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Intranets for Organizational Memory Building: An Exploratory Study

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Introduction

The proposed study examines the role of Intranets in organizational memory building. It discusses technological advantages and managerial changes that facilitate the memory-building process with Intranets. The study also suggests a model that describes the relationship between organizational memory, individual memory, and Intranets.

Objective of the Study

The Intranet technology is one of the most exciting developments in recent years. The implementation of Intranets significantly changes the way people communicate, interact, and cooperate within an organization. However, the benefits of Intranets could be more than enhancing communications and cooperation. Intranets have the potential to change the way organizations learn and build memory.

The objectives of this study include:

1. Discussion of why is Intranet an appropriate tool for building organizational memory,
2. Exploration of potential advantages for building organizational memory with Intranets,
3. Development of an implementation model and steps,
4. Discovery of related practices, status, and methods used by organizations.

For example:

- a. Are Intranets used as a tool for organizational memory building?
- b. Do organizations requires or encourages employees to document their professional experiences and expertise on the Intranets?
- c. Do organizations use Intranet activities as a formal indicator of performance?
- d. What methods, tools, and procedures are used to measure the performance of employees Intranet activities?
- e. What are the impacts on employee roles?
- f. What are employees perceptions of Intranets role in organizational memory building?

The concept of organizational memory is broad and fragmented. Its meaning and construct validity is not well established (Kim 1993). This study makes the following assumptions to limit the scope of discussion.

1. This study does not challenge the construct validity of organizational memory.
2. This study adopts the definitions of organizational memory from existing literature.
3. This study does not imply that Intranets can or shall entirely replace organizational memory. It only examines the possibility of using Intranets as a tool to bridge temporal individual memory and organizational memory.

Background

Organizational memory and organizational learning are both important, but distinct functions of organizational development. Organizational memory is the information an organization possesses through individuals, documents, and information systems. Organizational learning is increasing the organization capacity to take effective actions (Kim 1993). To build a better organizational memory is not the ultimate goal. It is the means to achieve organizational learning that subsequently leads to effective decisions and actions.

Thus, an effective organizational memory system must possess certain characteristics to facilitate organizational learning. As Karl E. Weick suggested: "I f an organization is to learn anything, then the distribution of its memory, the accuracy of that memory, and the conditions under which that memory is treated as a constraint become crucial characteristics of organizing" (Weick 1979: 206). In other words, an ideal organizational memory system must achieve a certain level of distribution capability and accuracy of information. It also must not become an obstacle of creative activities and innovation.

A crucial issue for organizational learning is how individual learning is transferred to the organization. Analogous to organizational learning, an important issue of organizational memory building is how individual memory is transferred to organizations. Thus, more research efforts should focus on how individual observations and learning outcomes can become a more permanent part of an organization memory system.

Definition of Organizational Memory

Although organizational memory has received a great deal of attention, its meaning varies in literature. For example, some researchers suggest that organizational memory include cause maps, architecture, strategic orientations, and standard operating

procedures (Hall 1984) (March and Simon 1958). Others believe that it includes past events, promises, goals, assumptions, behaviors, discoveries, inventions, evaluations, and so on (March & Olsen 1976) (Argyris and Schon 1978).

This paper adopts the definition suggested by Walsh and Ungson (1991). They believe organizational memory is stored information from an organization history. This is a broad definition of organizational memory. It simply suggests that memory is stored information of an organization past. It does not specify where or how the information is stored. In other words, information can be stored anywhere in any formats using any medium, as long as it is retrievable to be used in decision-making tasks. Walsh and Ungson describe six retention facilities to store organizational memory. The first five are internal facilities, including individuals, culture, transformation, structure, and ecology. The last one, external archives, is not a part of the organization.

Organizations are dynamic entities. Most of the five internal storage facilities stated above are not permanent components. Frequently, the state of the organization when information is needed may not be the same as when the information was learned. Critical decision information may become irretrievable from the organizational memory system, due to the dynamic nature of its components. Relearning of a previously learned information may become necessary.

Among the five internal storage facilities, individuals are probably the most dynamic. Even if a person remains a part of the organization, information in the individual memory system may become inaccessible due to a variety of reasons such as memory lost, promotion or transfer, work overload, organizational politics, personality conflicts, and so on. Individual memory bins are not limited to human brains or the so-called acit memory. Individuals memory bins include any device that is used by an individual to keep track of experiences and learning outcomes. Examples of individual memory bins include personal organizers, memos, notes, video and audiotapes, computer files, and the brain. These storage devices are not available to others, unless permitted by the owner. In other words, they are a part of the organizational memory only through the individual who possesses them.

To summarize, the reason for transferring information from individual memory bins to other organizational memory bins is to enhance its usability for other decision-makers in the organization.

Methodology

The method of data collection will be a combination of questionnaire survey, field observation, and interviews. The planned sampling frame is ten organizations that have implemented Intranets. Subjects will include both managerial and technical employees over a variety of ranks and positions.

Potential Contribution of the Study

The results of this study should be of great interest to users of Intranets. Currently, most users regard Intranets as a tool for information sharing and work collaborations. Few users realize the potential contribution of Intranets to building organizational memory. The potential outcomes of the study should provide insights on the managerial and implementation issues related to using Intranets as a tool for organizational memory building. The proposed model in the study should also give users a better understanding of the relationship between individuals, organizations, and Intranets.

This study is exploratory. The results shall also provide insights and directions for further research in the area.

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