The "Transparent" Knowledge Worker
and Locational Privacy

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Abstract

Knowledge management (KM) strategies are increasingly incorporating dimensions of personal opinion, organizational context, and idiosyncratic critical taste, along with the more objective considerations traditionally associated with knowledge and expertise. Knowledge work involves more than simple data manipulation; it often requires personal insights and style. Locational data have special value in enhancing the interpretation of knowledge work, playing distinct roles for such individuals as journalists, investigators, researchers, and marketers. However, these data can serve to make this knowledge work more conducive to control as well as enhanced and insightful. This presentation examines a growing category of "transparent" KM systems including (a) weblog-based approaches (e.g., "klogs") and (b) reputation systems, and discusses how locational privacy issues can arise with particular applications.

Transparent KM approaches couple the context of individuals' expressions (when, why, and how they were produced) and their compiled system contributions. These systems provide increased levels of access to detailed and intimate aspects of participants' knowledge-related behavior. In contrast, many of the more traditional KM approaches reflect far less contextual information and thus are often of less use in subsequent analysis. Blogging and reputational systems that combine locational aspects can
provide even more rich portraits of activity, including clues as to where and potentially with whom certain posts and contributions were developed. Along with privacy dimensions, this presentation also addresses how integrity concerns affect how personal expressions and profiles are utilized in knowledge management efforts. Organizational participants are faced with issues of integrity and authenticity in producing their own expressions and analyzing those of others. In turn, managers and project teams are faced with issues of how to balance their ability to access and utilize detailed information about transparent knowledge workers with privacy considerations.

Klogs emerged largely in small "high tech" organizations, providing an example of the power of the exchange of reflective insights. The "klog" is a relatively recent network genre, emerging in force in the late 1990s. They are weblogs that are developed in the context of knowledge management systems. In its basic concept, the weblog is very simple: weblog creators accumulate daily entries called "posts," often related to a particular theme or activity (Oravec, 2002, 2003). Those who produce weblogs ("bloggers") generally include hypertext links to selected sources as well as critical commentary. A brief excerpt from the material in question is often incorporated along with contextual information about how the material was located (for example, through personal recommendation, news portal, or Internet search). Klogs are usually generated in organizational contexts and
are devoted to professional or workplace concerns. The klogging of
conferences is a common activity, providing an immediately-updated "trip
report" to those at the office. Knowledge workers can also "bookmark"
certain interesting research locations for future analysis by other
investigators, relaying various reflections and insights.

As many organizations need to stay small in terms of workforces,
transparent systems can help in displaying and using the skills of existing
workers. Thus ways to capture as much information as possible from
knowledge-oriented activities are being explored. Along with klogs, other
kinds of knowledge management approaches are incorporating aspects of
individual opinion and critical judgment. Reputation systems create profiles
of individuals' knowledge-related interactions with others. For example, in a
system in which technical questions are posed in an open forum, the profiles
can reflect how successful are participants in providing answers as rated by
those who posed the questions or subsequently viewed the exchanges. Other
forms of profiling are automatic, gleaning information from individuals'
electronic mail interactions and word processing files as to areas of specialty.
Such expertise profiling strategies can search out people who can be of help
in solving certain problems.

The overall success of transparent KM systems relies upon whether
individuals put intensive, creative effort into their klogs and reputations--
whether they have sufficient incentive to utilize the systems for knowledge
generation and dissemination. People who are klogging a professional conference and having their locational data collected and analyzed indeed have some incentive to produce time-and-place appropriate posts, but whether those posts will be creative and deeply insightful is another matter. Reviewing klogs and reputations over time can elicit important insights concerning individual and project team perspectives and approaches.

Organizations are extending beyond the management of knowledge as an entity to the management of opinion and personal nuance. In such personal matters, trust can be a major factor. For example, if locational information is rendered in misleading or distorted fashion (or used for purposes other than originally intended), trust in the systems can erode.

Transparent KM approaches have a number of benefits in comparison with many of the more traditional KM strategies, especially in creative efforts. The notion that knowledge can be "mined" and "stored" for future consumption in some disembodied manner has a long legacy in knowledge-based systems as well as some KM approaches. It can lead to overly simplistic if not ineffective systems as knowledge loses recency and context and becomes more removed from its source. Transparent approaches are desirable for many areas that require professional judgment and stylistic discernment (such developing an innovation and bringing it to market). For example, organizational participants who maintain klogs are providing their institutions with frequently-updated sets of selections of items of interest and potential value to the organization, along with related opinions and
reflections. They are thus revealing insights about themselves as well as their fields of expertise. Combining these systems with locational data extends their intimate dimensions and may provide a "chilling effect" in some contexts.

Is There a Transparency Imperative in Organizational Activity?

The theme of "transparency" is emerging in various forms of knowledge management. This follows innovative operations management approaches in which such terms as "glass pipe" are common to refer to supply-chain components. Transparent knowledge work efforts incorporate the collection of incomplete fragments of knowledge output as well as finished, completed projects (thus in keeping with managerial concerns for efficiency in knowledge work). New dimensions of knowledge work may emerge as fragments of knowledge-related activity are analyzed and synthesized along with contextual and locational data. For example, in the course of developing an innovation, team members may run across various sources and discuss them in their klogs. Their manager may note that other, related innovations could be inspired by the same sources and locales. Knowledge workers' future productivity and areas of interest can often be projected from their klogs; combining locational data over time would display an even more developed portrait.
The notion that the ideal "knowledge management machine" is one that connects participants' brains in real time has been discussed. Perhaps fortunately, individuals still have some leeway over what they deliver to the organization in terms of knowledge products. Efforts to make knowledge work more transparent are likely to continue as organizations attempt to glean as much insight as possible from knowledge workers.

References
