Distributed knowledge work

Information and knowledge are the driving forces of today's modern service economy. The center of attention is the knowledge worker and his ability to quickly solve current problems. The integration into distributed knowledge and competence networks (often called Knowledge Communities or Expert Networks) is gaining a more and more important supportive role. What is special about these networks is their expansion to other organisational departments and their openness and flexibility as regards their members.

In most cases, knowledge and competence networks still emerge from real events (conferences, faires, seminars etc.). Nowadays, they continue to exist in communities using virtual information and communication rooms. In some cases, networking is exlusively done there. What is new is that knowledge is exchanged in explicit (written) form enabling the development of knowledge repositories which can be used by all other persons in the network. So far, the significance of this new aspect has been rarely detected.

Under which conditions do these networks function properly?

A major characteristic of distributed knowledge work is the connection of experts at different locations on the occasion of a project or a specific topic. Communication takes place in a group between several persons rather than between only two knowledge workers (point to point). A further phenomenon is the fact that the amount of work exceeding organisational boundaris (e.g. in clusters, interdisciplinary research projects etc.) as well as the mobility of knowledge workers on the job market is increasing.

In order to ensure lasting networks, a crucial factor is to create the possibility for distributed knowledge work which exceeds organisational departments and to guarantee openness and flexibility from a human resources perspective. A further important point is trust. Trust is directly connected to the willingness of people to contribute to the exchange of knowledge in networks. It is essential that people, between whom exchange takes place, and knowledge are dealt with in a responsible way. A transparent environment is decisive in order to gain trust.

Moreover, networks need to guarantee that acquired knowledge will be usable on a long-term basis in order to function properly. If the, mostly written, knowledge is accessible by involved knowledge workers as a usable knowledge resource, willingness to contribute to the exchange of knowledge will be increased. In order to develop a common knowledge basis, two interdependent aspects are decisive: The possibility of referencing information (hypertext) and its reliable availability. By taking these aspects into account it will be possible to include information in a continuously developing knowledge environment, eventually turning it into a usable knowledge resource.

How is explicit knowledge exchange supported?

An increasing amount of work in knowledge networks is taking place in knowledge and learning communities. In order to support explicit knowledge exchange and thus the development of knowledge repositories which can be used by all persons in the network (see above), it is possible to use knowledge platforms. Knowledge platforms provide an infrastructure for knowledge exchange and serve as a central knowledge pool as opposed to e-mail and other communication tools. The functioning of a knowledge community does not only depend on meeting techniqual requirements but also on careful planning. The lifecycle of a community (start, continuous usage, end), above all its launch, need to be taken into account. Many communities fail before actually starting with knowledge work. In addition, some accompanying measures such as sufficient training (technical and conceptual), support, simplicity of use and integration into existing processes have proved necessary.

As regards technical requirements, attention should be paid to whether work across organisations is possible. Topics such as linking across platforms, flexibility of the system during the start of communities etc. are relevant. An example for necessary functionalities of a system is e-mail notification which has proved essential for the usage of a system. E-mail notification informs users individually about the latest changes on the whole platform. If the changes can be accessed via a link, users do not need to actively visit the community platform and inform themselves about changes. Instead they are picked up where they usually start, in the inbox.

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