



The Knowledge Management Legacy

Business Commentary

Version: 1.0

15 May 2001

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Abstract

Frustrated users blame IT and the IT industry for many things but unless there is action soon, IT will soon be blamed for a dangerous legacy: 'the loss of knowledge management and the demise of collaboration'. Whether it is increased hidden costs in business or the inability to quickly find information, the impacts of this dangerous legacy are already being felt by business and within the greater community. This dangerous legacy stemmed from the loss of consolidated data storage and work-flow in the shift from mainframes to PCs. The dangerous legacy is being perpetuated by current business strategies, activities of software development companies, some of the leaders in the IT industry and the providers of professional services.

1 Introduction

Within the business community and society at large, users are expressing an increasing frustration with IT and the IT industry. Many users can recall waiting up to 40 minutes on the phone for customer service and having to wait in line for service from gods in white coats. The need to continually upgrade, frustration with software applications, IT solutions that do not work and do not integrate into the business and more are common complaints.

Conversely, the IT industry and IT people rightly point to the many gains in efficiency and productivity made through the use of IT and express their frustration with users being unable to articulate their requirements, ever changing requirements and priorities and the users lack of understanding of IT.

As with all of these things, faults probably lie on both sides and finger pointing may make one feel better but does not resolve the problems. One of the unfortunate consequences of this difference in view between users and IT is the loss of work-flow and consolidated data storage that occurred with the rapid adoption of the PC and the Internet. This lack of consolidated data storage is impacting upon the optimal development, expansion, application and management of knowledge and is leading to a decline in collaboration. Whilst this impacts directly upon business and increases hidden costs, it is the wider impacts upon society that are of concern.

2 White coat society

Those of us who can remember the days of the mainframe can recall how data was stored in one place (consolidated repository) and how we had task management systems and work-flow. In those days we also used to enter raw numbers and text (unformatted) into billing applications or accounting systems. We would pick a report type and style, have the report auto-populate with the required information and deliver this information to a variety of terminals and printers around an organisation (Single sourcing of information and its delivery to any device, anywhere any time).

The advantage of the mainframe and the consolidated storage of data was that it allowed for the management of knowledge and facilitated collaboration.

Consolidated data storage
Raw text (not tied to format)
Work-flow
Unified presentation



Mainframe

Centralised
Non-responsive
Unattractive interface
White coat society



Before nostalgia overtakes us, we can also remember the unattractive interfaces, the slow centralised systems, the non-responsiveness of mainframe suppliers to the evolving demands of business and the secret society of the gods in white coats who made you wait in-line whilst you were made to feel inferior. Whilst the IT teams may have been trying their best, may have been underfunded and misunderstood, all of this centralised white coast society computing led to increasing frustration.

3 Adoption of the PC

The introduction of the personal computer (Macs, IBMs, Commodores etc.) was liberating to the user, they became empowered and could not wait to move off the mainframes and away from the gods in white coats. The PC brought us responsive systems, increased computing power (distributive computing power), flexibility and an attractive interface. The business-computing environment moved from the mainframe to the PC for two major reasons, the use of distributive computing power and because the user was empowered.

The use of distributed computing power has been a good outcome but in the rush to adopt the PC, the benefits of the mainframe (consolidated data/information storage, task management or work-flow and tight integration of applications) were lost.

The loss of the consolidated storage of data and of work-flow was not widely discussed in the move to PCs because of the frustration that existed with IT and the mainframe world. This loss of consolidated data storage however, is starting to be recognised and is one of the areas of hidden cost within business. Currently, information is trapped on local hard drives, which people can not get at and may not even know that it exists. This inability to readily access single sourced information increases the duplication of effort, creates coordination problems and acts as a barrier to the operation of the business because knowledge management is no longer possible and it impairs collaboration.

The lack of consolidated data storage and work-flow leads to the inability to manage and share knowledge and the collapse of collaboration. Whether it is across the entire business or to the wider society, the impacts upon the optimal development, management, expansion and application of knowledge are already being seen. The use of distributive computing power is good and should be continued but there needs to be a move back to consolidated data storage and work-flow.

Increased flexibility
Distributive computing power
Attractive Interface
Empowered user



PC

Little work-flow
Coordination problems
Loss of data consolidation



4 Rapid Internet implementation

Use of the Internet brings many benefits to businesses and its ability to lower hidden costs is very important but the rapid adoption of the Internet has caused problems. The Dot Com boom and collapse epitomises how IT is often driving business rather than the business driving IT. The current Internet activities and strategies of many businesses are serving only to compound the knowledge management issue. The current strategies and activities of many software companies and professional service companies are also serving to perpetuate the knowledge management problem.



5 Knowledge management legacy

Whilst blame for the knowledge management legacy should probably be shared between business and IT, as both parties have contributed to it, this may not be how it is seen. The growing resentment of users to the IT industry will see that not only did the IT industry give us the gods in white coats, the poor customer service, the never ending upgrade cycle and increasing costs, but that the IT industry gave us the knowledge management problem and perpetuated. The “dumb user” then had to pay for it and fix it!

The optimal development, management, expansion and application of knowledge within business and society is already being stifled and collaboration is declining because of the lack of work-flow and consolidated data/information storage. The financial impacts of the legacy are increasing hidden costs within business. It is not a question of blame nor is it a question of the knowledge management legacy being too hard or your afraid to do it, there is both a moral and financial need to fix the problem. The longer it is left, the harder it will be and the greater the cost

By keeping distributed computing power but consolidating the storage of data, the best of both worlds is obtained. The lead in resolving the knowledge management issue can either come from the IT industry and a re-alignment of its values or the lead can be taken by the business and in the process, re-gain control of IT.

Resolution of the problems will not be easy and it will require a concerted and coordinated effort but the solution is simplicity itself. It is just the systematic application of proven business principles, data management and work-flow. This is best achieved by:

- deciding the business drivers (outcomes);
- establishing the business processes needed to realise these;
- determining what information is needed at every stage;
- implementing the self evident IT solution required.

6 Conclusion

In the move from mainframes to PCs and the Internet, the benefits of managed information, work-flow have been lost. The adoption of distributive computing power has been a good shift but there is a need to return to consolidated data/information storage. Without this, the sharing of knowledge and collaboration will be stifled. The current strategies within much of IT are serving to perpetuate this knowledge management problem.

Global communication
Rapid access
User empowerment
Low barrier of entry



Internet

Loss of consolidated data
Information overload
Little business process
Poor business integration

