



Thoughts on ETH Alumni “Knowledge Network” using a technological solution (Starmind)

The dream of a technologically supported knowledge exchange or knowledge network has existed since the 1990s. Starmind is one of a long line of software systems with this claim, as for example Adarvo, Autonomy, Confluence, Finebrain, Humingbird, Livelink, Metalayer, Teampage. Starmind corresponds 1:1 to the idea of the late Finebrain, Basel.

So far, however, only a few of these systems have met expectations and most no longer exist.

Depending on the company, there were various internal names for such systems. Yellow Pages at Novartis, Knowledge Organizer at Roche Diagnostics, Touchpoint at Roche Pharma, MedIS at Actelion or ReferencesPlus at Siemens.

These “Knowledge Network Systems” (KNS) offer at least the following functions:

- Static and/or dynamic creation of expert profiles
- Assignment of queries to experts based on rules and profiles
- Q&A archiving in a database
- Forwarding of queries on the basis of workflows
- Search tools for appropriate responses to queries
- Making documents created by experts accessible

The KNS software vendors make a number of assumptions that are often not fulfilled in organizations:

- Users can formulate their questions precisely and use the necessary technical terms so that the KNS can find suitable experts
- Experts pass on their knowledge to people they don't know without worrying about IP (intellectual property)

- The experts create and complete their individual profiles on their own initiative and have the time to do so.
- Expert profiles can be created automatically, as there are many documents in which both the subject areas and the names of the experts appear. Their matching is unambiguous.
- The keywording of the expert knowledge in the expert profiles will later match the users' search terms
- The breadth and depth of the users' search queries across the specialist areas and the expertise stored in the expert profiles provide useful results.
- If not, users will have the stamina to keep searching

The work required to implement such a system is wide ranging. They can only be partially facilitated by AI. Here is a selection:

- Creation of a taxonomy or ontology for each area of expertise. This allows user queries to be placed in the right context.
- Ensure that this ontology is used for both the expert profiles and the user queries
- Funding an editorial team that can assess and manage the content and profiles from a discipline-specific perspective
- Clarifying the question of whether and how the experts are remunerated for their IP
- Creation of instructions and operation of a hotline for experts and users

Unfortunately, the same mistakes were repeated, as the effort involved was always underestimated and too little attention was paid to the work mentioned above. The focus was usually primarily on the technical IT implementation.

By the time they saw and understood all the effort required, it was usually too late to stop the project. One option was then to include simple, sometimes trivial content in the databases. Another option was to shut down the system quietly after a few months.

It is presently believed that AI will make it easier to set up these databases - quod esset demonstrandum.

It is difficult enough to introduce such a system in a company that can mandate its employees to participate. It is even more difficult in a voluntary organization like ETH Alumni.

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