

Spreading the Word

Spreading the Word by Mick James - Professional Recruiter 20 June 2001

Although we live in a "knowledge economy", businesses have always been highly dependent on knowledge in many ways, from the "how-to" knowledge about the skills and processes used to create a product and service, to external knowledge about customers and markets, or the best suppliers and contractors. Knowledge can even be about the business itself, for instance knowing where in the business to find the skills or the individual needed for a project.

However, all these different levels of knowledge are typically scattered about a business in a variety of different formats (people's heads, databases, filing cabinets, libraries) and may not be accessible or even known about by the people who need them. It's only recently that the concept of knowledge management has emerged as a powerful business discipline - finding ways to make this knowledge work for the business. From this simple concept a complex area of expertise has emerged, which ranges from the development of powerful information retrieval technologies to a deep and cultural understanding of the ways in which people share knowledge in organisations.

Recruitment consultancies offer a rich example of the way a business can accumulate vast reserves of information without necessarily being able to deploy it as useful knowledge. Each campaign brings with it a thorough briefing from a client and brings in dozens of CVs, yet all too often the end of the campaign marks the end of the useful life of the knowledge acquired.

It took the advent of online recruiting, with its potential to create vast databases of client, candidate and other information, to underline the KM problem in recruitment. A database can contain masses of vacancies for one job type and yet not "know" that there is a skills shortage. Some of the worst shortcomings of the early databases came from their limited search abilities, delivering either floods of irrelevant vacancies to a candidate or none at all. So powerful retrieval technologies created by KM vendors such as Autonomy or Deskartes are often the most appealing aspects of KM to recruiters.

It's all too easy to see KM as the latest in a long line of software applications. "But we already have PCs and databases..." is a common reaction by end users. In fact, the widespread adoption of IT has itself created many of the problems that knowledge management tackles.

"The recruitment sector is very software oriented nowadays" says Jonathan Cox, a director of Start Resourcing, a specialist consultancy that designs and sells groupware software. "All the information used to be in filing cabinets. Now it's stored by software, but the value of those databases is in the concept of sharing things. Individuals work in teams, but they file everything in "My Documents" on their PCs and don't share it. If I run a campaign for, say, database administrators, those CVs get filed under that client's response and there they stay. But if I can use that as an open source then anyone can use it."

After looking around for a suitable solution for their own use, Start Resourcing developed their own system based on a Belgian product called Link, which creates a Lotus Notes-type environment in which all the activities within an organisation are linked and managed centrally.

"We wanted to create a vertical market solution which combines the three concepts of knowledge management: all team activities run centrally, combined with a relationship tracker plus workflow and project management".

Link allows people to work in their own "native" applications - Word, Excel, Sage or whatever - but records these activities centrally. Although they are software-oriented, products like Link can help solve some of the cultural issues of knowledge management.

"There's a lot of effort that goes into sharing information in recruitment consultancies", says Cox. "They all have different systems: meetings where you share information, e-mails that go round about candidates that have come in, bulletin boards. But you still get people in recruitment known as "top-drawers" who hang on to information, because they're greedy and they want to use it for themselves. These people are often the biggest billers - but if they're not putting information on the system you need to wrest it out of them".

Despite being branded as a KM vendor, Cox says he really sells knowledge management directly as a concept: "Recruiters are interested in knowledge management as such and they don't like it if you hit them round the head and say 'this is the future'," he says. "We concentrate on their business needs and the advantages they get from the functionality."