

PREFACE

Every day offers new ways for knowledge workers to access information from new and seductive sources. As I sat down to write this preface, Google announced that it would shortly be offering text from a number of academic libraries, together with full bibliographic information, to anyone with an Internet connection.

Information has become a problem as well as a resource and a solution. Knowledge workers are bombarded with information. Knowing where to find the right information – or an expert who can point the way – is much harder.

Several generations of collaborative tools have made it easier for knowledge workers to find each other and to communicate, regardless of geographic or organizational location. But sharing information is still hard. Everything about it is difficult, from deciding what would be useful to share, to selecting tools for sharing in a collaborative fashion, while supporting comments, linking to related information, and decisions about the persistence of shared knowledge collections.

We are getting better at the technology, but the cultural and organizational problems remain. To move forward we will need to successfully address all three:

- 1.) Continue to build better tools, especially tools that offer to do things for the user, rather than expecting the user to do more work. We need tools that can build user, role, task, and topic-specific indexes

of available material, based on stored metadata automatically generated. Tools for search need to be more adept in understanding natural language and offering smaller numbers of relevant answers to a knowledge worker's query.

- 2.) Work cultures change much more slowly than the technology. We need to be mindful of the human propensity to prefer the familiar (and avoid change) and embed new tools in familiar forms, even when innovators are certain that something startlingly new could give better results. No tool can provide good results if users pass it by.
- 3.) Organizational change is in the air. Enormous changes in computing, networking, and communications allow us to build a highly distributed, very mobile workforce. As this workforce is delivered better information, it has less need for supervision in decision-making and can operate in a more flexible and autonomous fashion. This indicates a flatter organizational structure, with fewer levels of management, and more decisions made by knowledge workers at the edges of the distributed office.

While it is possible – in theory – to convert an entire large business organization to a knowledge-supporting culture, this process is difficult and, in fact, rare. Most successes start with small steps. The trick is in picking the focal point. Most successful knowledge sharing projects focus on particular problems – customer service, product development or cost of field service – and use knowledge management, the application of expertise and information, to fix the problem. With success comes permission to apply the technique to other problems.

Managing knowledge and the knowledge worker is not a trick, it is the application of a number of communication and collaboration related tools to assist workers whose jobs are based on applying information and knowledge to solving problems. The better the tools we provide, the more knowledgeably we support their use, the better the chance for success.

Amy D. Wohl

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