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A Study of Best Practices in Designing and Supporting Effective Organizational Memory Systems

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Introduction

The use of information technologies to support organizational memory and assist in intelligence analysis and decision making has been examined by several authors (e.g., Stein and Zwass, 1995; Conklin, 1996; Huyhn et al. 1995; Chen et al. 1992; Ackerman, 1994; Walsh and Ungson, 1991; Huber, 1990). Information systems can turn informal knowledge and stored information (i.e., organizational memory) from media rich systems into actionable organizational knowledge (e.g. Conklin, 1996; Shum, 1997). Such systems make extensive use of organizational knowledge to effect shared understanding and learning by capturing and leveraging valuable information and making it widely available for use throughout the organization. The purpose of this study is to investigate the use of organizational memory systems in learning organizations. A conceptual model will be developed to provide managers with guidelines for developing and supporting organizational memory systems. In addition, the study will attempt to provide justification for investment in information technologies to support organizational memory.

Literature Review

Organizational memory is a generic concept to used to describe saving, representing, and sharing corporate knowledge (Durstewitz, 1994). Organizational memory includes that which can be conveyed by the written record, such as corporate manuals, databases, and filing systems (Ackerman, 1996) and by informal knowledge created and used in the process of creating formal results (Conklin, 1996). Walsh and Ungson (1991) refer to organizational memory as information from an organization's history that can be brought to bear on present decisions. Researchers and practitioners recognize organizational memory as an important factor in the success of an organization's operations and its responsiveness to the changes and challenges of its environment (e.g., Stein, 1995; Huber, 1991).

Growing information requirements magnify the need for sharing and disseminating information (Huynh et al., 1995). Information technologies contribute to the possibility of automated organizational memory systems in two ways, either by making recorded knowledge retrievable or by making individuals with knowledge accessible (Ackerman, 1996). An organization's past knowledge, explicitly dispersed through a variety of retention facilities (e.g., network servers, distributed databases, Intranets, etc.) can make an organization more accessible to its members. An organizational memory supported by information technology provides contents that are explicitly stored in information systems, can be modified promptly, and shared as necessary. Information systems designed to augment the interaction between a knowledge seeker and information provider could lead to higher levels of organizational effectiveness and learning.

Proposed Methodology

This study will employ a three-phase approach. The first phase will identify organizations that use information technology for organizational memory and organizational learning my means of a survey. Second, respondents who indicate their organizations both use information technologies for organizational memory and perceive value from the investment will be contacted for follow up visits and interviews. Finally a comparative case analysis of the organizational systems and methods will be conducted to develop a model for understanding, designing and supporting organizational memory systems. This approach will be useful in providing a view into the research domain that is characterized by both breadth and depth.

Expected Contributions

This study will be produce a conceptual model to help managers understand and value organizational memory systems by conveying the advantages, features, and functions of incorporating information technologies to gather, store and retrieve organizational knowledge. Using a best practice approach, the comparative case analysis will provide support for using organizational memory systems to influence productivity, effectiveness and competitiveness. Prescriptive guidance based on best practices for designing and supporting organizational memory systems will serve to validate Stein's (1995) recommendations to managers for addressing organizational memory issues. Finally, by examining organizational memory "in action," the study will identify valued contributions and assist in providing justification for investments in information technology to support and enhance organizational memory.

References

References available from the author upon request (dcroasdell@tamu.edu).