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INTEGRATED INFORMATION REPOSITORIES AND INTRANET PORTALS FOR EFFECTIVE INSTITUTIONAL KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT (IKM)

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Abstract:

Knowledge has been accepted as the most valuable asset by academicians and also by the industry practioners. It is the only resource which will help organisations remain competitive in today's increased era of globalisation. This research paper reviews the published literature outlining the importance of knowledge management, various platforms enabling the knowledge management activities – creation, dissemination and archival. The paper also highlights how an intranet portal plays critical role in enhancing the collaboration among employees and facilitates the knowledge sharing.

KEY WORDS:

Knowledge Management, Knowledge Repositories, Intranet Portals

INTRODUCTION

World economy has moved from agriculture revolution to industrial revolution, and then to information revolution and eventually to something, now, known as Knowledge revolution. Many argue that knowledge has become the main competitive tool for many businesses and Stacey (2001) claimed that it is a major asset in organisations today. The knowledge revolution and information explosion is known to all and is no more a new concept. Managing the ever growing information has always been a challenge in growing organisations. The information is growing in multifold manner and is captured in different forms and formats, across the various applications and databases in the organisation. The scattered information consumed lot of time in analyzing the data in order to make informed and strategic decisions. This has necessitated the quest for infrastructure that can capture, integrate, archive, manage and retrieve knowledge as and when the need arise. Many firms have deployed technology such as simpler intranet platforms and have undertaken formal and informal knowledge management initiatives designed to improve process performance, increase customer responsiveness and spur innovation.

Corporations employing a dispersed set of personnel are in a quandary nowadays. Obvious deficit of crucial and equitable information impedes the efficiency of the workforce. On the other hand, availability of information/knowledge in an easy to access and browse, through a single gateway that unifies access to the organisation-level information, helps employees make better and informed decisions and increase knowledge creation activity. In today's economy, knowledge is increasingly recognized as the key underpinning resource and is valued the most in an organisation. Most of the organisations, who have

understood the importance of their knowledge assets, have started exploring the better technology solutions for managing the information and knowledge. Employees want better information faster. They needed solutions that are simple to deploy, cost-effective and easy to use for their employees for sharing and distributing information throughout their organisation.

Intranet portals are among the well known technology solutions that create platform through which information can be created, managed, and shared more easily. Most of the intranet portals allow personalisation views so that right information is targeted to the right user. It not only enhances the collaboration among employees but also integrates the information available in various databases and applications. These portals help organisations build their information repositories capturing the various datasets, pieces of information, and valuable knowledge. The enabled access to these repositories act as catalysts enhancing the employee productivity as they no longer need to look for various means and methods to retrieve the information. The information is made available to them in a single platform in a much seamless and integrated manner. The intranets with access to the integrated information acts as a strategic tool for making informed decisions with increased information sharing and enhanced collaboration among employees in an organisation.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT:

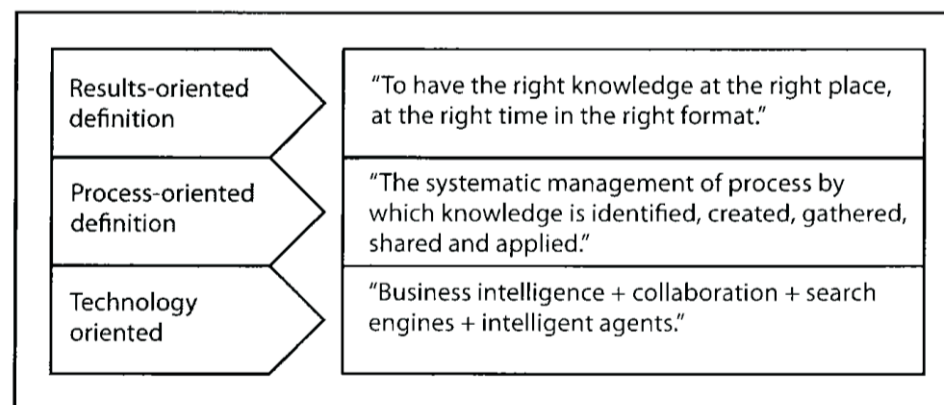
There are three important constituents in any organisations – physical, financial and human. Gilley, Eggland, and Gilley (2002) referred to these constituents as Organisational resources. Out of all these three, it is the human resource that plays an important role in creating knowledge and offers the greatest potential for organisational efficiency and effectiveness. The human resource is the only resource among the three which has a unique ability to think and to leverage knowledge for greater performance. In today's dynamic world, the ability to leverage knowledge becomes a competitive advantage. This leveraging and resulting advantage have become commonly known as Knowledge Management (KM).

