

# From information to knowledge

Companies must  
learn to manage  
their information as  
a vital asset, says  
David Skyrme

**K**nowledge management is the latest fashion to grab the attention of companies looking to gain extra competitive edge. In essence it has two thrusts. The first is making better use of the knowledge that already exists within the firm, for example by sharing best practice methods. The second is an innovation focus, the creation of new knowledge and turning ideas into valuable products and services. This is sometimes known as knowledge innovation.

Information management tools and techniques are a key element of many knowledge-management programmes. Management consultancies, for instance, invest in knowledge centres that classify information, package it into standard formats and make it available on their company-wide knowledge bases. Document management, groupware such as Lotus Notes, and intranets are some of the computer solutions used as part of a knowledge-sharing programme. But are we getting the most value from our knowledge assets? The short answer is no.

The Internet offers a good example of where simply carrying over the practices of another medium don't always cut the mustard. Web

pages are created in magazine format, overburdened with glossy images that take an age to download. Publications are put on the Web with hardly any restructuring or reformatting to take advantage of the characteristics of the new medium.

The power of the Internet is its ability to make connections. These may be hypertext links that connect you from one page to another, often held on a computer server in another part of the world. Another type of connection is one that links people together. It's easy to do, but how many Web pages even allow you to comment on the page and interact with its author, either by filling in a comment form, or by simple email click?

Even so, these are peripheral issues compared with the more fundamental one that many companies simply do not have effective policies and strategies on information that are geared to managing it as a vital asset.

Very often, a company's most valuable knowledge asset is its people. A knowledge-management solution should therefore help to leverage this knowledge. For many years, packaging the knowledge of experts using artificial intelligence methods was the main thrust of computer solutions for knowledge management. Today, expert systems play a small but growing role — for example in problem-solving situations.

Artificial intelligence is undergoing a resurgence as knowledge management gains momentum. It is found in intelligent software agents and filters that are used to help select and stream the information knowledge workers

want, and give it to them when and how they want it. It is found in data- and text-mining tools such as text summarisers that extract key concepts from large amounts of information.

### **Effective infrastructure**

Such solutions help the individual worker to be more productive with information. However, the greatest leverage comes from an effective information- and knowledge -sharing infrastructure that amplifies knowledge throughout an organisation. This is where computers are used not just to connect people to information, but also to connect them to other people in the organisation.

In our recent research into knowledge management, we found few companies that really understood what a comprehensive knowledge infrastructure consists of beyond making the physical connections and giving universal access to information such as through an intranet. The higher levels of a knowledge-sharing infrastructure include elements such as expert directories, structured conversations, knowledge editing of transient email or computer conference exchanges and a common language or glossary.

When it comes to knowledge creation, even more elements are needed, such as on-line facilitation of knowledge development and explicit articulation of implicit knowledge.

As with most information management and technological solutions, it is the human factors, such as organisational culture, that are usually the major barrier to effective knowledge management. Good knowledge management therefore needs the best of good information-management practice (especially the discipline of information resources management) and good human resources management. ■



*David Skyrme ([david@skyrme.com](mailto:david@skyrme.com)) is a UK-based knowledge management consultant, who is part of the ENTOVATION Network, a collaboration of knowledge workers that furthers world-class practice in knowledge management and knowledge innovation. The research outlined in this article forms the basis of the report 'Creating the knowledge-based company' published by Business Intelligence.*