

# Intellectual Asset Collection, Linking and Sharing

By Dennis Rufe

The collection, linking and sharing of the wisdom that exists within every successful organization, is a process that involves people. Without the people side of business, and the interactions of employees with internal and external customers, businesses simply would not exist. What people do, why they do it, how they do it, and the results measured against business strategies affect customer satisfaction, employee skills and business growth. This wealth of knowledge, when properly contained, can protect employers and employees from applying inappropriate processes when key individuals are absent or leave the business.

The protection of the intellectual assets begins with the understanding that two categories of organizational knowledge exist in every business. The first category is the organization's tacit knowledge, and second, the organization's explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is implied or "learned" about how an individual or work community successfully performs tasks that produce favorable outcomes. Tacit knowledge is elusive, not readily available, and it may not be consistent. Explicit knowledge leaves no doubt as to the intention, meaning or method for performing a task. Explicit knowledge consists of supportive documents, and written procedures used in conjunction with doing one's work.

**Organizational knowledge consists of either *tacit* or *explicit* knowledge.**

The strategic collection of processes and documents involves the interaction of everyone in the organization and management communicating the importance of capturing the value if what is already known. Short term, attempting to capture every nuance of the organization's tacit knowledge is an unrealistic goal, however long term, refinements accumulate and become new best practices, better training aids, and repositories of content that direct employees to the right information for the right reason. The collection is an ongoing process affected by the changing strategies of the business determined by outcomes affecting financial performance, customer service, marketing, learning, and employee competencies. Content, for content sake, is

meaningless unless it is supportive to clarify processes and procedures, link activities and outcomes, and shared to solve business issues.

Technology plays an important role in supporting the collection, and management of information relevant to how work "gets done". Desktop computers, networks, the Internet, and legacy business systems store or have access to vast amounts of explicit information. Because of the array of electronic means of storing data, that may or may not be standardized, many large businesses with multiple office locations and large employee populations have invested millions of dollars to develop technologies that allow employees to access document repositories, project teams, and collaborate privately within work communities. Either privately developed or acquired through software providers, businesses are incorporating Knowledge Management (KM) software for managing content and supportive documents, which when implemented reduces duplication of effort, doubt as to the authenticity of supportive materials, and facilitates employee training. KM technology features vary by the provider, but most facilitate the capturing and linking of documents and content. For effective utilization of KM software, the business must be clear about the strategic value that intellectual assets play in the success of their mission and establish methods to engage everyone in the organization to participate.

People, methods, and technology are the keys to successful knowledge asset collection. The process is simplified when isolated into three categories.

**Data in Context = Information  
Information in Context = Knowledge  
Knowledge in Context = Power**

## Data in Context = Information:

Collecting business wisdom is really about identifying "how work", associated with business objectives... "gets done". Employee interactions with both internal and external customers are *learned* processes unique to the organizational culture, structure, and strategies. Employee learning occurs either through formal classroom instruction or through on the job training, and according to the U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics the employer provides over 70% of all employee training, which leaves open

the questions of how well do we train ourselves, and what training is needed to move forward?

**“Over 70% of employee training is provided by the employer”**

(U.S. Bureau of Labor and Statistics)

Given that other employees within the organization provide most employee training, the success of training new employees is based on the interactions with his or her trainers and the quality of instruction and supportive materials provided. Are the instructions clear? Are they up-to-date? Do they reflect the culture and best practices of the business? Are they easily accessible? Are the instructions “personalized” by the instructor? The answers obviously have an impact on the “learners” competencies and productivity standards for which the employee was hired. In geographically dispersed businesses the impact may be compounded if the employee “doesn’t know” what the home office has developed or a change in strategy.

Visualize collecting intellectual assets as an ongoing training process that involves the participation of everyone in the organization. Employees enthusiastically embrace sharing “what I do best” or “how I did it” when the outcomes prove favorable. Many of these experiences are shared informally within the organization, which in turn work their way into day-to-day processes...becoming “best practices”. What is not shared, or the tacit knowledge, simply vanishes when an experienced employee leaves the organization along with his or her knowledge of how he or she fulfilled their role in the organization. The impact of the “lost expertise” on the organization is relative, obviously, but it is measurable in lost productivity, the impact on customer service, and the efforts and time delays to recapture the fugitive or lost knowledge.

