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Extending the learning curve -- How B-schools benefit by sharing knowledge on the Web

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DEVELOPMENT and sharing of knowledge have been a continuous process ever since man learnt to speak and write. Indeed, the first turning point in knowledge sharing came when man learnt to write, enabling future generations to access the knowledge of earlier generations.

The inventing of the printing press, which allowed copies of a document to be made and distributed cost-effectively was another watershed event. Few, however, thought it necessary to look at knowledge management as a separate discipline till recently. Now, knowledge management has clearly emerged as one of the most visible disciplines in management education. And the main driver of this trend seems to be the burgeoning field of information technology, in general, and the Internet, in particular.

When we think of knowledge, we instinctively tend to associate it with teachers, schools, colleges and universities. Indeed, for most people, the primary sources of knowledge are teachers and academic institutions. Yet, how committed are our institutions of higher learning to knowledge management? Very little, it seems, especially in the light of what is happening globally. This article discusses how Indian B-schools can use the Internet to accelerate knowledge dissemination.

Most of the leading B-schools in Europe and the US have strong knowledge management initiatives, many of which are Web based. Their web sites are rich in content. IMD's Web site www.imd.ch, among other items, has a feature 'Perspectives', consisting of articles written by the faculty and a full section on World Competitiveness. Insead (www.insead.edu) of France has a knowledge

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portal. Harvard Business School (www.hbs.edu) has a powerful web site which provides a range of educational resources, some free and some priced. Leading American B-schools also have powerful Intranets that allow information to be shared among faculty and students within the campus.

Some of the knowledge management initiatives undertaken by academics in the West are truly mind-boggling. In a recent lecture, Prof Raj Reddy (of Carnegie Mellon University) and an expert in artificial intelligence, explained how he is attempting to collect virtually all the information available in the world and host it free of cost in an easily retrievable form on one Web site -- www.ulib.org. Prof Reddy is talking about going back hundreds of years in time. And his vision is to store information pertaining to at least 1,000 years and make it available free of cost to the general public.

Another laudable initiative is that of Prof Werner Antweiler of the University of British Columbia, Vancouver, Canada. His Web site pacific.commerce.ubc.ca/xr allows us to access foreign exchange rates going back several years for almost all traded currencies. If you want to know how the rupee was trading against the dollar in 1993, do not go to the RBI! Prof Antweiler's Web site will give you the figure in seconds. Similarly, Paul Krugman's site www.wss.princeton.edu/pkrugman/ offers a wealth of resources that would be of great use to researchers.

With stray exceptions, such a commitment to compiling, documenting and sharing knowledge is lacking among our academicians. How many of us have a home page? Do we document our lecture notes and store them for posterity? We teach batch after batch of students. Do we document the common mistakes that students make in the examination or the questions typically asked by the students in the class?

Imagine a scenario where such information is provided to the students before the semester starts. Students would come well prepared and the quality of discussion in the class would improve by leaps and bounds. Not only that, if one of the regular instructors is not available for the semester, an alternative instructor can quickly be briefed and pressed into service, without in any way diluting the academic standards.

Thanks to the dotcom craze, most of our leading B-schools have Web sites today. Unfortunately, their quality leaves a lot to be desired. Except for a prospectus and a few photographs, there is nothing to excite a visitor. Unless the site is

enriched with lecture notes, power point presentations made by faculty, research papers and useful links, it will remain static and of little use.

A bulletin board is also a must to accelerate the process of sharing insights. In the medium to long run, our B-schools should aim to develop knowledge portals like Insead. But, in the short run, basic information, like lecture schedules, course curriculum, lecture notes and solutions to assignment problems, can be made freely available on the Web.

I would like to think that our faculty, especially in the top 100 B-schools are reasonably competent. Many of them are well-read and increasingly demanding students are maintaining the pressure on them to upgrade their knowledge. So, more than knowledge development, it is knowledge sharing that is the key issue. In general, we Indians are reluctant to share what we know with others. We feel worried that all the hard work put in by us will be meaningless if someone has easy access to our knowledge. This is a wrong mindset. People will invariably learn what we know, as no secret is permanent.

On the other hand, if we share our knowledge, reciprocity is quite likely. And, as knowledge is shared among academics, new knowledge will be created. This type of upward spiral is what we need to make our B-schools centres of excellence. Like in business, it is innovation that will create sustainable competitive advantages for a B-school. And knowledge sharing is a must to foster an innovation driven culture.

The Net has thrown up possibilities that did not exist earlier. While installing an Intranet such as Lotus Notes can be an expensive process, the Internet is an inexpensive medium to store and transmit files of data. Let us hope Indian B-schools enhance their effectiveness by appreciating the potential of the Web as a knowledge sharing tool.

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