

## The Implementation of Corporate Knowledge Portals at Professional Service Firms

*This paper presents the results of three in-depth KM cases studies: Bain & Company, Hill & Knowlton and Context Integration. This paper examines the use of sophisticated corporate portals (CP)s by these firms to support their internal and external Knowledge Management initiatives.*

**José Cláudio Terra, Dr., Cindy Gordon, PhD.**

### Introduction

Large and geographically dispersed professional service firms have always applied knowledge management strategies to leverage their business models. By applying Knowledge Management (KM) techniques and approaches, this is the only way that Professional Service firms can become more than just the “sum of their different parts”. In the past, however, most KM initiatives relied on traditional activities such as: training, informal networks, fostering strong team cultures supporting the value of shared knowledge, personnel transfers, etc. However, these approaches are no longer sufficient. The demands in terms of knowledge creation, reuse and the realities of business globalization require professional services to apply the latest KM strategies and approaches that have been, to a great extent, enabled by the Internet. In this paper,

we compare the use of corporate portal (Collins, 2001; DavyDov, 2001; and SAP-PriceWaterhouse, 2001) or “KM Portals” by three leading organizations: Bain & Company, Hill & Knowlton and Context Integration.

### Methodology

The research approach used was a case study method. A “theory-oriented inductive approach was used rather than a deductive process. The approach we took used the building block method where we identified key research questions, both qualitative and quantitative to identify new themes, causal relationships and insights. The case studies were conducted through a combination of face-to-face and telephone interviews. A structured research questionnaire was sent as a pre-read and with a supporting context overview of the research goals and objectives to provide time for participants to

respond more effectively during the interviews. In all cases, we interviewed 3-5 senior executives, and user champions who provided the vision and/or were in charge of the implementation of the knowledge portal project. The interviews were followed by multiple iterative review sessions to validate the case study observations and interpretations. During the interviews, a demo of the portals was also provided. More detailed project and support documentation was also analyzed before and after the interviews. Each case study took approximately four weeks each to collect, analyze and document the research findings, and have corporate release validating the research.

### Summary of Companies' Background

#### Bain & Company

Bain & Company ("Bain") is a leading top management-consulting firm founded in 1973. The firm currently has more than 2,800 consultants working in 28 offices across six continents. Bain's business mission is "to make companies more valuable and convert strategy and action into economic performance." The firm offers expertise in a number of industries including: conglomerates, consumer products, financial services, etc and functional areas including: strategy, e-commerce strategy, customers, growth, etc.

#### Hill & Knowlton

Hill and Knowlton ("H&K") is the second largest public relations firm in the world and is a subsidiary of the

WPP Group, a \$22B US company. H&K has significant global reach with two thousand employees operating in sixty-seven office locations in thirty-four countries. The company strives to leverage the Intellectual Capital of all these offices while at the same time operating in a decentralized culture with a razor sharp focus on client needs.

### Context Integration

Context Integration ("CI") is a leading integrator of e-business solutions. The company was founded in 1992 and has its headquarters in Burlington, Massachusetts. Its service line includes the integrated delivery of business, creative and technology design primarily for the financial and media/communications sectors. The company has around 300 employees in six offices across the United States.

### *The Catalysts, Driving Factors and Brief Description of the Portals*

#### Bain & Company

Bain has been early adopters of KM and have consistently demonstrated strong KM leadership. Although an early searchable mainframe solution helped to increase knowledge sharing, by the late mid 1990s, Bain knew that to continue to be thought leaders, they needed to extend their learning and knowledge systems to the next level utilizing web-oriented technology solutions to make it easier for consultants to locate their most knowledgeable colleagues; find the newest codified insights; and access the most relevant and updated industry data. Hence in 1997, Internet

technology solutions were deployed to support their KM client delivery support services. A critical viewpoint shaping Bain's KM deployment strategies was that their senior leadership embraced training and KM as a business imperative essential for success in today's increasingly competitive environment. An environment, which they saw, clients demanding more and becoming more sophisticated everywhere. Over the last few years, especially in fast-paced high-tech areas, industry cycles have become shorter, which makes it critical for consultants to tap into Bain's knowledge real-time as it is created, regardless of location.

When Steven Tallman, Bain Chief Operating & KM Officer, took on the role to spearhead Bain's global Training and KM strategy for Bain, it was to convince other Bain partners that they were not fully leveraging the "knowledge of the firm". Together with other senior Bain talent, he formed a core leadership team to champion Bain's KM strategy, execution and change management efforts. One of their first challenges was to "earn their budget" by convincing very fact-based senior consultants that it made good business sense. In order to achieve this, they not only set out on an "evangelizing" journey, they also built a strong business case pinpointing the constraints to case-team success from not having the right data, information and access to experts at the right time. Through fact-based real client case scenarios the logic of the implications became a "wake-up" call for Bain to speed up their KM implementation efforts.

