Buckman Laboratories "Work Profiles" Software Program

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Abstract

This is the story of a collaborative knowledge management project involving Buckman Laboratories International, Inc., and LearnerFirst, Inc. The project focused on a crucial issue in the knowledge management movement, *i.e.*, how to develop practical tools that enable organizations to apply knowledge management theory and principles in their everyday work. The result of the collaborative effort of both companies is a practical software program that enables Buckman Associates to maintain a dynamic and current Work Profile.

Introduction

While the concept of Work Profiles (job descriptions) is not new, Buckman's Work Profiles are innovative in the following ways:

- They are created by each individual Associate (employee), and are therefore, unique.
- They can be updated as often as required by changes in the work situation.
- They accurately describe the results of each Associates daily work, and the actions required to produce those results.
- They can be easily shared, transmitted, and stored.
- The Work Profile is directly linked to the performance review process.

Project History

In 1996, significant changes were taking place at Buckman Laboratories International, Inc., based in Memphis, Tennessee. Steve Buckman, CEO of Buckman Labs, met with a group of his top managers to address changing the direction of this global specialty chemicals organization. The leadership group envisioned a paradigm shift from a traditional, hierarchical organizational structure to a structure focused on processes and results. The group recognized that for any change initiative to succeed, it was absolutely vital that each Buckman Associate fully understand and appreciate his/her role in the new direction of Buckman. The creation of an individualized Work Profile by each Associate was selected as the first step in this planned paradigm shift. The Work Profile was seen as a means for Associates to clarify their role in the success of the global Buckman organization by describing the key results of their work, and the essential actions required to produce those results. Steve Buckman acted immediately on the group's decision by announcing two ambitious goals for the organization, world-wide: (1) Each Buckman Associate would create an individualized Work Profile by June 15, 1998, and (2) Each Buckman Associate would receive a formal performance review by November, 1998. Buckman's Human Resources Department was charged with the responsibility for implementing this plan. Initially, Work Profiles were created manually with paper and pen, a time consuming, potential obstacle in the overall plan for a worldwide, cultural transformation within the organization.

To overcome this obstacle and streamline the process for creating and deploying Work Profiles, Steve Buckman assembled a collaborative group that included (1) Process/content experts within the Buckman Human Resources Department, and (2) Knowledge Harvesting™ experts from LearnerFirst, Inc. (Knowledge Harvesting is a process that employs a structured interviewing methodology to help experts verbalize tacit, or hidden knowledge. The expert's knowledge is then organized and structured into software, so that others can access and share it.) The goal of this group was to harvest the knowledge required to design and develop software that would provide a means for each Associate's Work Profile to be:

- Self-generated and unique.
- Created with reasonable effort.
- Created in minimal time (average = within 2 hours).
- Easily shared with others.
- Easily transmitted by electronic means to and from all Buckman locations around the world.
- Easily stored.
- Easily updated and changed.
- Linked directly to the performance review process.

From September through December 1997, Larry Wilson of LearnerFirst conducted knowledge harvesting

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sessions with Steve Buckman and Buckman's Human Resources process/content experts (Mark Koskiniemi, John Absalom, and Chip Westbrook). Larry harvested the knowledge of these Buckman human resource experts related to the underlying assumptions, requirements, and component parts of the Work Profiles process, as well as the particular information that would comprise an individual Work Profile. When the information gathered in the harvesting sessions was organized and structured, the underlying assumptions and organizing framework for the Work Profiles process became clear.

Once the methodology was developed, it was submitted to an academic human resources expert, Dr. Jennifer Burnett, for validation of the process and content. After this validation, LearnerFirst designed and developed the Windows'95® software application entitled "Work Profiles." The completed software application is now available for Buckman Associates to download from LearnerFirst's World Wide Web site. The documentation for the software application is also available to Associates on the World Wide Web in either Microsoft WORD'97® format (for downloading and printing) or HTML format (to view on-screen).

Increased Organizational Effectiveness

The ultimate test of any theory is how it translates into practice. This project was grounded in the following projected benefits of using knowledge management:

- Improved Effectiveness - Intellectual specialization within the organization is increased. This is sometimes referred to as "doing the right thing."
- Reduced Rework - The amount of work that must be redone due to error is decreased. This is sometimes referred to as "doing the thing right."
- Improved Efficiency - The same work can be accomplished in less time.
- Improved Focus - More time is available to devote to the primary mission or function of the workgroup, rather than to tangential activities such as creation of the profile
- Work Elimination - Eliminate the need for some tasks or accomplish them automatically.

