KMS Evaluation:

Tomoye Simplify 3.0

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In their book *Working Knowledge*, Thomas H. Davenport and Laurence Prusak explore the complexity of knowledge, distinguishing it from data and information. “Knowledge exists within people, part and parcel of human complexity and unpredictability” (p. 5). They describe a knowledgeable person as someone with a thorough, informed, and reliable grasp of a subject, someone who is both educated and intelligent.

Businesses and organizations are recognizing that employees and members are a valuable source of knowledge, but often aren’t sharing it. Several reasons for this exist. Organizational culture might prevent members from feeling comfortable about sharing knowledge. Geographical and technological hurdles might physically prevent members from interacting.

Various types of knowledge management systems are being developed with the hope that knowledge can be captured and shared—to the benefit of the sponsoring organization and its members. Many of these systems combine technological and human elements.

Davenport and Prusak identify four different modes of knowledge: knowledge generation (how is knowledge captured?), knowledge codification and coordination (how is knowledge organized?), knowledge transfer (how is knowledge shared with others?), and knowledge roles and skills (who shares knowledge and why). Evaluating a knowledge management system (KMS) in the context of these four categories can provide insight to its value.

Tomoye Simplify™ 3.0

The Canadian company Tomoye touts its new flagship KMS software as “built specifically for Communities of Practice.” According to promotional material available online, CoPs seem to be subject-matter experts and other team members who have a common purpose, common challenges, and practical solutions to share.
When Tomoye was chosen as one of *Fast Company*'s 2002 “Fast 50,” company founder John Mertl described his new software as a “social computer” application.

It is all about connecting people with people (peers with peers) so that they can help each other solve critical business problems. Essentially, we are recreating the informal peer networks that people rely on to solve problems, learn from each other, etc. Success for us means complimenting well-established organizational forms by helping employees connect with each other across organizational boundaries. (*Fast Company*, 2003, From Their Original Entry)

Versions of Tomoye’s software have been used by the Smithsonian Institute, the World Bank, and the U.S. Department of Defense. In 2002, the United Nations asked Tomoye to help rebuild Afghanistan and to promote AIDS awareness in Africa.

According to the Tomoye Web site (www.tomoye.com), Tomoye Simplify combines the best features of many different types of tools—collaboration software solutions, knowledge management, and online community tools. Features promoted include rapid deployment, ease of use, decentralized publishing, and cross-referenced knowledge bases.

Unfortunately, the Web site does not offer a trial version that can be downloaded and played with. Instead Tomoye offers a 10-minute product demo that works as an “online tour.” The software is described within the context of two case studies—a research network at the United Nations and a knowledge-sharing initiative at the World Bank. Because the only way to evaluate the software is through the company-designed tour, its strengths and weaknesses are a little difficult to identify.

**Strengths**

The overall design of the United Nations’ *one fish* Internet portal is fairly clean, with categories of information clustered into columns. Most of the type is on a white background. A
“market-y” tag line that describes the purpose of the site provides context for the user. The only graphics (besides the logo at the top) are small icons, which allows for quicker download—especially important for a portal that seeks to serve users all over the world.

The portal for the second example, Global Knowledge Partnership, also has a fairly clean layout with categories clustered into columns. Again, most of the type is on a white background. The graphics are mostly small icons.

As pointed out in promotional material for Tomoye Simplify 3.0, the software is 100% browser-based, making it familiar and probably easy to use. Global navigation and a search feature are available at the top of the portal’s page. It looks as if the latest version includes a breadcrumb trail near the top.

Down the left side of the one fish portal is a “topic tree” that looks like a list of folders, which are clearly labeled. The number of new entries in each topic folder is signified with a boldfaced number inside of parentheses, which allows the user to perceive activity without having to click on the topic. According to the demo, articles, documents, and business cards are cross-referenced into multiple topics, so that they can be accessed from different sources. As we’ve discussed in class, the more information that a team member is exposed to will hopefully lead to more serendipitous discovery, more *Eurekas*!, more new ideas that will benefit the company for which they work.

The bottom of the left column includes links to information about the organization, different offices, and FAQs. A recent visit to the portal, which can be found at www.onefish.org, reveals that hyperlinks to various instructions have been added, including how to add a discussion or how to become an editor, thereby encouraging participation from new members without them having to guess where instructions might be.
The center column, which is also the widest, seems devoted to articles and lists of hyperlinks produced by the editor(s) that focus on current events of interest to most of the site’s audience. The right column contains lists of hyperlinks regarding news events, a calendar of workshops and symposia, job openings, and online discussions. In the discussions, postings can be viewed by thread or chronology, which provides flexibility.

The portal for Global Knowledge Partnership is similar in that it too is divided into three columns with the center column devoted to articles produced by the editor(s) of the site. Their version, however, seems to cater a little more to individual users. A portion of the left column is dedicated to bookmarks selected by the user rather than an extended list of topic folders as seen in the one fish portal. Although a calendar of events is included in the right column, it is nowhere as extensive as the calendar in the one fish portal. Although which portal better serves its users could be argued, the differences show how flexible the portals can be.

Weaknesses

The placement of the links to information about the organization, different offices, and FAQs might be more useful at the top of the left column, instead of at the bottom. Those unfamiliar with the site or the organization it represents might otherwise miss these links.

The amount of information that’s presented on the portal is extensive. It might challenge the capabilities of PDAs and other handheld communication devices. Even on a standard personal computer, a user’s first visit to the portal might be overwhelming due to the shear number of hyperlinks. The clustering of information—and the horizontal and vertical rules that help define the clusters—makes this less likely, however.

Conclusion

As I mentioned earlier, Davenport and Prusak identified four different modes of knowledge: knowledge generation, knowledge codification and coordination, knowledge
transfer, and knowledge roles and skills. Tomoye Simplify addresses all of these issues. Users are encouraged to contribute through discussion threads. Topic threads are cross-referenced with other threads to allow for information organization and serendipitous discovery. Users can easily find topics of interest through clearly labeled “folders.” Although anyone can contribute in some way or another, editors decide the content of certain categories, thereby maintaining the quality and diversity of those categories.

Personally, I would like to try this software. Tomoye Simplify serves two valuable KM functions: bringing information to the users and encouraging users to communicate with each other. The browser-based design is familiar and comfortable. It also allows easy access to users around the world as long as they have access to the Internet. The ability to customize the portal for each organization’s needs is also attractive.
Bibliography


