

knowldgWORKS News Number 27 February 17, 2000
A Monthly Newsletter Dedicated to Discussing Practical
Ideas about Knowledge Management

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KnowBits

- a. Survey - Knowledge Management - What's Important

What are the critical factors in a knowledge management effort? Take a moment to complete this survey. You can email your responses to rkaplan@accsys-corp.com. The survey will also be posted online at www.accsys-corp.com.

1. In order to launch a knowledge management effort, the most important factor that will contribute to its success is:
 - a. Management sponsorship
 - b. Sponsorship among the participants
 - c. Organizational maturity
 - d. Trust in the organization
2. I believe that tools that facilitate knowledge management are:
 - a. Necessary for the success of the effort
 - b. Unnecessary for the success of the effort
 - c. Have no bearing on the success of the effort
3. My first step in carrying out a knowledge management effort would be:

- a. To determine if there was a problem to be solved by the effort.
 - b. To put together a plan for knowledge management.
 - c. To gather requirements for a knowledge management effort.
 - d. To begin a knowledge management process to "get the ball rolling."
4. Knowledge Management efforts can only be successful when there is a definite ROI (return on investment) on the effort.
- a. I agree
 - b. I disagree
5. Knowledge Management efforts need individuals within the organization dedicated to managing knowledge.
- a. I agree
 - b. I disagree

As a subscriber to knowldgWORKS News and participant of the survey, you will receive a copy of the results of this survey.

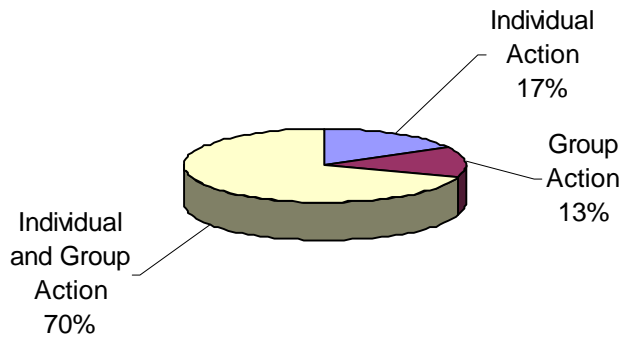
b. knowldgWORKS News Discussion

The knowldgWORKS News discussion area is up and available for you to discuss ideas and questions about the topics of knowldgWORKS News. We have seeded the discussion with some questions and topics but look forward to your participation. Please come and post your questions and start or participate in discussion threads. It will benefit all of us.

c. Last Month's Survey Results - Individual vs. Group Knowledge

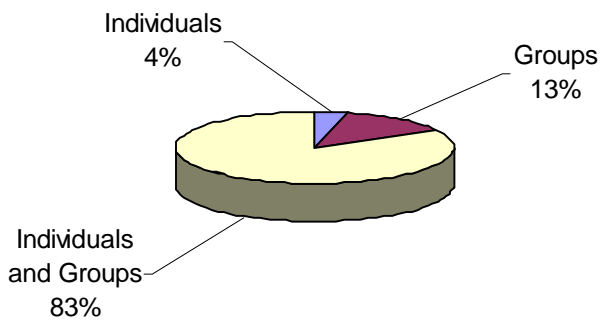
A total of 53 people responded to the first survey. Here are the results.

1. For the most part do you believe knowledge originates through:

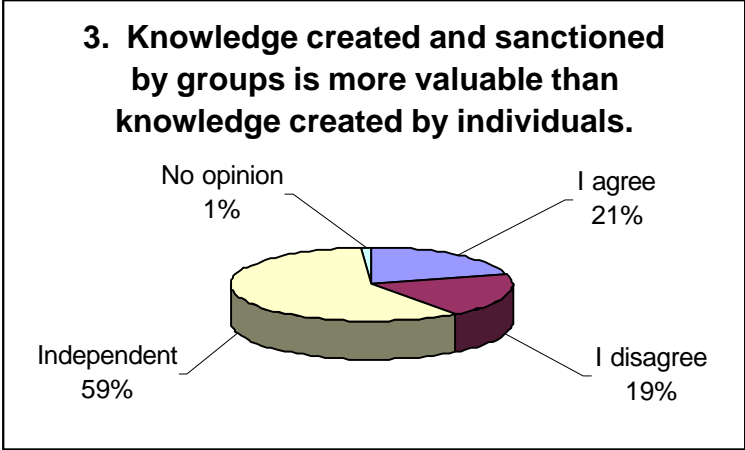


The majority of respondents believe that knowledge originates through both group and individual action.

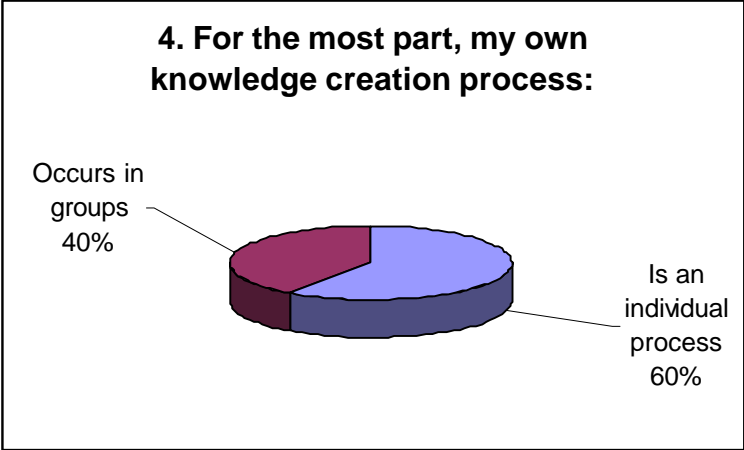
2. For knowledge to be of value, it can be created by:



The majority of individuals believe that knowledge is of value when created by both individuals and groups. I would interpret this to mean that regardless of how knowledge is created (individually or by group) it can have value.



