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The font of all knowledge.

By Ian Yates

Cataloguing employee skills in knowledge management databases turned out to be more complex than software vendors had hoped, but new approaches are yielding promising results.

Finding out what your employees know has kept managers on an eternal treadmill as long as there have been bosses and workers. In small businesses with small headcounts it is theoretically easier to know what is known and by whom, than it is for larger companies with hundreds or perhaps thousands of employees. However, even a small business can suffer when a staff member with loads of essential knowledge leaves the building for the last time.

About ten years ago knowledge management software and databases hit the radar like Scud missiles with your name on them. The various offerings were almost impossible to avoid but the noise faded faintly fast after several companies tried out the new wares and pronounced them less than satisfactory. The problem wasn't with the software, or even the databases. It was the data that proved elusive and still does to this day.

What wasn't difficult was building a skills database by checking off the right boxes on the forms, so a company could easily find out if they had someone on staff that was an expert in a particular field. These skills databases proved very popular with analysts and consultants, whose assignments are by design changing rapidly along with the staff members who make up their project teams. Large enterprises also find skills databases useful, because they have so many staff in so many places.

What do you know?

What is harder to get into a useful database is tacit knowledge, and managers may only discover the gap after the employee resigns, making it even harder to extract in advance. "Someone who may have worked in a company for 20 years has a vast bank of knowledge but if you asked them to put it down on paper you'd only ever capture a fraction of what they actually know", says Gretta Rusanow of Curve Consulting, a layer and management consultant specialising in knowledge management. "But there's a great deal of knowledge that they would be able to share with people in conversation".

It might not be possible with existing technology to easily search a database full of free-form conversations. "By building a skills and expertise locator, they're able to at least catch a profile of what people actually know, so that if someone is looking for those specific skills and expertise, at least they can put their finger on who actually has it and then make a call, have a conversation and start to share that expertise", says Rusanow.



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Implementation worries

Beth Jackson, a principal of McLean Kerrigan Jackson, an executive recruitment firm, has seen plenty of knowledge management systems implemented. "I've looked at every knowledge management system known to man, and it was the cause of a great deal of frustration for the staff of the organisations, primarily because it was a huge amount of input and no output", says Jackson.

That doesn't mean the systems themselves have no value, rather that the existence of such a system doesn't let managers off the hook when it comes to actually talking to their staff. "There's a degree of mobility now within the workforce which means that knowledge acquisition and knowledge capture and maintenance is becoming more critical", says Jackson. "There's no replacement for the sheer hard effort of the knowing the employees and working with them to find the best career development and succession planning for them and the company, and that's the way you find out about what people know"

Fighting Brain Drain

Some industries feel more vulnerable than others to the dreaded brain-drain that occurs when staff resign. "Some businesses are clearly more exposed such as the legal industry, to partners and practice teams that develop significant knowledge bases about clients and about precedents", says Micheal dal Maso, solutions alliances manager with Alphawest. "When they walk out the door and take their clients, they take their knowledge, they take all their precedents with them and the firms are left with a huge hole." Legal firms are amongst the pioneers of knowledge management systems for this very reason. "They are the organisations that have adopted things such as portals, intranets, and document management and e-learning initiatives to facilitate the gradual, natural adoption of knowledge," says dal Maso. "People are capturing how they relate to a client, what we call relationship intelligence technologies that capture things like who knows whom."

Other businesses that value the knowledge held by their employees can learn from legal and consulting companies, but they might find that the prevailing culture hinders their efforts, regardless of how much money was spent on a suitable database. "The companies that are really succeeding in this area are the ones that have built a culture around the benefits of knowledge sharing," says Rusanow. "You see some organisations which have created subject matter experts and where you are publicly recognised within the company as being a subject matter expert and you are applauded for that and indeed you are rewarded for it as well. Often what happens is that knowledge management is viewed inextricably with technology and not enough attention is paid to developing a culture that's actually going to support knowledge management."

New research

Existing knowledge management theory and practice may well be challenged by research being done at the Centre for Organisational Complexity in Wales, a joint venture between Cardiff University and IBM. David Snowdon, the centre's director, believes that narrative databases populated with natural conversations hold the key to revealing the knowledge hidden within an organisation. "The way we naturally inquire, we don't go and draw down best practice in the company's knowledge management system, what we do actually do is go and find eight or nine people with relevant experience and listen to their stories", says Snowden.



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“What narrative databases do, is they store knowledge in raw narrative form, it’s not amended or altered in any way. It’s the original material, and that is seen as authentic by the users”.

A sharing environment

Snowden has found that people will naturally share their knowledge and experience if the environment and culture support that sort of behaviour. “What is interesting about human beings is we manage for serendipity. We pay attention to things when we need to pay attention to them. So the issue is to make many things available to people when they have a need. We call this just-in-time knowledge management”, explains Snowden “The alternative would be trying to work out all the needs in advance and spending an absolute fortune on building systems that people won’t use. Instead we can create what we call a social learning ecology, which is a way in which the informal or shadow network of an organisation can be stimulated to grow in beneficial ways, while they are working.”

Snowden has been testing this technology and methodology using IBM’s global staff of guinea pigs. “We create repositories in which they can store or share their knowledge with interested groups. That costs you very little money and the amount of knowledge which self-organises is huge. For example in IBM there are 1220,000 employees, we have 55 formal communities. We have 64,000 informal ones”, says Snowden. “You should assume that roughly half your number of staff is the number of informal communities that naturally share knowledge in your organisation. You can’t ever formally manage that but if you create the right environment, when you need the knowledge, you can create the stimulus, which means they will volunteer it from the informal to the formal”.

Who’s first?

Although this might seem to be a new approach to knowledge management, it’s been around for two or three years and is already being used by some sectors of the industry. “It relies on volunteer behaviour, self-organising behaviour, organic stimulation in an ecology rather than attempts to design and maintain a perfect machine,” says Snowden. “we do experiments in IBM on this and then we move them out into the industry. Defence and pharmaceuticals are the big clients at the moment; they are the classic early adopters. We’re now starting to move the first systems into the banking sector, which tends to be the third into new markets.”

A critical need to capture tacit knowledge is starting to appear that transcends any one business or sector. “We are starting to do this stuff now for governments because it is a huge issue with the baby boomer generation about to leave government en masse. And there’s no way they’re going to write their knowledge down but boy, will they tell stories!” says Snowden. “We’ve got the conceptual models to handle it. The key issue for organisations is that you can wait for evolution to catch up and be proven, but by then you’re dead. We find a lot of people we work with now are doing small experiments in this area because they know they can’t afford to be left behind.