and online repositories that draw knowledge from across organizations have become more

popular. These wider-scale systems need to carefully organize and contextualize the information they offer, so as to offer the most relevant content and thereby encourage users to actively apply the practices and lesson learned. Supplying evidence about successful applications of the best practices and lessons learned has become a crucial success factor for such portal-based collections. A simple best practice / lesson learned listing, without any supporting evidence, does not encourage decision makers to use the collection as a source of valuable information. Consequently, collections without detailed application context and evidence descriptions often fail to promote the wide-spread use and adoption of the offered content, and end up as "data cemeteries," to which information is written but rarely read.

BACKGROUND

Senge (1995) identifies knowledge as the fourth factor of production and one of the most important assets for any kind of organization, independent of its domain or products. As a result, each organization should strive to continuously learn and improve, by identifying its knowledge assets and systematically collecting, organizing and disseminating them. According to Garvin (1998, pp. 52–53) the building blocks of such learning organizations are "*systematic problem solving, experimentation with new approaches, learning from their own experience and past history, learning from the experiences and best practices of others, and transferring knowledge quickly and efficiently throughout the organization.*" In this list, best practices are explicitly mentioned as one method of knowledge documentation and transfer, especially over organizational boarders. To achieve these goals, public collections of such best practices (e.g., in the form of web-portals) are in demand.

A best practice is commonly understood to be a well-proven, repeatable, and established technique, method, tool, process, or activity that is more certain in delivering the desired results. According to the American Society of Quality, a best practice is "*a superior method or innovative practice that contributes to the improved performance of an organization, usually recognized as 'best' by other peer organizations*"[1]. These descriptions indicate that a best practice typically has been used by a large number of people or organizations and / or over a long time, with significant results that are clearly superior over other practices. A lesson learned, in contrast, usually consists of documentation of a one-time event and hence, is often missing a solid understanding of the background and its foundation. Ideally, the repeated successful demonstration of a lesson learned will eventually produce a best practice.

Because of the uncertain and varying definitions of the term "best practice," some authors, such as Harrison (2004), advocate "*restricting use of the term best practice*" and suggest the use of terms like "*effective practice*" or "*good practice*" instead. This nomenclature also addresses the fact that neither a best practice nor a lesson learned can *always* be seen as a silver bullet. Sometimes, different best practices can even seem to be conflicting. (For example, in the software development domain, both agile approaches and process-centric approaches have been advocated as "best" practices although these approaches are at opposite ends of the spectrum concerning how formally processes are defined.) Such seeming contradictions are due to the fact that any practice often results in improved performance in only some contexts, while the same practice may be inappropriate or even harmful in other contexts. Hence, unwanted and sometimes even hazardous outcomes may occur when a best practice is applied in the wrong context due to missing information in the description.

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