Knowledge is a resource that is difficult to imitate and has to be accrued over a period of time. According to Hijri (2001) "Knowledge is the only factor of production that is not subject to diminishing returns". Knowledge is different from information –The information is defined as "useful data" or "value-added data" while knowledge goes beyond that. According to Duffy (2000), knowledge is information that has been enriched through interpretation, analysis, and context.

There is no universally accepted definition of knowledge management. But there are numerous definitions proffered by experts. A more technical and precise connotation showcases knowledge management as an ongoing value generating process, the value engendered from the vast pool of intellectual and knowledge based assets which the organizations possess.

A motley group of definitions arise to the fore when one deliberates upon knowledge management as a discipline. All these definitions hint at the same idea but each one focuses on a particular aspect of knowledge management (Fig 1).

Fig 1 – What is KM?



Source: Benjamins, V.R., "Knowledge Management in Knowledge-Intensive Organizations", Intelligent Software Components (2001).

For example, a results-oriented definition may state that knowledge management is “to have the right knowledge at the right place, at the right time in the right format.” On the other hand, a process-oriented definition may describe knowledge management as “the systematic management of processes by which knowledge is identified, created, gathered, shared and applied.” And a technology-oriented definition may present a formula for knowledge management as “business intelligence + collaboration + search engines + intelligent agents.”

Stacey (2001) noted that knowledge is in the process of constant development. Knowledge Management is multi-disciplinary and diverse in context and application. Groff and Jones (2003) proposed that Knowledge Management is as “the tools, techniques and strategies to retain, analyse, organise, improve and share business expertise”.

Shelda Debowski (2006) defines Knowledge Management as “the process of identifying, capturing, organising and disseminating the intellectual assets that are critical to the organisation's long-term performance”. Ron Young, CEO/CKO, Knowledge Associates International mentions that “Knowledge Management is the discipline of enabling individuals, teams and entire organisation to collectively and systematically create, share and apply knowledge, to better achieve their objectives” (www.knowledgemanagementonline.com) (<http://www.knowledge-management-online.com/>). 'Knowledge Management (KM) is the set of professional practices which improves the capabilities of the organization's human resources and enhances their ability to share what they know.'

NEED FOR KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT:

The competitive nature of organisational life has evolved from machine-based industrialisation to human knowledge-based innovation. Organisational leaders have realized the importance of creating, capturing, nurturing and sharing the knowledge for increased efficiency, productivity and performance at all the levels in organisation.

Hibbard (1997) reported that organisations with knowledge management initiatives realise increased innovation, enhanced efficiency and flexibility, better decision making, faster responsiveness, improved quality, reduced duplication and increased employee productivity. McKellar (2000) reported that organisations look to knowledge management programs to improve competitiveness of the firm, benefit product innovation, grow revenue and profits, help with employee development, facilitate decision-making, and achieve faster response time in handling business issues and customer needs. Burnett, Illingworth and Webster (2004) supported this claim stating the ability to create and use knowledge “appears to increase the organisation's ability to develop competitive advantage”

Many companies, with a strong senior management commitment, right organisational culture have deployed knowledge management initiatives have experienced some benefits, and, contributed to organisational performance.