Question 3 should confirm the responses of question 2. It is the same question asked in a slightly different way. As you can see, the majority of respondents believe that the value of knowledge is not determined by who sanctions it.



Interestingly, the majority of respondents indicated that their own knowledge creation process was an individual one.

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The Fragility of Knowledge
February 9, 2000

The Fragility of Knowledge

The other day while peaking my head out of the closet to see what was going on, I attended a meeting about knowledge management. Sometimes as I sit and listen to the 1000th discussion on knowledge capture, the rhythm of the

words takes me and I have an epiphany of my own. Such was the case the other day and a new concept was born to me.

Listening to the discussions about creating and capturing knowledge, I began to think about whether or not knowledge could break - an odd idea. You can't really hold knowledge. Therefore, you can't drop knowledge. Therefore, it can't fall and hit the floor with the resultant shattering into thousands of individual pieces. Knowledge is an intangible entity. But if you can create and capture knowledge, can't you sometimes break knowledge, rendering it unusable? Or, perhaps, the knowledge, unknown to the collector, may have already been broken when it was collected. My epiphany was that there might be an unmet need, and thusly an opportunity - namely a whole line of products consisting of labels, tee shirts, license plates, and coffee cups with witty sayings such as, "Fragile, Contains Knowledge, Handle With Care." I realize that this tongue-in-cheek idea may be a little far-fetched, but I wonder if the metaphor will stretch enough to give us some insight into the potential reasons for both non-functional knowledge repositories (knowledge repositories that are not used) and knowledge capture problems.

One of the common reasons given for non-functional knowledge management is that the repository was built to hold knowledge that nobody uses. Unused knowledge becomes stale and even more unusable. Using our definition for knowledge, "that which enables you to do things," we would have to say that the repository contents do not enable anyone to do anything. Indeed, we could say that the knowledge in the repository is "broken." It does not matter how the knowledge became broken - it only matters that the knowledge is no longer useful because it has lost its enabling characteristic.

Assume that a certain naturally occurring plant can cure a certain disease, and that certain "natural" health practitioners know this. A subset of these practitioners also know that the plant is no longer grown and the active ingredient cannot be synthesized. Although the knowledge concerning the use of the plant to cure the disease is still accurate, it is useless because of a change in circumstances in the environment.

Collecting, eRecording, eCapturing, or maintaining broken knowledge is a waste of resources. Therefore, two

things are important - the ability to recognize broken knowledge and the ability to protect knowledge during the collection process so that it does not end up broken.

Collection With Breakage

Collecting knowledge is like being an archeologist. Stomping around roughly without care will result in danger to potential knowledge artifacts. How is it possible to damage the knowledge you are trying to collect?

Let's assume you are collecting knowledge through an interview in which you record the knowledge you need. When the interview is complete you decide to test the knowledge you have collected by sharing it with several individuals but the tests just are not working. What do you do? (How do you fix the knowledge?)

You return to the knowledge source, and upon review you learn that you left out a most important aspect of the knowledge - namely where and how it should be used. What was missing from the original knowledge collection process was the context or setting in which the knowledge was used.

Breakage during collection can occur for other reasons. The knowledge source may not be able to fully articulate the knowledge they have. This may be especially true in the case of expert knowledge where the knowledge may be so ingrained that the experts can no longer identify discrete aspects of their knowledge.

Lack of cooperation may also contribute to breakage. It may be that an individual or group from which you are trying to solicit knowledge is unwilling to share the knowledge. This may be especially true where the trust level is low or where the group believes that it must hold on to its knowledge in order to hold onto its power. In either case, the transferred knowledge may be broken.

Other Kinds of Knowledge Breakage

Knowledge may break over time as the underlying information or data supporting the knowledge changes. This can occur because of discoveries that modify or invalidate the knowledge or because of the lack of relevance as time progresses. For example, all of the knowledge associated

with the flatness of the Earth, "broke" when it was discovered that the Earth was not flat.

Another contributing factor of breakage is organizational change. If an organization has a directory of "who to go to for what", over time as the people designated in the directory leave the organization or attain new positions, the directory breaks if it is not maintained in coordination with these changes.

Breakage can also occur through forgetting. Forgetting can occur at an individual or organizational level. On an individual level, for example, it can manifest itself when an important ingredient is left out of a recipe. Preparing the recipe results in an unexpected product and a broken recipe unless the missing ingredient can be remembered or discovered. In the organizational setting knowledge can be forgotten over time, through changes in personnel, through a lack of formal maintenance, or through carelessness.

Although knowledge is a very valuable and fragile entity, I also believe it can be fairly resilient depending on how it is treated. Hopefully this discussion of how knowledge can be "broken", provides clues as to how knowledge may be safeguarded and protected.

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The knowldgWORKS News is written in its entirety by Randy Kaplan and translated into readable English 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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