Knowledge Management and Information Technology

Guest Editors: Christopher Lueg, Xavier Alamán

Joint issue with Novática and Informatik/Informatique

2 Useful references on Knowledge Management – Xavier Alamán, Guest Editor

4 Knowledge Management and Information Technology: Relationship and Perspectives – Christopher Lueg, Guest Editor

8 Knowing is a Human Act – Richard McDermott

Many companies discovered that leveraging knowledge using information technology involves community building as well as information technology.

11 The Paradox of “Knowledge Management” – Jacky Swan and Harry Scarbrough

An analysis of what is written in the name of on Knowledge Management reveals that Knowledge Management itself suffers from the problems it is trying to address.

15 State-of-Practice of Knowledge Management Systems: Results of an Empirical Study – Ronald Maier

A empirical study in the German speaking countries shows that up to date information about the state-of-practice of KMS and barriers to their successful application is scarce.

24 Enabling Distributed Knowledge Management: Managerial and Technological Implications – Matteo Bonifacio, Paolo Bouquet and Paolo Traverso

The architecture of KM systems reflects an objectivistic epistemology. Adopting such a view has dramatic consequences at an architectural, managerial and technological level.


A design approach for virtual workspaces, combines data mining techniques for refining lower-level models with a reverse engineering cycle to create upper-level models.

36 Data Mining of Collaborative Virtual Workspaces: The “Space-Data-Memory” Framework – Simeon J. Simoff and Robert P. Biuk-Aghai

Research aims to extract insights from vast amounts of data about actions and content of collaborative project activities and reuse knowledge in the development of new workspaces.

40 Communication-oriented Computer Support for Knowledge Management – Volkmar Pipek and Markus Won

We look at perspectives on support for knowledge management: communication on information artifacts, as information artifacts, and on infrastructures for information artifacts.

45 Some Critical Remarks in Favour of IT-Based Knowledge Management – Reinhard Riedl

We shall discuss the state of the art in contemporary knowledge management with respect to processes, tools, people, and the role and potential impact of information technology.

51 Knowledge Management in a Law Firm – Cristina Rodríguez Morcón, José Pérez García, Juan Alberto Siguénza Pizarro

A legal knowledge management tool was developed is the result of the combined efforts of end users, knowledge management area, systems area and an external collaborating company.

56 SINTAGMA: From Information to Knowledge – Joaquín Bastos Amigo

Sintagma is an integral information management platform. It is capable of completing 100% of the information cycle in a software solution.

60 IT Tools for Knowledge Management: A Study of the Current Situation – Ruth Cobos, José A. Esquivel and Xavier Alamán

We describe a classification for KM systems based on the support the system gives to collaborative work and the focus it has on providing a structure for the knowledge.

66 Knowledge Management: A Trip Round Europe – Fabián García Pastor

We take a look at knowledge management applications in Europe, their manufacturers and some of the main projects and lines of research.

72 Efficient Management of Multilingual Electronic Conferences – Daniel Pimienta, Catherine Dhaussy

Web conferences often fail in communication aspects. We claim for an alternative approach focusing more on methodology than software to disseminate information.
Communication-oriented Computer Support for Knowledge Management

Volkmar Pipek and Markus Won

In this contribution we discuss possible approaches to exploring new directions in support for knowledge management with computers. We consider networked computers in their role as communication media, and look at three perspectives on communication support for knowledge management: communication on information artifacts, (persistent) communications as information artifacts, and communication on infrastructures for information artifacts. We describe some basic ideas as well as providing some examples of possible functionality from the literature.

Keywords: Knowledge Management, Computer-Mediated Communication, Negotiation Support, Discourse Support, Expertise Management

1 Introduction

Computers manage knowledge within organizations in many different ways. As “computing devices”, they offer new methods for detecting useful information in large data sets, as supported by data mining and information retrieval methods. As “storage devices”, they support storage and fast, flexible access to large volumes of information (data warehousing). Following the differentiation of data, information as “meaningful” data, and knowledge as “interpreted, contextualized and understood” information, these solutions operate below the level of producing knowledge.

As a “medium”, networked computers offer support for presentation, cooperation and communication within knowledge management:

- The development of computers as multi-media tools now allows for very sophisticated ways of presenting information. This permits other people to interpret and understand new information more easily.

- Cooperation support for knowledge management allows localized information repositories to support workgroups, and provides other cooperative means such as co-browsing tools (browsing the web with a group of distributed users), recommender systems (systems that support the rating of information within a group of “peers”) and expertise finders (systems that help to find the right expert within an organization).

- Communication support for knowledge management cannot be clearly distinguished from the former point, since cooperation to some extent requires communication. But the role that communication tools themselves play in the knowledge management process can be improved. This contribution aims to discuss this issue and highlight some existing approaches.