According to Barclay, R.O. and Murray, P.C., (2004), organisations have felt the necessity to manage knowledge for the following reasons-

- Marketplaces are increasingly competitive and the rate of innovation is rising.;
- Reductions in staffing create a need to replace informal knowledge with formal methods;
- Competitive pressures reduce the size of the work force that holds valuable business knowledge;
- The amount of time available to experience and acquire knowledge has diminished;
- Early retirements and increasing mobility of the work force lead to loss of knowledge;
- There is a need to manage increasing complexity as small operating companies are transnational sourcing operations;
- Changes in strategic direction may result in the loss of knowledge in a specific area.

In 1995 Harvard Professor Dorothy Leonard suggested that “to survive and excel in this rapidly changing global economy, a new emphasis on innovation, competency, and collaboration is needed. The goal of managing knowledge as a strategic asset is not only to seek the short-term results, but also to maximise the long-term advantage over competitors. The ability to learn, collaborate, and innovate faster than one's competitors becomes the only sustainable source of competitive advantage in the coming knowledge-based economy. To stay competitive, companies need to capitalise on their intellectual assets, rather than infrastructure.” (From: Wellsprings of Knowledge: Building and Sustaining the Sources of Innovation)

Suzlon Energy, a global manufacturer of wind turbines, having operations in over 11 countries and 236 locations, has registered 108% increase in sales and in last financial year. This gave rise to the need of managing data and also the knowledge generated. According to Dr V V Rao, Group Head, IT, Suzlon

Energy mentions, "We have operations in various countries, and a problem solved in one country can help a power plant in another. A knowledge management portal exclusively for employees is a platform where people can share information and interact with each other" (Source: www.tech2.com.)

Case studies in literature highlight successful knowledge management implementations in large organisations such as BP Amoco, British Airways, or Chevron i.e., companies with turnover in millions of US dollars (Ahmed, 2002). According to IDC estimates, approximately 3.2% of corporate knowledge is incorrect or becomes obsolete every year. An estimated 4.5% of knowledge is lost or hidden due to employee turnover, information mismanagement, and knowledge hoarding.

Many reports have recognised the importance of knowledge management claiming measurable success for those organisations that manage knowledge. Organisations that create, capture, nurture, share knowledge and expertise will remain competitive even in an uncertain environment. This process of managing and applying knowledge has given rise to creating knowledge repositories (KR).

KNOWLEDGE PORTAL AND KNOWLEDGE REPOSITORY:

A business realm in today's times is a set of convoluted and byzantine entities, necessitating expeditious decisions, and enhanced allocation of resources. It also decrees the requirement of dissipating knowledge both within and outside the sphere of influence. Business environments have made rapid strides over the past few years and that, coupled with the IT revolution has been the driving force behind creating knowledge repositories within the organizations

A knowledge portal is essentially an information portal with additional features that it focuses on Knowledge rather than information alone. With the emerging web-based technologies and tools, even an intranet portal would be an easy to use interface, to facilitate the knowledge creation, storage, sharing and manage with in an organization.

A knowledge repository initiative needs to document all the organizational activities, transactions, any correspondence taking place between employees, customers and partners. These may include things such as email, customer relationship management, files, documents, etc. This paper is concerned with using Intranet portal as a means for storing and transferring organizational knowledge being generated using all these artifacts for future reuse.

Repositories act as the link between users and core knowledge, operating as a single point of entry to help intranet users find relevant information from many different organisational sources. The knowledge can be the one that is generated within an organisation or the sources of information and knowledge that the organisation has access to. The repository also acts as a the platform to contribute new knowledge and setting up alerts for personalized knowledge delivery which keep the users updated on any new additions in the repository. Hence, a highly effective knowledge repository serves as a single point of contact for all the knowledge needs of an individual based on his/her own settings. (Debowski, S, 2000).

The emergence of internet and intranet technology has enabled knowledge management to acquire the kind of formidable possibilities that were previously not feasible. According to Davenport and Prusak (2003), "Previous information technologies were much better suited to managing structured data, but the web enabled the handling of unstructured text and graphic forms of information and knowledge". With the growing internet and intranet technology, most of the organisations in today's knowledge economy have deployed the portals to communicate to their internal stakeholders (Intranet) and external audience (internet).