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So how do we gather the knowledge assets of the business? Employees are the best source for the compilation of documented processes, and supporting materials. Through encouragement and participation employees are quite capable of defining new solutions that can, and often do, result in improved performance, and by conducting employee interviews, either on a one-on-one basis or through

work groups, they remain the best source for capturing both tacit and explicit knowledge.

The “interviews” should focus on the identification of consistent processes, establishing standards for the processes, and identifying relevant materials and or documents used in the performance of an employee’s or work group’s purpose within the organization. This process helps identify what sources of data are used to perform a particular role or task. Employee-to-employee interaction plays a critical part in day-to-day operations, and the identification of interaction “paths” determine what data in the context of job performance is shared with by others. This collection of the raw data about how work “gets done” then becomes...“information”.

**Information in Context = Knowledge:**

The collected raw data represents the source of “information” that may have been contributed to by any number of people from within the organization or from outside sources. In the scenario of employee training, the newly compiled information can then be structured to provide consistent and accurate training, thereby reducing the time requirements needed to complete the training cycle. If the process of collecting the raw data was complete, the once tacit knowledge has become explicit and reusable, thereby reducing the risk of employee knowledge losses when people are absent or no longer with the company. Linking and sharing the information becomes the next issue in its utilization.

Structuring the knowledge content requires customization focused on the organization’s mission, composition, and culture. The purpose of establishing a standardized structure built around the organization is to assist employees who are not familiar with performing a task to find the correct information relating to the task in question. Computer hardware and software technologies provide a systematic and structured means to access to information of various types and formats in the form of central electronic repositories of process documentation, activities and supportive documents. Cataloging the content so that information is readily accessible, particularly when employees from remote offices or locations need access, promotes the use of technologies that are available 24/7, easy to use and secure.

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The most common practice for file and document sharing is by linking employee personal computers to local area networks within the organization. Employees can share documents across the network and the content managed is by the employee. Creating shared folders and document titles is generally dependent on “personalized coding or naming”, which can be misleading, not relevant, or out of date. A centralized repository promotes a single source for information, which reduces document duplication and promotes the proper assignment for relevancy to goals or tasks.

Software specifically designed to manage large document repositories provides structured assistance in naming documents, their placement relating to tasks, and can facilitate attaching comments by using templates or wizards. By applying systematic standards, these methods promote a common naming methodology thereby reducing the “confusion” factor in identifying document or process relevancy.

Ideally, the content structure would be a direct reflection of the company mission, structure, functional business segments, and processes. The knowledge linked to the business “content tree” enables employees to quickly identify information by department, tasks, and related documents much like a table of contents. Employee access to information, obviously, cannot be an “open book” for all to see. Security and privacy features must be in place to safeguard sensitive information from unauthorized access or intrusion. By identifying and establishing the interaction “paths” within the business, access and privacy controls can determine what information is shared and by whom.

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The benefits gained by the linking and sharing of information to functions, activities, and expertise facilitates reduced training cycles while empowering the right employees, armed with the right information, to solve simple and complex problems. Applying standards to the process of linking and sharing knowledge is the key. Keep in mind that ***deviation from standard*** is a three-word definition of a ***problem***.

## **Knowledge in Context = Power**

Business leaders must keep their eye on the future and make changes to remain competitive. How well they use the resources available to enact change and measure the outcome centers on the cumulative knowledge of the organization, the marketplace, and the organizational culture. Change is inevitable, it is ongoing, and it involves people.

Implementing change and strategic planning involves five key elements, 1) the effects on company financials, 2) marketing and sales, 3) customer service, 4) employee learning and knowledge, and 5) competencies. Each step in the process of implementing change has activities associated with a series of goals or objectives, that when measured in terms of the outcome, against these five elements can prove to be either successful ventures or fall short of expectations. Being able to organize activities to reach the goal, or the tactical planning, involves the knowledge of the people performing the activities, and their clear understanding of the expectation.

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- 4) Employee learning and knowledge**
- 5) Competencies**

Providing a common structure that allows employees to collaborate and to focus clearly on the objective enhances the organization’s agility to respond to changing business needs and trends. Employee skills and knowledge evolve necessitating the ongoing process for collecting, linking and the sharing of the new knowledge. Just as employee knowledge evolves, so do processes. Work community interaction to solve business issues is a factor in assuring the quality of process improvement. Underlining process improvement is the capitalization of the collective wisdom of the people within the business.