Chapter XVII
Identifying Knowledge Values and Knowledge Sharing Through Linguistic Methods:
Application to Company Web Pages

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ABSTRACT

How can three linguistical methods be used to identify the Web displays of an organization's knowledge values and knowledge-sharing requirements? This chapter approaches this question by using three linguistical methods to analyse a company's Web sites; (a) elements from the community of practice theory (CoP), (b) concepts from communication theory, such as modality and transitivity, and (c) elements from discourse analysis. The investigation demonstrates how a company's use of the Web can promote a work attitude that actually can be considered as an endorsement of a particular organizational behaviour. The Web pages display a particular organizational identity that will be a magnet for some parties and deject others. In this way, a company's Web pages represent a window to the world that need to be handled with care, since this can be interpreted as a projection of the company's identity.

INTRODUCTION

The aim of this chapter is to analyse a company's **Web pages** to see if this could provide some answers to the following question: How can linguistical methods be used to identify what the Web display in terms of an organization's knowledge values and knowledge sharing requirements? The answers to this question were found by doing a text analysis, using tools within the field of language theory, and by applying concepts from a **community of practice theory** (CoP) (Wenger,

1998). Still, an analysis of a set of Web pages cannot give a complete picture of the different aspects of an organization since their main purposes lie in their commercial value. Web pages published by companies can have a variety of aims, like attracting new customers or investors by displaying their products, the knowledge, and the achievements of the company. Furthermore, Web pages could aim at attracting new employees, display the legal and political values of the company, and provide an easy way to gain access to the company's financial information and product portfolio updating.

The use of a set of linguistical methods does not pay attention to the graphical elements of the Web pages, only the written text. This is, of course, a weakness when the choice is to analyse a set of Web pages, since design and layout are such important elements of Web pages. Nevertheless, in this chapter, one has deliberately omitted the elements of design and layout as part of the data interpretation, first and foremost because the aim was to do a textual analysis that would not be influenced by any design and layout considerations.

The organizational image that Web pages display is most likely a result of a refinement process, created through interpretations and reinterpretations, as results from negotiations between members within the organization. When the Web pages of a company are analysed linguistically, caution should be made with respect to how these results are interpreted and applied. My perspective is that Web pages reflect how the organization works, not only how organizational phenomena can be read from the Web pages. By using three selected **linguistical approaches,** it is demonstrated how Web pages can be analysed for a first understanding of how an organization works. Web pages analysed in this way will then provide a useful tool for further in-depth investigations of a company, and as a frame of references to whether the Web pages actually display how an organization works.

Knowledge of how and why the text was produced would require additional empirical data from the inside of the organization, but this was beyond the aim of this study. Rather, this chapter demonstrates how some linguistic concepts and a social theory on learning can be applied to uncover how a set of Web pages present how the organization works, and what knowledge values and sharing requirements can be identified using such methods. This chapter is about knowledge value and knowledge sharing. It refers to how knowledge gets its value from being shared with others. Partly this perspective is a result of social interaction (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998). Wenger (1998) explored, in detail, how a practice is more than just a learning process, but also how the practice is created as a continuous process of negotiation and renegotiation of meaning, and how this process forms our identity. His idea is that members of a community of practice participate in a shared activity or enterprise. He emphasises that participation embraces all kinds of relations, controversial ones as well as harmonious ones, intimate as well as political, competitive as well as cooperative, and our ability (or inability) to shape the practice. He also highlights that "participation goes beyond direct engagement in specific activities with specific people. It places the negotiation of meaning in the context of our forms of membership in various communities. It is a constituent of our identity" (Wenger, 1998, p. 57).

Anyone interested in organizational behaviour might find the methods and the results of this chapter worthwhile in providing a different entrance to how an organization's knowledge values and knowledge management practices can be interpreted and understood.

What is presented in this chapter is a historical snapshot of company Web pages at a particular place in time, and which are no longer accessible. The reason for choosing Web pages as empirical data was that a company's Web pages provide easy accessible data, useful for developing a first understanding of the image the company is

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