As we will see with some of the examples, the combination of the categories described above also provides numerous opportunities to improve current approaches.

Knowledge Transfer: Environment and Process

In an impressive study of the work undertaken at a telephone helpline, [Ackerman/Halverson 98] showed that the classical metaphor of knowledge management as maintaining an “organizational memory” as the guiding line of computer support for knowledge management falls short when discussing support for “knowledge work”. We prefer to use the metaphor of “knowledge landscapes” when referring to the organizational environment where knowledge work takes place. We feel this metaphor clarifies several aspects:

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• Knowledge representations (information artifacts) are not located or even stored in one particular form in one particular place.
• Knowledge lives. Different fields of knowledge (i.e. its real and virtual representations) are not only distinguished by their content or topic, but also by their structure, their degree of persistence and their growth. Fields of knowledge may merge and stimulate each other’s development. The usefulness also depends on their maintenance (“gardening”).
• As in landscapes, the presence and visibility of relevant aspects of the knowledge environment are important to provide orientation and quick access.
• Knowledge workers are situated in a knowledge landscape. They have a specific perspective on the knowledge representations of their work context, which they also change according to the work they do. Knowledge representations are not restricted to digital storage media. There is a smooth transition between the virtual and the real environment of knowledge work. It is especially important to realize this for a task-oriented perspective on the processes of knowledge work.

Our perspective also is closely related to the notion of communities as groups of people with a shared issue or interest, and an ability and interest to communicate regarding that issue. In many organizations, communities are informal but important promoters of knowledge transfer. Knowledge landscapes (with a focus on representations of knowledge) and knowledge communities (with a focus on people and processes) are the key concepts for this contribution.

But what is the role of communication within knowledge management?

Managing knowledge also means providing people with opportunities to learn. [Nonaka/Takeuchi 95] described a knowledge transfer based on knowledge externalization along information artifacts as a process of de-contextualization (abstraction) during the creation of an information artifact, and of re-contextualization through the perception and interpretation (in a new problem context) of the information artifact. Usually, re-contextualization work is left to the knowledge seeker. But communication support can connect the knowledge seeker to an expert, to someone who knows an expert, or simply to someone who is also interested in the problem.

Another important aspect to mention is the establishment of trust as the crucial point in knowledge management. Larry Prusak, Director of IBM’s Institute for Knowledge Management, pointed out the social tasks someone has to perform in the process of gaining knowledge from someone else1:

1. These bulletpoints are taken from an invited talk L. Prusak gave on the ECSCW’2001 conference in Bonn. This example may also be found in [Cohen/Prusak 01].

• Who has knowledge related to my problem? Can I trust his or her expertise? Expertise finding also is a social task.
• How do I make him/her lent me his/her time? Negotiating this is a social task.
• How do I make him/her care for me and my problems? This is also to be negotiated.
• Can I expose my vulnerability, i.e. not knowing something I maybe should have known, to him/her? Establishing this level of trust is deeply related to the personalities of both parties.

These are points we cannot solve by system design (maybe not even by mediated communication), but integrating communication channels gives users the chance to explore the possibilities here.

So, communication support can help to improve efficiency. We describe possible directions of research (and first examples) in three ways:

• Support for communication in knowledge landscapes: Communication with others can help people to locate, interpret and understand electronically stored information artifacts. Support for this kind of communication is also part of the co-browsing idea, and it is also the aim of “expert finders” to initiate communication.
• Support for communication as part of a knowledge landscape: Communication, made persistent, can result in information artifacts that are both easy to create and easy to understand.
• Support for communication about knowledge landscapes: Communication support for discussing the structures and processes of the knowledge infrastructures themselves.

The baseline of the scientific challenge here is how to integrate and combine the spheres of communication and the information artifact storage and presentation. In the following, we will discuss that, addressing some work already done here.

Before starting, we want to point out that we are well aware of the preference for face-to-face communication, especially for knowledge-related communication. But especially new forms of organizations with their differing degrees of virtualization call for new approaches to knowledge transfer support where face-to-face communication is not possible.

2 Communication in Knowledge Landscapes

Several approaches already exist, with varying emphases on supporting communication in knowledge landscapes. The BSCW system <http://bscw.gmd.de/>, the different implementations of the “Answer Garden” idea (e.g. [Ackerman/McDonald 96]), the D_E-environment [Sumner/Shum 98] and the ZENO-tool [Gordon/Karacapilidis 97], are well-known examples, as well as several tools which have been used for computer supported cooperative learning (CSCL), [Stahl 00].