Bain knowledge custom-developed knowledge portal integrates two separate initiatives:

- ✓ Bain Virtual University (BVU), a complete web-based learning environment, was introduced in 1998. By the summer of 2001, more than 170 modules were available to all employees across the globe. BVU's design takes into consideration that individuals have different learning styles. Modules are presented in a variety of formats, including web-based power point presentations, "hands-on exercises" (computer based training-CBT), multi-media courses and templates that can be used in real-life projects.
- ✓ In 2000, Bain launched its state-of-art KM platform, called the Global Experience Center (GXC). GXC can be seen as a knowledge portal organized around five core sources of knowledge for Bain's client work:
  - Tools: proprietary and non-proprietary frameworks, concepts, templates and other tools that can be applied across a number of projects;
  - Capabilities: a repository of Bain's proprietary insights across all of its key "study types" of client work (e.g., cost reduction, M&A, growth strategy)
  - Industry Information: a source of organized information per industry that combines both internal and external sources;
  - Case, Client and People Information: Bain's improved repository (as compared to BRAVA's) of information on previous client work. Client

information is “sanitized” by knowledge brokers (client names are removed and data is disguised) to allow company-wide view, and is designed to facilitate tacit knowledge sharing.

- External Research: includes access to high-value subscription databases, as well as links to top business sources, that have been pre-selected or suggested by the research department and/or consultants.

#### Hill & Knowlton

In early 1999, Tony Burgess-Webb, a member of H&K’s worldwide executive committee, assessed H&K’s current approach to KM and existing intranet infrastructure and support processes. Employee surveys were conducted which confirmed their intranet had limited functionality as knowledge sourced was irrelevant, outdated and inaccurate. In addition, the value of the knowledge-based initiatives did not have strong executive alignment. Hence, Tony proposed a new and bold vision to “Build something totally new.” He began a leadership quest to share a compelling vision, goals, and project requirements to senior management. In early 1999, in a general management meeting where all global practice leaders assembled, about 60 executives, Tony shared his vision for a more robust and pervasive knowledge ecosystem at H&K. He spoke passionately about his beliefs that the focus on knowledge would benefit clients in developing stronger products and services; deliver consistent service across the company

and believed further investments in KM infrastructure would help improve H&K globalization processes, and leverage strategic knowledge into high margin repeatable activities. The outcome of this meeting was unified executive support to invest in a more robust KM organization, and initiate an investment process to help realize his dream.

The evolution of value contributions of H&K’s knowledge portal is seen as the collective brains of H&K’s employees. It is called HK.net. Strategically for content creation and content submissions H&K has adopted the view of giving people the power to add content versus controlling what is added. Everyone can contribute and participate in the process versus having a centralized categorizing process. Recently added content is frequently monitored and any frequently requested documents are linked into a library for a special search area to highlight value content. End user training is conducted on a regular basis to ensure that employees are trained to conduct the search properly to use their tools effectively. H&K’s knowledge portal is now at the stage where the volume of knowledge has increased significantly and requires people to edit and weed – the maintenance continuum is an area for management attention to improve the sustainability capabilities.

H&K uses an Intraspect platform to support its worldwide knowledge community. Intraspect solutions provide web-based workspaces to capture information as it is created, many-to-many collaboration technology to share intellectual capital

across employees, customers, partners and suppliers, and an enterprise knowledge base that grows with us. The HK.NET is the company portal that provides immediate access to a number of information sources and people. It includes access to customized portals according to regions of the world, a number of links to find expertise within the firm (directories, cases studies, biographies, global client leaders and organized documentation about key sectors) and also several external news feeds that are relevant for H&K business.

Intraspect provided a portal environment to facilitate the ease of content use and publishing and there is also an ability to easily set up alerts that can be directed to a person's inbox and/or personal pages. Documents can be submitted in a wide range of document formats (office documents, emails, newsfeeds, etc.). One of the capabilities of this knowledge collaboration environment which was attractive to H&K is the ability to integrate their intranet and extranet and to share selected information to clients via a password protected site. An important attribute of H&K's CKP is the support it provides to their global accounts. The value of H&K's CKP environment is actively promoted in their business proposals and has helped secure some top global clients. These clients, both knowledge centric in their business approaches, were attracted to HK.net capability to access in a password-protected area H&K knowledge with external knowledge from targeted news sources and account activity (including on-going

and scheduled interviews, plans, work-in-progress documents, etc). All emails related to each specific account are automatically stored in this client folder so anyone joining the project can easily follow all the major milestones, decisions and communications related to the project. Clients can also post easily information.

### Context Integration

Bruce Strong, one of the founders of CI, explained that its knowledge management (KM) system is a natural outcome of the core values of the company and also of a clear and explicit three-pronged pursuit of value creation in every activity. The core values of CI are: deliver outstanding client value with integrity; invest in employee growth; balance work and personal life; commit to teamwork; embrace innovation. Value creation at CI includes the perspective of the client, the employee and the investor. In founding CI, Bruce and the other partners set out on a journey to build Intellectual Capital, and to have fun along the way. As the company started to grow and expand geographically, and with the frantic need to tap into the latest technological know-how in order to compete successfully, Bruce recognized that CI needed more than just smart individuals and a knowledge sharing culture to succeed. It needed a supporting KM platform that would better connect the minds of the organization.