What is a Portal?

According to Dictionary.com, a portal is a Web site that aims to be a doorway to the World Wide Web, typically offering a search engine and/or links to useful pages, and possibly news or other services. Portals offer the content and various services free of charge within an organisation hoping that employees and stakeholders make the portal as their default home on their respective browsers.

The word "portal" is derived from the Latin word porta, which translates to "gate". In the strictest sense of the word, anything that acts as a gateway to anything else is a portal. A web portal, also known as a links page, presents information from diverse sources in a unified way. Web portals, apart from comprising the customary search engine features, also offer supplementary services like email, news, stock prices, databases, entertainment et al. They present a one stop interface for enterprises to provide an unswerving and reliable look and feel with access control and course of action for multiple applications, thus eliminating the need for surplus entities.

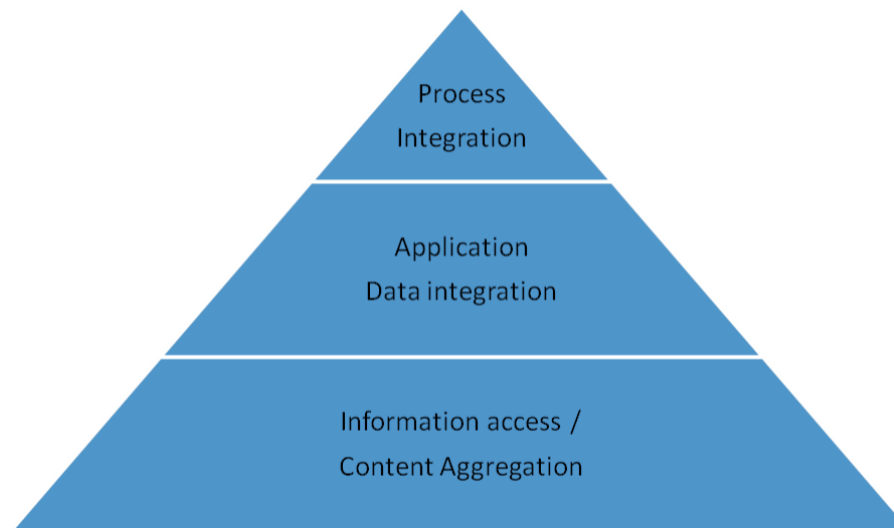
Portals started evolving as practical corporate solutions in the late 1990s. Yahoo ® introduced one of the first versions of a user-centric portal in 1996. The interface was simple—users needed to create a

profile to access a collection of information through a personal web space. Portals enable access to critical information assets, in this context defined as information, content, applications, and business processes. It facilitates the interaction of critical information, knowledge and human assets to select target audiences – all delivered in a personalized manner (Gartner, 2005). Portals also present the capability to provide personalized information to users in a timely fashion (Infogain, 2005).

Portals represent the “face” of Knowledge Management, according to Steven Ng, Manager of Business Portals for IBM Southeast Asia, speaking at the KM seminar series, “Leading with Knowledge”, held in Singapore, Kuala Lumpur, Mumbai and New Delhi. Web portals are tailor made for complementing individual employee needs. A well conceived and devised portal operates as an efficient delivery channel for knowledge management applications at any point of time, at any place and on any device.

Enterprise knowledge portals have emerged as a foundation tool to bind together the various content and collaboration activities of a KM environment.

Fig2 :Generations of Portal Technology



Source: Gartner's Six Generations of Portal Technology

CORPORATE INTRANET PORTALS:

An intranet server typically responds and reacts faster and more effectively than a conventional web server, since the internet is almost always at the mercy of traffic spikes, numerous server breakdowns due to the enormous amount of network traffic and other configuration problems. An intranet, however, offers superior bandwidth and the network hardware is also more reliable. Thus, serving a high bandwidth content, such as audio and video, over an intranet becomes straightforward.

Corporate intranets became widespread during the 1990s. As they escalated in size and complexity; webmasters faced full blown challenges in the wake of ever multiplying content and user profiles. A mere concise and condensed company information outlook was not adequate; the portal users started insisting on personalization and individualization. Proficient and competent webmasters could achieve this goal, but most did not rise to the occasion.

