

KnowldgWORKS News Number 34 September 25, 2000
Case Study: Knowledge Management at Destiny WebSolutions,
Inc.

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KnowBits

- A. The Prototypical Knowledge Management Organization - A Reference Report Available From ACCSYS Corporation

As part of my ongoing effort to create useful reference materials for those of us involved in knowledge management, I have prepared a report entitled, "The Prototypical Knowledge Management Organization," that is available for purchase. The report costs \$25 and can be downloaded from the ACCSYS Corporation web site at <http://www.accsys-corp.com>. A brief synopsis of the report follows.

Synopsis: The Prototypical Knowledge Management Organization. Dr. R. Kaplan. ACCSYS Corporation. May 2000.

This report focuses on the "design" of a prototypical knowledge management organization. The premise of this report is to design an organization and describe the positions in it that would support a complete knowledge management effort. The report presents the organizational design, describes 11 positions, and provides detailed job descriptions for each of these positions. The content of the report could be used as the basis for a company's own

knowledge management effort, as a reference for the necessary positions and the specific requirements for these positions. In addition, the report also describes a "starter" or "seed" organization that would serve as the beginnings of a knowledge management group within a larger organization.

B. Virtual TeleClass - Brain Dominance - One Key to Better Knowledge Management

On October 11th from 12 Noon to 1 PM EST I will be leading a virtual class about brain dominance. About 20 years ago, a researcher at GE wanted to better understand creativity. Out of this work came a model of brain dominance and a means to understand thinking style preferences. This work has far reaching applications in learning, human interaction, and knowledge management. Join me for this virtual class. The class is free except for the cost of the telephone call. You may register at www.teleclass.com and clicking on "Search for Classes." When the next screen comes up, in the box labeled "number" enter 4297. Click on "Find Classes." At the next screen click on "Add to Cart." Follow the directions to register. I look forward to meeting you in this virtual space.

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Case Study: Knowledge Management at Destiny WebSolutions, Inc.

Not too long ago I had the pleasure and opportunity to visit with a former student at his company, Destiny. This company is well known in the Philadelphia area and has been described in publications like Red Herring and Upside. The company's focus is on the financial community and has been very successful in creating customized systems for this industry. The company is growing rapidly and is just crossing the 100 employee mark.

The founder of this company, Lester Shuda, created a knowledge management project/effort. Impressively, he saw the need to allocate staff to this effort and assigned two full time staff people to knowledge management. Few organizations (save for the very large ones) assign full

time staff to knowledge management efforts. For example, one organization I worked with in the past had over four thousand employees and a knowledge management effort staffed by three or four people who were not relieved from their usual duties. That effort is still trying to get off the ground.

A small organization that realizes the importance and value of a dedicated group to carry out knowledge management tasks exists on a higher plane than large organizations that add knowledge management tasks to existing staff work because they don't see it as a primary activity.

As an outside observer considering what has been accomplished by this firm on the way to capturing knowledge and structuring that knowledge, I am impressed with their accomplishments. They have established a knowledge repository accessible to all members of the organization. The repository is Internet-based and is driven by a proprietary technology called "WebCycle." Key knowledge elements form patterns which can then be used to streamline the software development process. This is no surprise as the knowledge management project sponsor/company founder/my ex-student is the Chief Technology Officer of the company and leads the company's software development teams and client engagements.

An underlying principle of the knowledge repository is the idea of design patterns. The design patterns used in this repository are based on design principles originally defined by the architect Christopher Alexander. Alexander wanted to define a common way to express knowledge about architecture. To do so he defined a "pattern language." An Alexander pattern consists of five fundamental parts. These are a name, an example, a context, a problem, and a solution. Alexander never defines a pattern formally but it appears that in his works he provided many examples of this pattern language. Destiny has adopted Alexander's language as a basis for its knowledge repository.

Primarily, the content of the knowledge repository is focused on the software implementation process. The patterns in the knowledge repository represent best learnings about the end-to-end process for creating Internet systems for financial services clients.

The knowledge management project sponsor asked me to take a look at the current state of the knowledge management project and make an assessment of where to go next. The context of this question was the year-end budgeting exercise. The sponsor and his staff were trying to determine what technology to buy for the next steps of the knowledge management process. The project sponsor asked for the assessment because he had a sense that evolving the project by purchasing new tools might be a limited approach to knowledge management in the organization.

Some of the discussion we had about the knowledge management effort centered on how the organization perceived the knowledge management activity. One of the scenarios I discussed with the knowledge management team had to do with how project post-mortems were carried out. A project post-mortem is a post-project meeting that attempts to review project activities from a strategic viewpoint to capture the learnings of the project. For example, if a project was delivered late, why was it late? How do we avoid being late on the next project? Post-mortems attempt to get at this sort of information and so are often not popular activities because they ask people to expose vulnerabilities.

From the standpoint of the project teams, these post-mortems were not germane to the mainstream work. In general the only way to get project team members to attend a post-mortem was by royal edict - the knowledge management project sponsor/founder/my ex-student had to ask people to participate in a post-mortem. His knowledge management team could not easily persuade teams to have these discussions.

Our discussions also covered who was involved with the knowledge management process. The knowledge captured was mostly devoted to the software implementation process. At first glance, there seemed to be little knowledge about customers, marketing, or sales practices in the Webcycle knowledge repository.

When we drilled down a little further we discussed how the knowledge management practices were integrated into organizational processes. In fact, organizationally, the integration was more implicit than explicit. Although the value of knowledge management was seen, it seemed to me that knowledge management was still an "off to the side"

activity as opposed to part of the day to day business processes.

One of my questions to the knowledge management team was how does the remainder of the senior management team view the knowledge management effort? It appears that in general the management team supported the knowledge management activity with some skepticism. There was some understanding of the importance of the effort, but it was not an organizational imperative.

Although I could go on with my commentary about learnings in our discussion, I want to summarize some of my recommendations to keep the newsletter to a reasonable length. Needless to say, this was an extremely rich environment with a dedicated and intelligent team and sponsor. I believe this organization could serve as a model for other knowledge management efforts if they continue to evolve the efforts organizationally rather than technologically. After considering the various aspects of the state of this effort, I made the following recommendations.

- Bring the management team in line with the knowledge management effort. Get the whole management team to see knowledge management as an organizational cultural imperative.
- Bring knowledge management into the mainstream activities of the organization. Make it a part of the business processes. Tie this integration to performance and reward.
- Have more intra-company cross-functional teams for cross-fertilization. Collect and record the results of cross-functional interactions.
- Don't invest a lot of effort in augmenting the current content of the repository.
- Buy technology only to automate the accumulation of knowledge repository content.

To me, it was critical for the knowledge management project sponsor to gain greater organizational support. This was the most important "next step" in this effort. Without that, it was unclear how the effort could make a greater impact on the organization.

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The knowldgWORKS News is written in its entirety by Randy Kaplan and edited by Harriet Trenholm. Suggestions for the newsletter should be sent to rkaplan@accsys-corp.com. All suggestions will be considered and always appreciated.

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