Buckman Laboratories and LearnerFirst applied these principles to facilitate design, development, and deployment of the Work Profiles process. The results have yielded significant savings in time, money, and effort in all these areas. With paper and pen, it would not have been possible for the organization to meet its deadlines for deploying this system world-wide. With a project this large in so many locations, it would not have been possible to make the expertise of Buckman's Human Resources Department available in a timely manner to 1200 people who were all trying to create a Work Profile at the same time. Without the Work Profile process, associates would have had no clear guidance or support on how to align their roles to support the organization's new direction and objectives. By implementing knowledge management principles and harvesting the knowledge of experts and designing software to put this expertise to practical use, Buckman Laboratories was able to use the existing personnel within its Human Resources Department to accomplish the following major organizational objectives on schedule:

- Taking the initial step in implementing Steve Buckman's vision for the new direction of Buckman Labs.
- Successfully linking each associate's role into the success of the company.
- Improving communication and understanding throughout the company, and more specifically at the Associate/supervisor interface.
- Improving the company's ability to direct and redirect resources to meet its goals.
- Improving the company's ability to give prospective new Associates a realistic view of their work role, thus increasing the likelihood of a successful match between .the person's strengths and the work requirements.
- Expanding the use of Buckman's award-winning K'Netix Network (intranet).

Creating and maintaining an up-to-date and accurate Work Profile is now a vital component of Buckman Laboratories, and provides an opportunity for Associates to directly and continuously link their results and actions to the organization's critical business processes. The Work Profiles process increases organizational effectiveness by institutionalizing a way for individuals within the organization to:

- Routinely examine and understand their role in the organization
- Play a major part in individually controlling this process.
- Grow as their role changes due to changes in the business environment and the organization
- Establish clear measurement criteria
- Increase the level of dialogue with their manager/supervisor
- Discover the interrelationships with other business and business support processes
- Enforce new work habits
- Improve morale, with increased participation
- Improve record-keeping
- Perceive work in a different way
- Directly link the results of their work into the performance review process

Measurable Productivity Gains

Immediate productivity gains have been associated with cost avoidance and reductions in operating cost. One person, Chip Westbrook, was assigned the task of

making the entire Work Profiles process happen. It would not have been possible to implement this system globally without the software – there were not enough people or time. With the support of the software program, the organization achieved its strategic goal in a matter of months, not years. The Work Profiles software application allowed Mr. Westbrook and the other Human Resource process experts to significantly leverage their know-how in a medium that is easily deployed to all target users. Additionally,

- By using the software, Associates do not have to take significant time away from their daily work to create their Work Profile.
- With the on-line system and embedded help, it is not necessary for Associates to take time away from their work to attend training sessions (lecture/classroom) to learn how to use the system.
- A more difficult to measure, yet observable and important outcome is increased satisfaction. Many Buckman Associates have expressed their appreciation for the opportunity to self-create their Work Profile.

Cultural Issues Addressed During Deployment

The goals of any knowledge-based organization include continuous learning, renewal, and sustainability. In order for these goals to be realized, the individuals within such a system must be afforded the opportunity to achieve these same goals on a personal level, while maintaining alignment with the overall corporate objectives. The complexity of attaining these goals is magnified when the organization operates in 20 countries, and more than half of its employees work outside of the United States.

At Buckman Laboratories, where knowledge transfer and management are the corporate norm, the organization needed to better align its human resource processes with the overall objectives of the company. Additionally, senior managers had determined that the time had come for the organization to become more focused, both on its customers, and on the individual effort and accountability required to meet customers' needs. The opportunity presented itself to create a technology-mediated process that allows individual Associates on a global scale to more closely align their results and actions with those of their department, operating company, and the entire organization.

The existing methodology provides a sound basis for addressing cross-cultural and localization issues. A meeting to be held in May, 1998 focused on training Buckman's human resource professionals from the company's locations around the world in the most effective use of the Work Profiles application, and how to support Associates as they work through the process. Cross-cultural issues and variables in implementing the Work Profiles process in countries outside the United States will be addressed and resolved at that time.

Program Users

The following graph shows number of Buckman users of the Work Profiles application by date.

