

Track 5: Social, Behavioral, Cultural and Ethical Factors Part I

by José-Marie Griffiths

The focus of Track 5 is on people as producers and consumers of information/knowledge. The presentations vary in terms of the level of aggregation, dealing with individuals, groups and communities of producers/consumers. Some presentations address certain populations of individuals – children, teenagers, college students, engineers, military officers and low-income populations, the “haves and have nots.” Other presentations deal with groups of individuals such as communities of practice, collaborative work, multi-skilled teams, community networks, professional associations and peer reviewers.

Some of the overriding themes represented by the presentations in Track 5 deal with people’s information seeking patterns, work habits, value systems, cultural milieu and reward structures. There was a consistent message that people want and need easier location of information and a high degree of personalization both of the service and of the information that they access.

Ten major issues were discussed in the set of presentations. It is clear that the “hottest issue” is knowledge management (accounting for about half of the contributed papers) which is why we address this issue in somewhat more detail than the other areas.

Issue 1: The Digital Divide

There is growing awareness of and concern about a widening gap that is perceived between those who have access to digital tools and resources and those who do not. Access is broadly construed as encompassing physical access to equipment and communications networks, skills to use digital resources and economic access in terms of ability to participate in the knowledge production and distribution system.

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Issue 2: Cultural Change in a Digital Environment

Individuals, groups, organizations and communities need to reconsider their respective roles and responsibilities in a digital knowledge-based society. Change is difficult for most people and especially so when change is so pervasive/systemic/endemic. It is often the cultural change management that is the critical success factor rather than any technological development and implementation.

Issue 3: Collaborative Culture

There is general agreement that a more collaborative culture is evolving. Less certain, however, are how much true collaboration occurs, how collaboration can be fostered and what collaboration means from the perspective of both the individual and the group.

Issue 4: Perceptual/Conceptual Issues in Relation to Practice

Models of information seeking behavior derived from cognitive and epistemological development theories were discussed. These models need to be tested against actual information seeking behaviors. Examples addressed include elementary school children and college students.

The relationship of people’s physical work environment to the knowledge work performed there was explored. People shape their work environment to help them remember and organize their thinking. Conversely, the physical environment shapes the work activities by the extent to which it encourages interaction, favors some work tasks over others and distracts attention.

Do form and function, the “shape” of information, affect user interaction with digital documents and, if so, how? What elements of the document signal the reader about the function of the document?

Issue 5: Population Differences

As mentioned earlier, many of the presentations addressed the information needs and behaviors of specific populations. In particular they identified some differences in

types of sources used, in levels of information technology literacy and in general information access patterns.

Issue 6: Digital/Hybrid Libraries

The relatively recent emergence of digital library initiatives creates new challenges for designers and evaluators of such environments. These processes are complex because digital library use is a socially embedded process whose study involves designers, users and social scientists. Furthermore, most digital libraries need to be used in conjunction with non-digital libraries, and more effective ways to bridge these distinct environments are needed.

Issue 7: Customization and Flexibility

A common theme among many of the papers is that people want easier ways to locate needed information, and they want interfaces and information service delivery to be increasingly customized and personalized to reflect their interests and preferences.

Issue 8: Intellectual Property

While the issues associated with intellectual property are numerous and complex, several papers focused on database protection in the aftermath of the 1997 European Union Directive, the WIPO treaty and database antipiracy legislation. Particular concerns include the pricing of databases, the effect of database protection on transborder flow of scientific data and whether the competitiveness of non-EU databases will be impaired.

Issue 9: Information Economics

Economic issues focus on the costing, pricing and valuing of information products and services.

Issue 10: Knowledge Management

Since knowledge management is a major theme for Track 5, Janice Keeler addresses these papers separately in the second part of this overview.

Track 5: Social, Behavioral, Cultural and Ethical Factors Part 2

by Janice Keeler

All of the tracks in the 1999 ASIS Annual Meeting pertain to knowledge management in organizations. In this track the focus is on social, behavioral, cultural and ethical factors.

Consulting firms and other organizations with large concentrations of "knowledge workers," such as those in the pharmaceutical industry, have been at the forefront of efforts to create, capture, organize, disseminate and reuse knowledge in systematic ways.

Andersen Consulting uses the following definition: "Knowledge Management is the engine that transforms ideas into business value. It is a systematic process for creating, acquiring, synthesizing, sharing and using information,

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insights and experiences to achieve organizational goals."

The goal is to share both explicit knowledge (which can be captured as information in databases) and tacit knowledge (knowledge in people's heads that is difficult or impossible to reduce to writing). Key challenges in knowledge management include providing links between people as well as databases and encouraging people to make tacit knowledge more explicit so that it can be shared.

Knowledge Management at the Organizational Level

Knowledge management requires a "knowledge sharing" culture to be successful. In organizations that reward only individual achievement and competition, people are rewarded for their personal knowledge and have no incentive to share it. In a knowledge-sharing culture, people can be rewarded for individual achievements, but are also recognized and rewarded for their knowledge sharing and contributions to team efforts. Key organizational characteristics of a knowledge sharing culture include the following:

- top leadership sees knowledge as a strategic asset and provides incentives and support for knowledge management processes;