



Virtual Collaboration: Capturing and Using Tacit Knowledge



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[Jonathon Levy is leading a pre-conference workshop at ONLINE EDUCA BERLIN on Wednesday, November 29: It's Not About Learning, It's About Doing: Creating Your Own User-Centric Solutions.](#)

[You can also meet him in the session COM03 Learning Opportunities in the Workplace on Thursday, November 30, 2006 11:45 – 13:00 hrs.](#)

■ I enjoy observing, interpreting, and reporting on the expanding convergence of knowledge, technology, and human consciousness. But I don't support myself by *observing* the next wave; I create practical solutions that try to *catch* the next wave just as it starts to rise and ride it all the way in. So it is not surprising that when two seemingly-unrelated events coincided on the same day last week, I began to see the beginning of yet another wave.

The first event was a talk by techno-visionary Ray Kurzweil about "experience beaming," the potential to network actual experiences with others, as in *Being John Malkovich*. I took notice because that has immense ramifications for learning at the workplace. If we can share our learned experiences, we will have added an entirely new dimension to what we mean by "content."

That same evening, on the phone from Denver with my wife, I was lamenting that I didn't have a camera with me to share a photo with her of the five-story-tall bear statue that stands nose-to-window in front of (and peers curiously into) the new Colorado Convention Center. As I was describing the scene to her, she replied, "Oh, it's a *blue* bear." How did she know? While I was describing the bear, she put a few words into Google and a moment later, there was a photo. Someone, somewhere took a picture and posted it, and there it was. My wife was using the Internet to "share my experience" in real time, looking through my eyes by looking through another person's experience. I had no idea who had contributed that photo, nor did it matter.

The way Kurzweil describes it, the reality of shared experience lies several dozen years in the future, when we arrive at "the Singularity," a unification of human and machine intelligence. But as is often the case in this rapidly-evolving world, the future is already arriving. Some of us at Monitor Group have been developing corporate solutions that address the issue of shared knowledge and experience within an innovative user-centric platform.

Part of this new vision is "Virtual Collaboration," a kind of collective corporate consciousness that captures and redistributes what we know. There is real strategic and competitive power there. The largest untapped resource in our organizations—the inherent or tacit knowledge of our knowledge workforce—is destined to become one of the most important competitive assets of the global

marketplace. We are developing the physical ability to tap into and effectively capture, categorize, and redistribute that previously elusive resource and blend it with other resources—both internal and external--in a single personalized interface.

There is a story told of a company that ran a contest to encourage call center workers to use the new online support system. After a few weeks, winners were chosen based on most effective call handling. To management's dismay, the first prize was won by a man named Jose who never once used the new system. The explanation was that he came to the call center from fifteen years in production and engineering and knew every product so well that he could readily help customers resolve their issues. But the second-prize winner was a woman who had only joined the company three months earlier. She *also* never used the new system. How did *she* win? She sat next to Jose and benefited from his years of knowledge.

There's a lesson for all of us in that. With computing technology on the horizon capable of ten quadrillion cps and ubiquitous networking virtually at hand, any human experience can be instantly available to all of us. Even in firms with tens of thousands of knowledge workers, we can *all* sit next to Jose.

Virtual collaboration leverages tacit corporate knowledge in previously unimagined ways. A good start in this direction is to change our definition of "content" from course-like structures to a much more user-centric definition: "the resource(s) that I need." The distinction between learning and work is dissolving, as is the distinction between information, data, and knowledge. The employee is becoming the subject-matter expert (SME), and the subject matter is "what I need now." We need to think differently to use existing technology in new ways to accommodate that evolving reality.

Monitor Group is creating solutions that capture, codify, and blend the inherent wisdom of the enterprise with existing knowledge that resides in legacy systems into a user-defined, real-time performance support solution with a single, simple, dynamic, and very user-friendly interface.

We start by rejecting the academic trappings of the university world (courses, classes, etc.) that anchor companies to a static, supplier-driven model. We replace the "electronic classroom" with a user-driven third-generation system that is much more agile, providing a personalized interface that captures and integrates all knowledge resources—human and digital—through a core taxonomy and makes the smallest coherent chunk available as required at the time of need.

The value of collaboration at the workplace is unquestioned, but until now, it has not been possible for collaboration to take place efficiently and productively. Time has been a significant gating factor in achieving real value. Simply knowing "who knows what" and defining the context for best practice in each case has been an impossible task.

Now, however, it is possible to achieve virtual collaboration in real time with an electronic mediator of knowledge and needs, a technological matchmaker of experience and timely requirement, an intelligent parser of all of the collective knowledge and informational resources of the enterprise.

We are only at the beginning of this process, but the value to an organization is real enough, even at this early stage. The solution is so important to corporate competitiveness and organizational effectiveness it kind of makes you wonder why we waited this long.

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