

# Knowledge in Action

Issue 03

## Sharing knowledge in the virtual world

Technology is increasingly enabling geographically-separate employees to work together as if they were in the same office. But when employees don't know each other, how do they know what knowledge they have that a colleague might need – and what knowledge they in turn can gain from others? And how is it to be communicated?

Research carried out by Henley Knowledge Management Forum pinpoints the knowledge-sharing tools, techniques and strategies that help the virtual organisation as it wrestles with such quandaries.

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“The bigger the group of individuals involved in a meeting, the more difficult it is to get people’s diaries in line: sharing knowledge virtually is easier, more cost-effective and allows the business to respond more rapidly.”

Karen Eden, director of industry communities, communications and knowledge management, Oracle UK



The world of work is becoming increasingly virtual. Spread across different offices, different countries and even different continents, individuals are pooling their efforts to achieve a collective goal. It’s a way of working with obvious merits; from the cost-savings delivered by globalisation through to the development of new products, the virtual organisation has become an increasingly familiar part of business life.

But equally, it’s a way of working with an obvious downside. Physically separated – often by considerable distances – and only meeting face-to-face occasionally, if at all, individuals working in virtual organisations find it difficult to share knowledge. Nominally part of the same enterprise, they lack the opportunities, both formal and informal, that are brought about by working together in closer physical proximity.

Research carried out by Henley Knowledge Management Forum provides powerful new insights into how organisations can achieve the benefits of virtual working, yet at the same time harnessing the knowledge-sharing opportunities yielded by more traditional forms of organisation. The bottom line: the barriers to knowledge sharing are very real – but nonetheless surmountable. What’s more, the research also illuminates the thorny issue of sharing ‘tacit’ knowledge – that difficult-to-categorise body of wisdom built up from individuals’ long experience. This too can be shared, provided that some straightforward stratagems are followed.

## Visualising the collaboration space

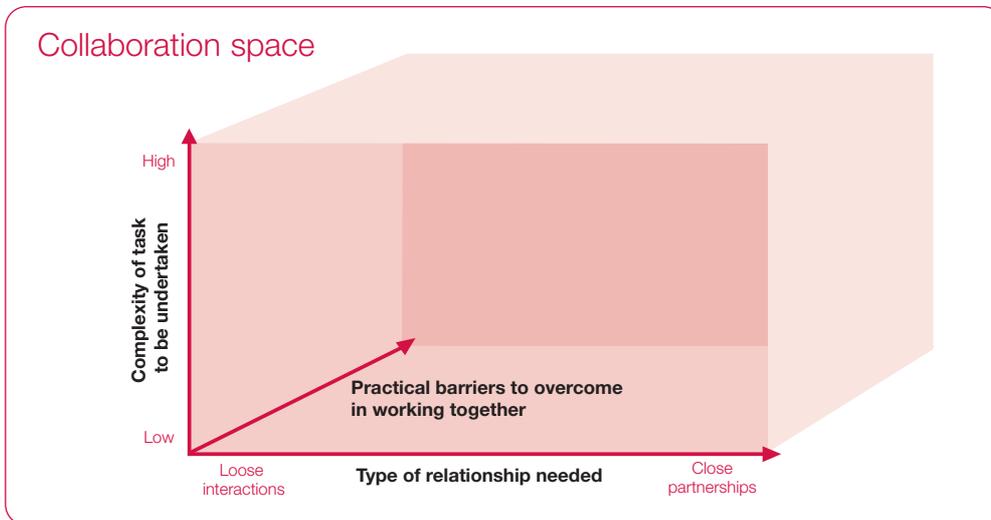
A starting point is the concept of ‘collaboration space’, a three-dimensional cube that enables a particular knowledge-sharing challenge to be visualised in terms of three dimensions of difficulty. Armed with this information, it’s possible for managers to shape their knowledge-sharing strategies accordingly, thereby boosting the effectiveness with which their organisations can share knowledge among employees working virtually.

The first of these dimensions is the complexity of the task that the employees are collectively involved in. Working together to build a harmonised global sales forecast once a month is one thing – designing a passenger jet or nuclear reactor is quite another.

Second, there’s the extent of the barriers to knowledge sharing that are involved. How geographically dispersed are the people in question? How many time zones are involved? Do they all share a common native language, and if not, do they actually share a common language at all? Even if there is a shared language available, cultural differences mean that interpretations will differ slightly.

### Collaboration, insight ... practical value

Co-ordinated by Dr Christine Van Winkelen of Henley Management College, the insights into knowledge-sharing described here originated in two separate pieces of research undertaken by members of the Henley Knowledge Management Forum. Spearheaded by Henley Management College’s Jane McKenzie and Christine van Winkelen, and Richard Potter of QinetiQ, the work drew on the insights and experiences of Forum members from almost 20 leading businesses and organisations – including Lloyds TSB, GlaxoSmithKline and Thames Water.



