

# Whither Corporate Knowledge?

*"Enlightened enterprises, no longer able to take for granted the intellectual assets on which they rely, are examining more closely how to operate productively in a distributed and interconnected world."* — French Caldwell, et al. — Gartner Group

There are many ways a firm loses its people, and many consequences to those losses. One business consequence is simply the loss of the knowledge and experience those people leave with.

In my last office, we lost some strong talent through retirement. Other talent left the firm when a surge in demand in the industry led to higher salaries and equally high turnover. We found ourselves with a younger and less-experienced firm. The expertise we often sought in these older practitioners was irretrievably lost.

For individual projects, the firm naturally moved people from project to project as staffing needs changed (and as each project moved from phase to phase). Managers complained that there was no paper trail allowing the rational design decisions made during early design phases to be communicated to the staff of later phases of the project.

In an earlier article, I bemoaned the fact that today's communication methods do not naturally lend themselves to sharing (or even maintaining) knowledge and historical information in a searchable format. If you need convincing, just try finding emails for any project in an ex-employee's mailbox.

For all those reasons, modern and dynamic offices need some kind of searchable knowledgebase.

In the old days, many firms created paper 'office manuals' which might contain general reference information, standard forms, standard details, and/or office procedures. I have been involved in assembling several of these. They are sometimes assembled by an individual (which means it contains the knowledge of a single individual) or - even worse - by committee.

Without artful management, committee generation of office standards can be one of the more costly and least useful methods of knowledge generation. First, the process eats up non-billable hours. Second, the submit, review, revise, resubmit cycle can go on many times before anything becomes integrated - so response to new office needs is doggedly slow. Third, particularly difficult technical decisions with strong proponents on two sides often never get published at all due to the controversy (and these are often the most important to publish). Fourth, the process is so costly and painful that revisions and updates are few and far between. Fifth, the process does not integrate new questions and methods in a timely way. Sixth, the experts often overlook the simpler questions which may seem too obvious to them. Seventh, the inherent 'drag' involved in getting current information into it means the information is often out of date and, therefore, seldom used.

Some offices have dragged this same methodology into the 'Internet Age' - just publishing the same information on their Intranet rather than on paper. I suppose this might be considered a minor improvement - at least the Xeroxing is eliminated - but it

also has the disadvantage of being less portable than the paper manual (at least make sure your staff has remote access from home)!

Other industries have integrated interesting ways of answering questions into their daily workflow. When answering questions (either by email or by phone), answers are captured into a searchable knowledgebase for easy retrieval later by both support experts and those asking the questions. This dynamic methodology needs to be utilized in our industry - at both the general office level and at the project level.

Here's the dynamic solution I want to use:

Define a place on your Intranet for users to ask questions (about office policy, practice matters, and construction/detailing issues). Define an in-house expert for each category of question, but allow others to add responses and follow-up questions as well (it's like a 'discussion thread' in Internet parlance). Document and drawing attachments should also be supported.

Design the knowledgebase to notify the expert as soon as the question is posted, with a link to the question for easy access and responses. Make it easy for the expert to add a link to an earlier answer to reduce repetition and reinforce standards. Of course, a questioner should be similarly notified by email when an answer is posted. Employees should also be allowed to request notification of new postings in any category. These notifications will encourage participation.

Encourage your 'experts' to post answers to the knowledgebase even when they receive questions by phone or email. This will further strengthen the useful content of your knowledgebase.

The home page of this knowledgebase should contain lists of the most recently created items, and the most frequently accessed items.

This type of solution uses few, if any, non-billable hours. It is self-populating and self-maintaining (as long as it's being used, that is). It is always current and up to date, while also maintaining historical information. It answers real questions in real time and encourages participation by everyone.

There are frameworks out there that provide a part of this structure. A Wiki, for example, is a web site that can be modified by ANY user (The phrase "wiki wiki" means "quick" in Hawaiian). Topics can be added, edited and enhanced easily using a few rules. It can be easily searched and has a list of recent changes and additions. For me, the structure is too fluid for a productive office setting (too much anarchy for my taste), but it's a good start to collaborative knowledge. You can get some information on wikis at <http://www.usemod.com/cgi-bin/wiki.pl?WhatIsaWiki>.

A fee-based product which looks promising is AskMe ([www.askme.com](http://www.askme.com)).

If you have implemented a knowledgebase in your firm (successful or otherwise), I'd like to learn about it. Is it home-grown, or a commercial product? What other features would you like to see in an AEC firm's knowledgebase? - e-mail me at [mhogan@id-8.com](mailto:mhogan@id-8.com).

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