DESIGNING FOR KNOWLEDGE CREATION WORK:
AN EXEMPLAR APPLICATION OF SENSE-MAKING METHODOLOGY

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ABSTRACT

Designing approaches to support knowledge intensive work has been documented to be critical and costly. Research has shown that knowledge workers frequently evaluate such efforts as missing the mark. They are too often left without the help they need for constructing knowledge-based solutions. Knowledge workers point to failures not so much in accessing topically-perfect-information but rather to communication gaps, such as practices and knowledge interactions that do not address work demands and knowing needs in complex, changing, and sometimes elusive situations. This research used an interviewing approach informed by Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology. The aim was to allow digging deeply to understand hidden depths of knowing practices that rarely have come to light in user studies. The ultimate aim is to design knowledge interactions and practices that support complex knowledge creation anchored to knowledge worker's knowing practices and to the situationality of these practices. The purpose of this paper is to present an exemplar study focusing on the challenges of doing user research in such a way that it usefully informs the design of knowledge supportive practices and interactions intended for use in complex knowledge creation work in the for-profit context. Dervin's Sense-Making Methodology is presented as an alternative and more powerful approach to studying knowledge creation work in organizational contexts.

Keywords: Knowing; Sense-making; Knowledge creation; Knowledge creation work; Knowledge work; Knowledge interactions; Strategy; Innovation.

1 THE SPECIAL CONTEXTUAL DEMANDS OF KNOWLEDGE WORK

The design of support for knowledge creation work[i] whose primary activity is to create complex knowledge to ground strategies of internal and/or external customers (e.g. consultants, business analysts, market and competitive intelligence analysts) is critical activity. Designs need to guarantee that the knowing workers invest minimum effort (e.g. cognitive, emotional, time) in finding existing knowledge that can help them meet their knowing needs in order to create knowledge-based solutions and products. Designs should ideally allow the knowing workers to focus primarily on combining, interpreting, using, and analyzing existing knowledge, and in applying the results to their customers' needs. These needs range from creating suitable and effective knowledge-based analyses, strategies, studies, plans, or recommendations. Design, thus, should focus not just on **delivering** knowledge, but also on communicating knowledge that will be contributive to intended users and supportive of the ways in which they create new knowledge.

At the same time, design must account for the two most marked characteristics of the contexts within which knowledge-intensive organizations operate. One of these is high competitiveness; the second is high complexity. Knowledge-intensive organizations (e.g. focusing on management, biopharmaceutics, marketing, and competitive intelligence) operate in intensely complex, dynamic, and competitive environments. Their core source of differentiation is based on the knowledge-based solutions and products created by their knowledge workers. Any loss of time or misuse of efforts severely impacts the bottom line -- the quality of knowing workers' customers' decisions and strategies. It has been well documented that the knowing workers spend excessive time struggling to access knowledge -- attempting to locate relevant professionals, trying to interact with them and access what they know regarding critical issues. According to Jacobson and Prusak (2006), knowledge workers spend almost 17% of their time looking for knowledge and arranging meetings with experts, and more than 80% trying to elicit (37.7%), and interpret, adapt, and apply (45.9%) knowledge.

What makes knowledge creation work more challenging, however, is not merely the competitiveness of the organizational environment but rather that this risky competitive scenario plays out amid high complexity. Alvesson (2004) put it well: knowledge work is "the use of knowledge for achieving a high level of rationality in situations of complexity" (p. 222) and "the exercise of professional judgment in the effort to solve complex, frequently unique problems" (p. 23). Hence, competitiveness in knowledge-intensive organizations is heavily based on the learning and unlearning capacities of workers and on their skills in translating these into customized solutions that provide added value to customers.

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