The intranet has been widely accepted and is used as an information silo or a repository of unstructured information. It is a useful tool; it enables users to locate and interact with each other thus helping individuals and organisations to communicate and have access to information and knowledge and, consequently, creating the opportunity to generate new knowledge. (Stenmark, 2002; Stenmark, 2002a)

Intranets hold enormous potential for adding purpose and meaning to individual and group work, but they remain a tool that has had only limited usefulness to management. They are predominantly used for information sharing and broadcasting, for emails, document management, electronic forms and corporate directories. The intranets increase accessibility and exposure to information. They are also being used to store best practices in an organisation.

Organisations such as Ford Motor Company declare that their corporate intranet is backbone of

the company. The top executives at Ford have been pushing for Web-only publication of divisional plans, engineering best practices, and production-development specs. Every car and truck model has its own internal web site to track design, production, quality control, and delivery processes. (Denton, D Keith, 2002)

The knowledge Repository offers a significant knowledge hub which links the user to bulletin boards; documents; workflow links to permit the execution of certain tasks; software; and tools for use in projects; and a project archive, where knowledge of other projects is available. Other features of the repository include best practices and lessons learned; news of groups and activities; access to a help desk, which offers support from experienced field engineers and answers unresolved queries; and FAQs, to answer questions which are forwarded to the help desk. The repository is very much the focal point for seeking information and collaboration. (Smith, R G & Farquhar, A, 2000)

It is quite crucial for an organization or an enterprise to possess the resources, channels and adequate configuration for management development and expansion, as well as the means to preserve the already amassed corporate knowledge. To envision and initiate a value based culture, where knowledge and its appendages are appreciated and encouraged within the environs of an organization is indeed a daunting task. A knowledge organization must necessarily become a learning organization so that the entire organisation will learn even in their daily routine activities and be able to adapt quickly to changing environment.

Some of the very common features of intranet portals that can be used for creating knowledge repositories are -

Forums/Groups/Networks-enable real time posting of messages or questions by the members of the organization, which are then appended to streaming threads on the site. As forums provide a medium for members to discuss about a message, they are also referred to as message boards. These forums act as a platform for collaboration, sharing views, exchange ideas, etc. and is proved to be an effective communication tool.

Document Repository-basically, a compilation of significant and relevant documents, methodically listing out implicit knowledge about events, employing the use of text, pictures and diagrams. Few such examples are – Leave forms, Claims and Reimbursement forms, travel request form, cab booking form, etc. Most of the technology companies use the intranet document repository as an efficient orientation tool for briefing on various processes, procedures and policies for newly joined staff members. Documents with short movie and audio clips can also be uploaded to the portal for additional knowledge transfer and to enhance the interactivity of the portal.

Newsletters/Magazines Online-akin to a shopping cart in a real life mall, this option allows patrons to effectively shop or pick the documents of their interest from the aforementioned repository. Most of the organisations provide free access to the internal newsletters and magazines to internal users however there are organisations who provide shopping cart facility, integrated with payment gateway, for purchasing the newsletters and magazines or any other articles, online.

Databases are collection of information or other data that is organized in a structured fashion, which can easily be accessed, managed, and updated in a real time environment. Most often, the top management relies heavily on the reports that are generated from various transactional databases for designing the future strategy and further decision making.

Chat rooms -a very versatile medium of communication, chat rooms provide real time discussion forums for the members of the organization. Multiple, relevant members can log in and chat, exchange ideas and opine on issues. Chat rooms greatly facilitate cost reduction programs and also save valuable time. Moreover, these also afford the possibility of acting as online help desks. Chat facility can also act as online help desk to answer the questions raised by users.

External sources are helpful sources for efficient management decisions. The sources can be as simple as free RSS feeds, news live feeds, or subscribed contents of portals giving access to business and management literature, market research reports, online books, electronic libraries, etc.

