

Chapter 8

The Use of Social Technology to Support Organisational Knowledge

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ABSTRACT

In the current economy, knowledge has been recognized to be a valuable organisational asset, a crucial factor that aids organisations to succeed in highly competitive environments. Many organisations have begun projects and special initiatives aimed at fostering better knowledge sharing amongst their employees. Not surprisingly, information technology (IT) has been a central element of many of these projects and initiatives, as the potential of emerging information technologies such as Web 2.0 for enabling the process of managing organisational knowledge is recognised. This technology could be used as a collaborative system for knowledge management (KM) within enterprises. Enterprise 2.0 is the application of Web 2.0 in an organisational context. Enterprise 2.0 technologies are web-based social software that facilitate collaboration, communication, and information flow in a bidirectional manner: an essential aspect of organisational knowledge management. This chapter explains how Enterprise 2.0 technologies (Web 2.0 technologies within organisations) can support knowledge management. The chapter also explores how such technologies support the codifying (technology-centred) and social network (people-centred) approaches of KM, towards bridging the current gap between these two approaches.

INTRODUCTION

Knowledge has become a crucial asset in modern organisations and the key to success in the new economy (Davenport & Prusak, 1997). An organisation's ability to use its knowledge assets will help it to maintain a sustainable competitive advantage. It is therefore not surprising that knowledge management (KM) has emerged as a key focus for many modern organisations (Drucker, 1993; Wiig, 1997). The importance of KM, as acknowledged by commentators such as Alavi and Leidner (2001), Davenport and Prusak (2000), and Jackson (1999), has resulted in the development of knowledge management theory and practice in both academia and business, as indicated by their increased spending in knowledge management projects and systems (Kakabadse, Kakabadse, & Kouzmin, 2003).

There are two approaches to implementing KM: the KM technology-centred approach and the KM people-centred approach (Song, 2007). The technological approach employs information and communication technology (ICT) such as databases and intranet to support organisational knowledge. Its use of ICT enables capturing, codifying, storing, distribution and reuse of knowledge. The non-technological people-centred approach adopts managerial, social and cultural methods to manage organisational knowledge (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). This approach commonly includes building communities of practice or communities of interest, creating an appropriate knowledge-sharing culture and implementing reward systems (Wickramasinghe & Mills, 2002).

Whilst it is true that KM is more than just about technological issues (Hasan, 2003), ICT does have a critical role to play in managing organisational knowledge (Alavi & Leidner, 2001; Chan & Patrick, 2007). Technology for KM can be divided into two categories: traditional knowledge management systems (KMS) such as databases and intranets, and emerging collaborative KMS that include the use of social technology commonly

referred to as Web 2.0 (McAfee, 2006; McElory, 2003). Traditional KMS have some drawbacks: for example, the content is produced centrally by a small group of employees; and there are systems limitations in capturing both tacit knowledge and the experience of workers (Alqahtani, Watson, & Partridge, 2010; Levy, 2009). In contrast, collaborative KMS that draw upon Web 2.0 are more informal, allowing employees to discuss their knowledge while working, which helps to capture tacit knowledge (Levy, 2009; Paroutis & Al Saleh, 2009). Also, collaborative KMS add a social connection nature to KM work in which everyone participates, shares and contributes (Anderson, 2007; Tebbutt, 2007). Enterprise 2.0 technology is one such collaborative KM technology. Its advantages over traditional KMS include its ability to capture tacit knowledge, harness the collective intelligence and support the social and networked model of managing organisational knowledge (Alqahtani, Watson, & Partridge, 2010).

This chapter explains the relationship between Enterprise 2.0 technology and knowledge management by looking at three main points: how Enterprise 2.0 tools help KM, how Enterprise 2.0 tools are aligned with KM theory and how Enterprise 2.0 is a people-centred as well as a technology-centred approach for knowledge management.

In the next section, the focus is on knowledge management: the concept of knowledge is presented, and indication is given regarding how the concept resulted in different KM approaches. The section ends with a discussion about the role of information technology as a KM enabler. This section will also show a brief comparison of the two generations of knowledge management systems.

Section three is about social technology and enterprises. It introduces the social technology Web 2.0, then outlines its use in enterprise, referred to as Enterprise 2.0. Three major models of Enterprise 2.0 are highlighted, with a focus on Enterprise 2.0 as the internal use of Web 2.0 tools within enterprises to support organisational knowledge.

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