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Tapping knowledge

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A COMPANY'S GREATEST asset is its employees, but tapping their store of knowledge can present a challenge to large, geographically dispersed enterprises. Aware that its success hinges largely on the knowledge locked in the minds of its nearly 110,000 employees around the world, consumer-products giant Proctor & Gamble turned to knowledge-sharing software to transform departmental experts into tangible information resources for the whole company.

From improving the blend of ingredients in toothpaste to manufacturing diapers, P&G's scientists and researchers depend on information exchange among workers in multiple, distributed departments to develop and market about 300 of the world's most recognizable brands of products.

Four years ago P&G established an employee portal to facilitate collaboration among workers involved in product development. Dubbed Innovation Net, the portal is used by about 18,000 workers around the world in the areas of R&D, engineering, purchasing, and marketing, said Mike Telljohann, associate director at P&G's technical center in Cincinnati.

The portal was successful in providing workers with browser-based access to published information such as documents, reports, and data from a variety of disparate sources. But the intranet was limited because it could not extract one of the company's most valued resources: employee knowledge.

"[Innovation Net] was doing a good job connecting people to knowledge that is documented and articulated, but not as good a job in connecting them to experts," Telljohann says. "Because we are a global company, people are building products all over the world. People often didn't know where to go with questions or issues. They suspected, given the size of the company, that there was more out there that they just didn't get to leverage," he says.

This feedback prompted P&G to seek out tools for tapping the knowledge of its many experts. Enter AskMe Enterprise knowledge-sharing software, which P&G deployed on a trial basis earlier this year to about 1,000 Innovation Net users.

AskMe Enterprise is designed to be integrated into corporate intranets and portals to add qualified experts to the pool of information resources. Based on how much particular workers are involved in certain subjects, the system forms a directory listing of individuals noted as subject-matter experts who can be called upon to lend advice or collaboration for problem solving and product development.

What attracted Telljohann to Bellevue, Wash.-based AskMe, apart from the software's scalability -- a key issue for P&G's large number of employees and locations -- was the software's method of rewarding workers most active in their field with distinguished rankings.

"We found that the way the experts were highlighted within the project was an implicit reward system. It made experts want to participate," he says. "The more active you are in a particular area, AskMe highlights you as a featured expert. People in the innovation area enjoy being seen as an expert. I think it gives a lot of personal satisfaction."



MIKE TELLJOHANN
says AskMe Enterprise
helps create a more
effective work force.

The technology deployment went off without a hitch, but Telljohann says one of the biggest challenges was integrating the system into the day-to-day business process of workers.

"People are very busy. Anything new tends to be seen on the surface as a distraction. Getting people to listen as to why this is valuable is a bit of a struggle," he says.

Telljohann says he and his team spent a lot of time on marketing, conversations, and meetings to evangelize as to how the product could help workers. The tangible ROI results of the pilot deployment were enough to persuade management to invest in a larger rollout to all 18,000 Innovation Net users, which P&G is in the process of completing.

"The quality of conversations going on was very high and could be tied to people moving projects forward. It was clear this would be a pretty good investment," he says.

Another benefit that users appreciated was the efficiency that resulted from establishing a single knowledge base in the company.

"Experts see great value in being able to see a question once and refer repeat questions to those answers," Telljohann says.

Users liked the ease with which they could locate experts and the fact that the system was integrated with e-mail so questions or feedback could be sent immediately. The software gave P&G employees a place to go to ask questions and to share their knowledge.

"I think the experts feel like they can make more of an impact. They typically have close circles they share experiences and knowledge with; this broadens their ability to share what they know, and the people with questions have a place to go."