The various constituents of knowledge repository and its key functionality in learning organization are discussed.

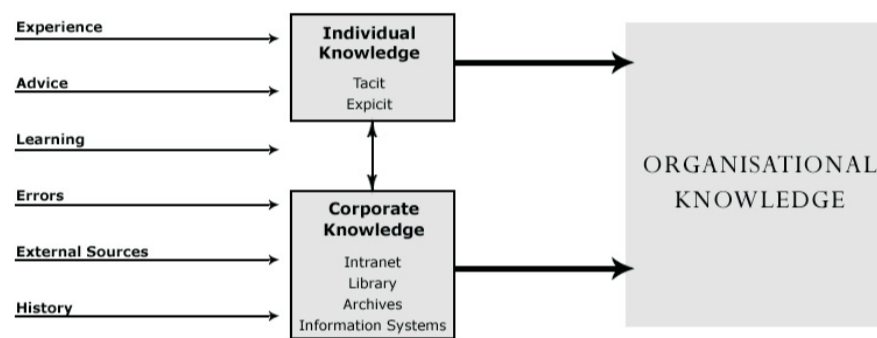
Knowledge Repository – Components:

There are two division/forms of knowledge – tacit and explicit.

Tacit knowledge, as is obvious, is the inferred or implied knowledge which exists within the members of an organization. This implicit comprehension is contained by the individuals based on their personal experiences and levels of intelligence. Apart from the fact that it relies on intuition, tacit knowledge also has a component of cognition, which consists of beliefs, perceptions, ideals, emotions and mental modes and models. Some of these factors are deep seated in our psyche and we fail to recognize their worth. Though not given to articulation, this cognitive dimension of tacit knowledge is instrumental in helping us to perceive the world around us

Explicit knowledge is overt and unambiguous. It is expressed in plain words, numbers or any other form of cognizable data. This kind of clear data can be readily and easily communicated and transmitted to people in a methodical and organized manner

Fig 3: Components of Organisational Knowledge



Source: Knowledge Management, Shelda Debowski, 2006

Modern organizations now face the momentous challenge of capturing and effectively utilizing the existing knowledge for overall improvement. Some of the pertinent issues are mentioned below.

A significant challenge facing the modern organizations is how to capture and utilize the existing knowledge for overall improvement. There are several issues related to knowledge acquisition with in an organization. Some of them are:

- Figuring out the relevant knowledge
- Organising knowledge instead of over-loading
- Ensuring that there is no knowledge loss;
- Defining processes and systems for organising knowledge;
- Sharing knowledge, etc.

The methodology, tools and technology to be deployed and the level of intended knowledge would differ from one organisation to another, and will mainly depend organizational goals and its activities. Organisations decide and document what kind of tacit and explicit knowledge need to archive, retrieve and reuse and when need arises. The portal and the repository is then are developed only after brainstorming among the key stakeholders. The key stakeholders decide on what knowledge artefacts would be of importance, mode of access – free public view or role based access. Any object which conveys functional representations of knowledge may fall under the purview of a knowledge artifact. Based on these inputs the technology team, along with representation from each business unit, develops, deploy and launch the knowledge repository for users to access and use.

The components and knowledge artefacts differ from one organisation to another. Some of the commonly deployed knowledge artefacts in corporate organisation are –

- Proposals
- Brands
- Consultancy advice
- Customer information
- Patents
- Libraries/Archives
- Management Tools & Techniques

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Training Materials
Client deliverables
White papers
Links to external information
Project plans
Links to experts

Academic institutions that are actively involved in creating the intellectual assets have some of the components that the knowledge repositories focus on –

Strategy documents
Various Policies
Infrastructure design
Case studies
Research/Working papers
Books
Conference proceedings

Knowledge Management – Benefits:

Knowledge management programs, if applied properly, will harvest some of the following benefits –

Optimise human assets within organisations
Realise increased innovation
Enhance efficiency and flexibility
Faster customer responsiveness
Improve competitiveness of the firm
Facilitate decision making
Achieve faster response time in handling business issues and customer needs

Few of the leading examples of intranet based knowledge repositories -

The leading IT giant, Microsoft used its own product Office SharePoint Server - a 3rd Generation of Intranet based Enterprise Content Management system, is a leading example for Corporate/Enterprise intranet base Knowledge Management Tool and is used heavily for internal communication and collaboration.