All attempts to tackle the problem have common features: they can store information artifacts like electronic documents, texts, etc. or collections of these, and also allow communication related to the information artifacts. In the D_E-environment it is possible to refer to sections and lines. These are then visualized together with the communicated statement. In the BSCW system, the discussion forums are stored in the same directory as the files they belong to. The ZENO-system allows relations to spatial data in contributions for online-discussions [Rinner 99]. More generally, it is possible here to speak of a connection and visualization of articulations to context information.
Similar systems have been developed for synchronous communication (e.g. for persistent chats related to document paragraphs, see [Churchill et al. 00]).

Text-based communication is common to all these approaches, though. In times of growing bandwidths one has to consider whether multi-media communication is to play a role. First attempts have already existed for some time in the field of synchronous video communication by application sharing functionality [Iacucci et al. 98], sporadically also in the field of asynchronous multi-medial communication (e.g. [Sgouropoulou et al. 00]).

Besides the exploration of the opportunities multi-media support offers, mobile devices have to be integrated as well. First approaches also exist here, e.g. [Fagrell/Johannesson 02] report on the use of mobile devices in the work of radio journalists. The information available on the mobile device not only covers the text and pictures of published articles and reports of collaborating journalists, but also information on the articles’ author (i.e. contact information). Contact can be established via mobile phone, and because the knowledge management system enables both to refer to the same information artifact (the article/radio feature), explaining details of the article is much easier. Further exploration of the role played by mobile equipment such as laptops, organizers/PDAs and mobile phones and how contextualization takes place could be supported here.

We believe research in applied computer science is faced with the following questions:

- How to improve the representation of contexts of communication?
- Which automatisms (search agents, navigation agents, notification agents) might ease communication?
- Can any common rules for communication ergonomics or discourse ergonomics be found? Easier reference to relevant (parts of) information artifacts and to earlier contributions to a discussion are a first challenge.
- Will the efforts made actually result in the level of socialization needed to support the building of trust on the base of a computer based communication? How will success be measured?

3 Communication as a Content of Knowledge Landscapes

The text-based communication in the tools described in the last section – made persistent – may also be used as a resource. Observing a discourse (a goal-directed discussion) allows following argumentation lines in a natural way, and may ease the understanding of information artifacts. Examples of the particular value of this kind of communication are the “Frequently Asked Question” concept often found on the Internet, as well as the various examples of using “socratic dialogue” and its derivatives in education. Normally, technical support for this kind of communication only permits navigation along the process of the discussion or a full-text search to obtain information. Some approaches try to achieve improvements here.

In the Answer Garden architecture, the communication between the person seeking advice and the expert, which is established within the system when the information seeker does not find sufficient information in the “organizational memory”, becomes itself a new information artifact in the organizational memory. While in the first version the expert’s answer was just stored “as is”, in the second version, possibilities for further editorial treatment of the communication have been added [Ackerman/McDonald 96].

Other approaches focus not only on the contents of the communication, but also on the visualization of communication structures in order to supply orientation and navigation possibilities.

The most widespread approach here is that of Issue-Based Information Systems, which were invented in a discursive design approach by [Rittel/Kunz 70] in order to solve “whicked” problems (problems with several complicating features). The crucial point of the paper consists of the classification of discourse contributions into “issues”, “positions” and “arguments”. Issues will start a discussion thread, related positions may then be expressed, which are proved (pro) or denied (contra) by arguments. Thus a discussion structure is built that is organized not just temporally, and whose categories may be helpful when navigating within it. The IBIS approach has been transposed by computer science into a series of tools (e.g. gIBIS – [Conklin/Begemann 88], ZENO – [Gordon/Karacaplidis 97]). In ZENO, an improvement has been added which allows calculating statements about the current state of a discussion thread (“dead” discussion thread, “decided” discussion thread). Criticism arose from the unrealistic expectations of users towards the IBIS approach [Isenmann/Reuter 97], from observed objections of users to categorizing their contributions, and a principally critical view of the restrictive influence of given categories [Suchman 93]. A benefit justifying these costs for an extended categories system may only result from a large number of participants in a discourse, when providing an overview of the discourse becomes problematic.

Another approach of visualization of communication is the Babble-prototype [Erickson et al. 99], which not only visualizes discussion structures (in persistent chatrooms), but also conversation constellations (the persons participating) of a chat. The single participants of a chat are visualized more or less centrally depending on their communication intensity. Chats are stored together with the conversation constellation and it is also intended to permit searches for special conversation constellations.

In the concept of the ArguMaps [Rinner 99], in the context of computer supported discourses in urban planning, information about the state of the discussions is displayed according to the regions they refer to (districts, other areas) in a three-dimensional visualization of these regions. Further geographical data may be added to the visualization.

Another important idea is that of not only making past communication available, but also stimulating new, further communication. This is done by a respective visualization of and access to communication partners. If, in the Answer Garden, someone searching for help can’t find help in the organizational memory, an expert belonging to this section will be integrated as a communication partner. Other approaches generally sup-
port locating experts (see [Yimam/Kobsa 02] for approaches in this regard).