Third, there's the quality of the relationship between the various individuals – not just in terms of its existing quality, but also in terms of the calibre of relationship required to effectively share knowledge among the individuals involved in the task in question. The greater the gulf between the two, the greater the knowledge-sharing challenge. Put slightly differently, people who know each other well, and who value and trust each other's insights, will share knowledge more easily than when that isn't the case.

Once organisations understand this, it's possible for them to tailor their knowledge-sharing strategies according to how they score in terms of these three dimensions. As the work being carried out becomes more complex, for example, and as the barriers and boundaries between people increase, it becomes even more important to develop and sustain the trust, mutual understanding and shared values that make co-operative action possible. This can be done by:

- selecting the right kinds of technology to facilitate collaboration and knowledge-sharing, eg electronic conferences and discussion areas, certainly, but also 'wikis', communal 'blogs' and other social networking tools
- allowing time for trust to grow
- recruiting and selecting people who are skilled at empathising with others
- training people to be sensitive to cultural differences.

Likewise, as the task becomes more complex and interdependent, it becomes necessary to improve the quality and efficiency of communication within the collaboration network. To do this, organisations must:

- ensure that the technology being used for knowledge sharing is suitable for the task and that everyone has access
- ensure that everyone uses agreed methods of communication consistently
- adopt policies that promote openness in terms of sharing information, and that deal effectively with information overload.

Finally, as relationships become more important to the success of the collaboration, the value of the knowledge that is being shared tends to increase. To facilitate this, organisations need to:

- put reward schemes in place to encourage knowledge sharing
- foster a 'no blame' culture
- celebrate knowledge-sharing success.

**"Within Vodafone, we're increasingly sharing our knowledge virtually."**

Marc Aafjes, global head of knowledge management, Vodafone



**“The bottom line is that sharing knowledge virtually saves the organisation money. It’s as simple as that.”**

Rowan Purdy, national strategic knowledge management lead, Care Services Improvement Partnership



## Sharing knowledge in practice

But how have such stratagems worked in practice? At global enterprise software giant Oracle, for example, a seven-year old programme of developing virtual ‘professional communities’ – incorporating employees drawn from up to 30 countries – is providing simple yet efficient environments in which knowledge on topics of mutual interest can be shared, says Karen Eden, Oracle UK’s director of industry communities, communications and knowledge management.

At mobile telecommunications firm Vodafone – which is now present in 25 countries worldwide – purpose-built discussion forums, ‘team rooms’ and ‘project spaces’ are making a strong contribution to knowledge-sharing, says Marc Aafjes, Vodafone’s global head of knowledge management. “The intensity of the collaborative experience achieved through such tools is surprisingly high,” he notes.

And at the Care Services Improvement Partnership, a UK Department of Health-backed body designed to disseminate best practice, a variety of social networking tools has made a real contribution to reducing the frequency with which people need to physically meet to exchange ideas and information, says Rowan Purdy, the Partnership’s national strategic knowledge management lead. Stressing the superiority of ‘wikis’ over email when it comes to knowledge sharing, “our virtual teams once needed to meet together physically far more frequently than they do now,” says Mr Purdy. “There’s no doubt that we’re saving money as a result.”

In short, it’s not only possible to share knowledge among virtual employees efficiently and effectively, it’s also possible to save money while doing so – a fillip to the bottom line that’s separate from, and additional to, the benefit accruing from the knowledge itself. But what of ‘tacit’ knowledge – that difficult-to-categorise body of wisdom built up from individuals’ long experience? Again, the news is good. Tacit knowledge, too, can be shared – provided that some straightforward stratagems are followed.

First, organisations must accept that sharing tacit knowledge among employees working virtually is more difficult, and requires extra effort and resources. Those dependent on virtual knowledge sharing, as well as those participating in it, should be encouraged to ‘go the extra mile’. Specifically, this can mean devoting time and energy to building high-quality relationships among employees, and providing employees with contextually ‘rich’ ways of sustaining those relationships – not just email, but forums and other online resources, as well as videoconferencing. As such ‘communities of practice’ grow and evolve, mentors and ‘old hands’ should be encouraged to lead by example, going out of their way to show how their tacit knowledge can indeed be leveraged by others.

In summary, the bottom line is clear. As a growing number of organisations rely on geographically-dispersed employees working virtually, the barriers to knowledge sharing are very real – but nonetheless surmountable.

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### Henley Knowledge Management Forum

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Dr Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849 or Dr Judy Payne +44 (0)118 947 4652.

For more information visit [www.henleymc.ac.uk/kmforum](http://www.henleymc.ac.uk/kmforum) or email [kmadmin@henleymc.ac.uk](mailto:kmadmin@henleymc.ac.uk) for an information pack.

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