

TechnoLawyer Archive Newsletter/Post

Seth Rowland
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Re: TechnoFeature (3/16/00) -- What Is Knowledge Management?

DATE: 4/25/2000
AUTHOR: Seth Rowland
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TOPIC(S): Collaboration/Knowledge Management

Over the past decade I have been grappling with meaning and application of knowledge management to the legal community. It has become a buzz word that has been applied to everything from glorified file managers (like PCDocs) to comprehensive knowledge archives (like LRN) to interactive discussion database tools (like Lotus Notes) to neural network software (like Houdini and The Brain). Each of these items are approaches to the organization of knowledge. Each of these items are big first steps over what preceded them. But none of them represent a comprehensive Knowledge Management solution.

Their failures derive from the very term they seek to fill: "Knowledge Management" or KM. For a KM solution to work in any given setting there are three prerequisites:

1. KM requires an agreement on what constitutes "knowledge."
2. It requires a "manager" to manage to the flow of knowledge, filtering out the garbage and ranking the gems, and getting rid of the dated less relevant material.
3. It requires a user, client, customer, consumer of that knowledge.

Let me give a few illustrations.

GLORIFIED FILE MANAGERS

One large national law firm after years of running a "sneaker net" (floppy disk sharing) and then graduating to a "mass garbage dump" (an unregulated series of file servers with personal attorney directories) decided to create a KM solution. They bought firm-wide licenses to PCDOCs. They then formed a committee in each department (and firmwide) to come up with a series of descriptors for file types for each department. After over a year of discussion, they finally rolled out PCDOCs with big fanfare as their KM solution. A few comments.

1. The firm lost one year of knowledge while they were fighting over the descriptors. Knowledge before the rollout date didn't exist for all intents and purposes even though PCDOCs allows full-text boolean searches.
2. The firm neglected to code and categorize the vast knowledge base of files sitting on their file servers (and floppy disks).
3. The firm failed to designate knowledge managers to screen the files to create a dnyaset of "relevant" documents or precedents that were exemplar of the types of documents lawyers should draft and refer to.

Ultimately what this firm created was a massive file manager that had a rudimentary organizational scheme, no filtering or ranking. While there is a capability for advanced queries in PCDocs using full-text searching and boolean logic, I know of few attorneys who actually use this to its full potential. I have even heard of System Administrators

who turned over the full-text indexing feature because no-one used it and the indexes took up too much space and got corrupted too often.

COMPREHENSIVE KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS

LRN <<http://www.lrn.com>> has done what national law firms should have done years and years ago. There are hundreds of thousands of billable hours spent researching and drafting memos on topics that have been researched and drafted before. As a lawyer, I was directed to write dozens of them. As a savvy attorney, but not necessarily a profitable associate, I would send out feelers to anyone who had written on the particular topic before and then crib and update their work. With the introduction of SoftSolutions to my law firm, I did full-text searches regularly to find "knowledge". I was even dressed down a few times for "copying" the work of others and not doing fresh work -- as if this were a personal failing. I won't even address the memos that were blatantly assigned to run up billable hours.

LRN defines knowledge as a body of topical memos written by experts in the field. It offers a knowledge manager who filters the memos and does styling and editing. To the extent LRN fails to have maximum penetration, it is on two fronts. First on the client front, there is inertial resistance from the legal community to the concept of purchasing and relying on legal research done by strangers. The second is the failure to customize the delivery of knowledge to suit the requirements of each individual client with a unique composite memo that specifically addresses the question posed by the client. A system that would engage in a dialogue with the client to refine exactly what bits of knowledge the client requires and then to assemble a memo to suit those needs would truly be a KM solution that could change the way law is practiced.

DISCUSSION DATABASES

The problem with discussion databases as subscribers to Technolawyer will attest, is the inconsistency of the quality of the content and the volume of "irrelevant content". Neil does an admirable job filtering out non-meeting contributions and providing threads. But Neil fails to provide an archive or ability to search anything more than the MasterPosts. There are gems in these discussions. I may not be interested in a topic when it is discussed, but at a later time I may have need to review the discussion. Lotus Notes offers that historical archive, allowing both full text search, thread analysis and all sorts of views to sort and rank the information. It's query engine is quite powerful at using multiple criteria to identify and describe the information required. As Steve Lauer notes, the value of a Knowledge Base depends both on the amount and the quality of relevant information to the user. Unfortunately the two curves are in tension. The more contributors to the knowledge base the greater the likelihood that a relevant piece of information will be contributed but the lesser likelihood that the information will be of adequate quality.

NEURAL NETS

A while back there was a thread discussing Houdini, an old DOS program and The Brain, an windows/web program. Both were and are brilliant program for organizing knowledge in a non-hierarchical fashion. They allowed one to create links between bits of information in much the same way the brain functions to create associations with knowledge and experience. The web thereby created let you brainstorm. Rather than focusing on a hierarchical schema for information, you would create links between objects and their nearest most relevant neighbors, creating in essence multidimensional outlines. I have worked with and abandoned these programs. They worked as personal knowledge managers an extension of your own neural net. I couldn't get anyone else to enter information to extend my neural net. Nor could I effectively extract and package the information in that net for others to use.

HARD WORK

Knowledge management requires an agreement on the type of knowledge that the consumers of that knowledge wish to secure. Do the consumers require detailed memos or quick answers to technical questions? KM should deliver that knowledge in a timely and attractive package, rather than one size fits all. KM requires real managers. Managers can be individuals exercising judgment or they can be software agents that filter, rank and extract information, or some combination. Vast repositories of knowledge are useful but insufficient. Without management that true potential of KM will not be realized. And management is hard expensive work. It is tedious and dull. But properly managed, the time saved as well as the increased quality of information on which to base decisions is more than worth the cost.

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Community Manager's Notes

[CM's Note: Regarding Seth's criticism of The TechnoLawyer Community's lack of a searchable archive, please rest assured that we are working on this project. The TechnoLawyer Archive will contain all the best material since January 1997, plus updated and supplemental information for nearly every post! In addition, you'll be able to conduct searches in a number of different ways. I myself plan to use the archive to track the development of Ross Kodner's huge signature block over the past three years. ;-)
But seriously, thank you for your patience; we are working as quickly as possible while still maintaining our commitment to superior quality. -- Neil J. Squillante]

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