Obviously the above mentioned approaches of using “stored” communication as an information artifact are always compromises between the effort required by treatment (e.g. editorial) over and above pure storage, and the potential profit generated by further use. The key question for these approaches is: Which one is the “right” compromise? We have described above how users rejected classifications of discussion contributions in order to simplify navigation when reusing them. The cognitive cost of categorization was estimated to be higher than the benefit of easier navigation. Possibly more subtle graduations of such treatments (here: categorization as an act of formalizing with a subsequent benefit) may be a way to find the “right” compromise. [Selvin/Buckingham Shum 00] take this road with their “Rapid Knowledge Construction” method of solving the problem of computer support for meetings. Several levels of formalization when storing meeting contents (from simple videotaping to hypermedial work- and visualization methods) may be employed variably. To date, however, there has been no broad experience within the application fields.

We believe the projected cost-benefit equation is the main issue. This results in the following research challenges:

- What would a good cost-benefit relationship look like?
- The costs often appear at the workplace level, whereas the benefit only appears at the team or organization level. How could transparency be improved to reveal these contexts to the single user? Which visualizations of such a “knowledge logistics” support would make sense?
- Which organizational measures (building of conventions, etc.) could ease this problem?

### 4 Communication about Knowledge Landscapes

The communication about the categories, representations and processes related to stored information artifacts, which is part of the communication about the knowledge landscape as a whole, takes on a special role. For this purpose, it has already been suggested that methods for participatory design (PD) for the construction and reconfiguration of information structures [Buckingham Shum 97] should also be used.

The primary motivation of PD-approaches was improving system design, i.e. the quality of work and computer use. When designing knowledge landscapes, a certain affinity regarding their perception and interpretation by the persons supported is also indispensable for an efficient support of knowledge exchange processes (in the simplest case e.g. shared naming conventions for directories and files in repositories). [Shipman/ Marshall 99] have pointed out that even apparently fixed category systems are continually re-interpreted and used according to the new interpretations. It is inherent to these dynamics that “bottom-up” or “participatory” approaches are the only choice. Category and representation systems which are not flexible enough to support these processes tend to be ignored by users. An ongoing communication and an explicit alignment of categories and interpretations (as a maintenance effort for the knowledge landscape) is especially important in work contexts with a heterogeneous member structure (e.g. in virtual organizations).

Appropriate visualizations of (parts of) the knowledge landscape or useful abstractions of it can be valuable information artifacts for supporting these discussions. These could also be manipulable to illustrate how new proposals would change them. The Ontolingua Server [Farquhar et al. 97], which allows ontologies to be collaboratively built and modified (although in this case these are made for automatism, not for humans), could serve as an example here.

So the research challenges here are:

- How can the topologies of knowledge be visualized for a heterogeneous user group? How can they be manipulated and extended?
- To what degree should the tools used be tolerable for end users?
- The (re-)configuration of a knowledge landscape usually does not belong to the primary work task of its users/inhabitants. Again we have a cost-benefit-balance to explore.
- In the process of (re-)configuration, the necessary modes of cooperation and coordination must also be explored.

### 5 Conclusion

In this contribution we have described a direction of research on computer support for knowledge management that we expect to be very fruitful in the near future. By considering computer-mediated communication as an integral part of system support for knowledge landscapes, we can complement current ideas in knowledge management (characterized by terms like “Organizational Learning” (e.g. [Argyris/Schön 96], “Social Capital” (e.g. [Cohen/Prusak 01]), and “Knowledge Communities” (e.g. [Lesser et al. 00]) in their tendency to stress the social dimension of processes of knowledge transfer. The goal of our concept is to tear down the artificial border that history has placed between existing information and communication spaces.

We have described three dimensions of the role that computer-mediated communication can play in knowledge management:

- Communication integrated in knowledge landscapes can help by providing a communication channel to an expert who can help to apply the information stored in documents to the current problem.
- Communication, made persistent, as an information artifact in a knowledge landscape can result in easy to produce and easy to understand information artifacts.
- Communication on knowledge landscapes can support retaining a reflective level with all participants in knowledge management processes. This is necessary for maintaining a shared understanding and perspective of the artifacts in the knowledge landscape.

When computer-mediated communication is related to knowledge management, it is important to explore what we call “communication ergonomics”, that means that the communication should be as easy as possible, e.g. by allowing easy reference to the content of the information artifacts shared by both parties.
In describing these ideas, we also describe the road we are taking in our research project “Olvio” (“Organizational Learning in Virtual Organizations”, http://www.olvio.de/), where we follow these trajectories in the context of virtual organizations in the fields of consulting and IT-services.

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