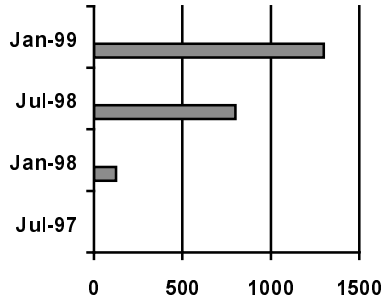

Figure 1: Work Profile Users by Date

The number of users of the Work Profiles software application is expected to continue to increase as localization issues are addressed. Currently, the Work Profiles software is suitable for all Associates with a competency in English. Also available at this time are Work Profiles tools (by-products of the software, such as the Work Profiles Worksheet) in Spanish, Portuguese, German, French, Mandarin, Italian, and Japanese. However, the complete software package is not yet available in these additional languages.

Most Associates within Buckman Laboratories will have the opportunity to use this software application. The exception to this will be those individuals within a job classification where the need exists for consistency of results and actions, globally and/or locally. Examples include Sales Representatives and Manufacturing Operators. Current use is approximately 60% to 70% of the organization's employee base.

An agreement is in place to allow LearnerFirst to commercialize a non-Buckman version of this software for distribution and sale to interested companies. Many companies have already expressed interest in this approach.

Having Work Profiles created by the people who actually do the work every day (instead of the HR department or an outside consultant) is definitely a novel approach. And tying rewards to the work results and actions identified by each Associate in his/her profile has certainly altered the established system.

The collaboration of LearnerFirst Knowledge Harvesting methodology and Buckman Laboratories content / process expertise has yielded an application that:

- Demonstrates how human expertise (related to a human resource management process) is elicited/harvested and transformed into practical software that is instantly deployable to thousands of people within the organization.
- Demonstrates how the product of real knowledge management work can provide the support needed for an organization to successfully accomplish a critical company objective.
- Provides a framework for applying all aspects of knowledge management theory and principles in daily work. It is not another example of esoteric knowledge management theory that leaves everyone bewildered.
- Represents an ambitious, yet accomplishable knowledge transfer effort.

In addition to the innovations that the Work Profiles process has brought to the daily work setting at Buckman Laboratories, it is important to consider the innovative functional characteristics of the Work Profiles software application itself. These include:

- Clear guidance for performing all parts of the Work Profiles process (how-to-do-it information) is contained within the software application itself. Associates save time that would be spent in looking up information from other sources.
- Buckman Associates can easily and quickly access the software application and its documentation by downloading from Buckman Lab's intranet (K'Netix).
- Information that is critical to the entire organization is captured in the form of reports that are generated by the application. These reports are transmitted electronically by each Associate to the appropriate local Human Resource department in Buckman's locations around the world.
- Having up-to-date Work Profiles facilitates recruitment, hiring, and orientation of new Associates.
- The Work Profiles software makes possible a structured, planned methodology to enhance communication between Associates and their managers/supervisors.
- The software makes it possible for both new and experienced Associates to create Work Profiles with fewer references to external sources.

Effects on Customer Satisfaction

The Work Profiles application has served to improve internal and external customer relations in the following ways:

- Internal customers—Completed Work Profiles are posted on Buckman's K'Netix intranet site. Each Associate has a much better understanding of the results and actions required of other Associates. This serves to create a better sense of community. There is a specific set of change triggers related to internal organizational changes.
- External customers—An important component of the software application is guidance to help Associates recognize customer-related events that may potentially create a need for changing work profiles and even organizational strategy. There is a detailed set of change triggers that help Associates to perceive changes in a customer's needs, requirements, or level of satisfaction.

Issues and Challenges

With implementation of Work Profiles, Buckman Laboratories has begun to structure Human Resource processes that are consistent with its corporate values related to the uniqueness and importance of each Associate. The ongoing challenge involves reconciling this individualized system with the traditional laws and practices that govern labor relations and compensation, *i.e.*, a system that has been structured around standardization.

Now that each Buckman Associate has created his/her individualized Work Profile, the organization continues to explore the following issues and challenges related to individualization of its Human Resource processes:

1. Designing a system of recognition and rewards that flows logically from the Work Profiles and Performance Review processes.
2. Fine-tuning the Work Profiles and Performance Review processes so that they are aligned with the values, beliefs, and customs of a variety of cultures.
3. Fine-tuning the concepts of actions and results.

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