

What are operational components of knowledge management?

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Operational components constitute what people have in mind when they talk about a knowledge management system.

Content Management Systems

To make available the organization's data and information to the members of the organization is done through dashboards, portals, and the use of content management systems. A Content Management System (CMS) is a software platform that lets its users create, edit, archive, collaborate, report, publish, distribute, and inform. Its Graphic User Interface (GUI) makes interacting with a website's database user friendly.

Websites use HTML and CSS to create and design its pages. They are two of the essential core components to create Web pages. HTML provides the structure of the page, CSS the visual, and aural layout. A CMS allows users without any coding knowledge to amend, modify, and edit content to websites using a WYSIWYG interface, an acronym for "what you see is what you get." The data entered into CMS software is stored in a database which renders the web page via a template. The CSS of that page can then control the output.

Expertise Locator Systems

Since knowledge resides in people, often the best way to acquire the expertise is from an expert. Locating the right expert with the knowledge that is needed, though, can be a problem, particularly if, for example, the expert is in another country. The basic function of an expertise locator system is to identify and locate those persons within an organization who have expertise in a particular area.

There are typically three sources from which to supply data for an expertise locator system:

1. Employee resumes,
2. Employee self-identification of areas of expertise (typically by being requested to fill out a form online), and
3. Algorithmic analysis of electronic communications from and to the employee

Expert locator systems come with load-balancing schemes so as not to overload any particular expert. Typically, such systems rank the degree of presumed expertise and will shift a query down the expertise ranking when the higher choices appear to be overloaded. Such systems also often have a feature by which the requester can flag the request as a priority, and the system can then match-high priority to high expertise rank.

Lessons Learned Databases

Lessons Learned databases are databases that attempt to capture and make accessible knowledge, typically "how to do it" knowledge, that has been operationally obtained and normally would not have been explicitly captured. In the knowledge management context, the emphasis is upon capturing knowledge embedded in personal expertise and making it explicit.

A particularly instructive example of a "lesson learned" is one recounted by Mark Mazzie (2003), a well-known knowledge management consultant. The story comes from his experience in the knowledge management department at Wyeth Pharmaceuticals. Wyeth introduced a new pharmaceutical agent intended primarily for pediatric use. Wyeth expected it to be a notable success because, unlike its morning, noon, and night competitors, it needed to be administered only once a day, and that would make it much easier for the caregiver to ensure that the child followed the drug regimen, and it would be less onerous for the child. Sales of the drug commenced well but soon flagged. One sales representative, however, by chatting with her customers, discovered the reason for the disappointing sales and also recognized the solution. The problem was that kids objected strenuously to the taste of the drug, and caregivers were reporting to prescribing physicians that they couldn't get their kid to continue taking the drug, so the old standby would be substituted. The simple solution was orange juice, a swig of which quite effectively masked the offensive taste. If the sales representative were to explain to the physician that the therapy should be conveyed to the caregiver as the pill and a glass of orange juice taken simultaneously at breakfast, then there was no dissatisfaction and sales were fine.

The obvious question that arises is what is there to encourage the sales representative to share this knowledge? It extends

to how does one structure the organizational culture to facilitate and encourage knowledge sharing, and that extends to how one structures the organization's compensation scheme. The sales representative can be compensated based on salary (small), and bonus (large). Lessons learned systems must have a mechanism of vetting and approval for items that can be posted as lessons learned. The obvious questions are:

How long do items stay in the system?

Who decides when an item is no longer salient and timely?

Therefore, the system must have a life cycle for a lesson. Without a clearly designed process for weeding, the proportion of new and crisp items inevitably declines, the system begins to look stale, and usage and utility falls. Deletion, of course, is not necessarily loss and destruction. Using carefully designed stratification principles, items removed from the foreground can be archived and moved to the background but still made available.

Communities of Practice (CoPs)

CoPs are groups of individuals with shared interests that come together in person or virtually to tell stories, to share and discuss problems and opportunities, discuss best practices, and talk over lessons learned. Communities of practice emphasize, build upon, and take advantage of the social nature of learning within or across organizations. In small organizations, conversations around the water cooler are often taken for granted, but in larger, geographically distributed organizations, the water cooler needs to become virtual. Similarly, organizations find that when workers relinquish a dedicated company office to work online from home or on the road, the natural knowledge sharing that occurs in social spaces needs to be replicated virtually. In the context of knowledge management, CoPs are electronically linked communities.

The organization and maintenance of CoPs are not a simple or easy task to undertake. There are several key roles (manager, moderator, and thought leader) to be filled. Some questions that need to be thought about and resolved are:

Who fills the various roles of manager, moderator, and thought leader?

How is the CoP managed, and who will fill the management role?

Who will have overall responsibility for coordinating and overseeing the various CoPs?

Who looks for new members or suggests that the CoP may have outlived its usefulness?

Who reviews the CoP for activity?

Are postings open or does someone vet or edit the postings?

How is the CoP kept fresh and vital?

When and how (under what rules) are items removed?

How are those items archived/expired?

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