The Knowledge management (KM) practices of Infosys Technologies, one of the leading software companies based in India, are followed meticulously and well appreciated in the organisation. The MAKE hall of fame welcomed Infosys into its fold in the year 2005, recognizing its pioneering knowledge management initiatives. A more formal program began in 1999, spearheaded by the launch of K-shop. This was programmed to be a device which could capture any knowledge generated in projects across the international level operations launched by Infosys. And it thoroughly undertook the claim to perfection.

An award winning corporate intranet has been developed by the MITRE Corporation. The same has been used profoundly in running day to day operations and information sharing. This intranet has essentially revolutionized the way the corporation operates and leverages the widespread skills. Though the original focal point of the intranet concentrated solely on locating and contacting people dispersed throughout a widely spaced organizational geography, it quickly metamorphosed into a superior knowledge management terminal.

IBM Corporation's intranet portal built on WebSphere Portal Express is an intranet portal allows its employee and members to share their knowledge.

Cap Gemini Ernst & Young has introduced n-Portal, a knowledge management solution based on Microsoft's Solution for Intranets (MSI) that enables comprehensive knowledge sharing across corporate intranets.

Wipro Technologies, one of the leading software technology/BPO giant uses the Microsoft SharePoint Server 2007 for their internal operations mainly for the purpose of Knowledge Management.

Knowledge Xchange is a knowledge repository from Accenture, which hosts content ranging from proposals, tenders, suggestions, client deliverables to white papers and links to experts. Around 400,000 orders for knowledge capital are engendered on a monthly basis and over 2000 contributions are made. If we put aside the numerical data and focus on the core of knowledge management, we see that it has helped

Accenture immensely in the areas of innovation, competency and productivity

KPMG, one of the winners of the global MAKE study, has a great thing going with its employees. All of them can easily and freely access the various knowledge management tools like Ksource virtual library of knowledge, regional intranets, skills experience locator and a universal search engine. This greatly enhances their own store of knowledge about KM. The collaboration tools provided by Kclient offers a protected environment for sharing work progress with their clients.

Ernst & Young (E&Y) is a pioneer in the field of KM and has evolved Web-based collaboration tools to enhance the relationship between e-business and knowledge management via "EY/KnowledgeWeb", on intranet.

The "Knowledge Sharing Network" of the American Productivity & Quality Center (APQC) provides members with online access to a wide range of business resources on topics ranging from productivity to quality. The network includes knowledge taxonomy, a portal platform, a template inventory, content management processes, community services, and authorisation.

Chevron's KM strategy includes bet practice sharing, internal/external benchmarking, technology brokers, networking, new planning tools, and work-tracking software. These are showcased via their corporate intranet.

The KM System at Siemens, supported by a Global Editing Team, includes knowledge objects such as successful practices, innovations, lessons learned, and methodologies.

British Airways launched its KM initiative in 1998; it included a high-level KM project board, regular knowledge fairs, company-wide search engine, and tools for videoconferencing.

Open Text's corporate intranet OLLIE hosts the global Knowledge Library and three communities of practice: Competitive Forum, Customer Dashboard, and Knowledge Centre.

CONCLUSION:

Global competition has been increasing at greater pace; and thus, what is useful today may become obsolete tomorrow. In such a rapidly changing environment, knowledge-based business is seen as a paragon to help organisations sustain growth and have an edge over competitors. The deployment of efficient knowledge management facilitates organisations to leverage on the intellectual capital and knowledge that resides in the employee's minds and in the organisational memory. There is greater realization that sustainable organisation competency depends upon its capacity for knowledge creation, storage, transfer and application through an ongoing and continuous process of learning. Thus it is imperative to have the right tools, techniques and processes to capture, archive, and share the knowledge for increased productivity.

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