The Intellectual Assets Network, or "IAN" as it is called at CI, has filled that need. According to Bruce, in order to

be useful, IAN needed to capture knowledge as it was being created and disseminate that knowledge in real-time. IAN was also designed to help CI better serve its customers. As Bruce highlighted, “Although we [CI] rely extensively on technology, we are not a scientific company, we are a services company”. Since its inception, the basic goal of sharing knowledge vertically and horizontally within CI and within and outside the walls of the organization (especially with clients and occasionally with partners) has been the key driver of the continued development of the architecture of IAN. Other specific objectives have also been incorporated in IAN over time. The current inventory of goals follows.

IAN was custom-developed on a Lotus/Domino platform. IAN allows employees from six different offices to keep connected and share ideas. Employees have access to IAN from anywhere and at anytime: from client sites, home or anywhere else they can get an Internet connection. In order to access certain areas or databases of IAN, employees do not even have to be connected to the Internet since parts of IAN can be downloaded to the hard drives of employees’ laptops. IAN can also direct important and urgent questions to experts via a pager or other wireless devices (such as a cell phone, Blackberry, or Palm) IAN is organized into the following key areas, which are immediately accessed via the portal’s home page:

- Search: The Verity engine allows the user to target the search according to a number of parameters including author, date,

language, project, technology domain and topic among others

- Discussions: This area includes all the on-going discussion databases, representing a variety of topics related to CI business. The topics are based on technology, sales category, or other category – the metadata is constantly evolving to meet the changing needs of the consultants as they capture and search for information. Employees can subscribe to receive notification every time there is a new posting that has a topic of interest to them. They also use the discussion area to post documents, tips, links and also any questions. Their questions are automatically directed by IAN to be answered “gurus” via email and pager. Questions are classified by users into one of the following categories according to their urgency:
  - Immediate: Requires response in less than one hour;
  - Urgent: Requires response in less than four hours;
  - Routine: Requires response in less than one business day;
  - Not time-sensitive: Responses can be given within one week.
- Knowledgebase: This area includes a set of documents or discussion threads that have been reviewed by experts in their field and deemed to be of high-value for reuse. Only domain experts can

post/upload directly to this collection of documents. Documents called “road maps” are posted here. These are documents written by domain experts or practice leaders that serve as a comprehensive introduction for new employees or novices that need to get quickly acquainted with a specific domain.

- Learning: This area contains all information related to the learning process at Context. Documents include Curriculum Paths (a set of skills needed to achieve

senior management team, which needs to respond within a week.

- Project artifacts: This is where employees upload all information (artifacts) related to specific projects at certain pre-determined milestones. Artifacts encompass a broad range of intellectual assets, from sales presentations to software codes.
- Projects: This is the work-in-progress area with specific folders for each individual project. All employees have access to all projects and documents unless

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competency in a particular area, including methods for attaining the skills), pointers to internal and external class descriptions and schedules, and previously recorded training sessions available for playback.

- ContextWISE – This area contains all information related to CI’s core methodology. Descriptions of all tasks in the methodology (including best practices and pointers to sample deliverables) are contained here.
- Solution Box: Allows employees to enter suggestions around any aspect of the business. The suggestions are forwarded to the

otherwise stated. The links to PETE are located here.

- Partners: A list of contacts for each important CI partner is listed here. Contacts are usually domain-experts in a specific technology.
- Colleagues: The firm is adamant that employees keep their profiles up to date. A digital photo is taken of employees on their first day with CI, so that their initial profile can be set up immediately.

#### Stated Goals

Based on our standard questionnaire, the KM leaders at Bain, H&K and CI rated the goals of their respective KM/portals initiatives (table-1).

**Table-1: Comparison of KM Goals** - Legend: ( P ) Primary Goal ( S ) Secondary Goal ( N ) Not relevant

QUESTION	Bain	H&K	CI
<b>Communication Tool (Top-Down and Bottom-up)</b>			
Improve communication of vision and knowledge strategy	N	S	S
Improve communication of company values	S	S	S
Keep organization alert	S	S	P
Engage customers and community at large	S	P	P
Divulge results more broadly and promote systemic analysis	P	P	P
Facilitate bottom-up communications	N	S	P
Make it easy for employees to suggest improvements to management	N	N	P
<b>Push Information and Knowledge to Employees</b>			
Capture, organize and distribute codified knowledge (e.g. database access)	P	S	P
Improve access to external sources of information and knowledge	P	S	S
Improve decision-making	N	S	S
Empower front-line employees	P	S	P
<b>Improve Reuse of Knowledge</b>			
Develop expertise maps (uncover existing knowledge)	P	P	P
Map and measure intangible assets	S	P	S
Facilitate search of previously developed knowledge	P	P	P
<b>Foster Collaboration</b>			
Increase collaboration amongst different functions of the organization	P	P	P
Increase collaboration amongst different geographies of the organization	P	P	P
Improve overall knowledge sharing	P	P	P
Support the development of Communities of Practice	P	P	P
Increase connections not related to work	S	S	N
<b>Improve Human Capital Management</b>			
Improve hiring	N	N	N
Improve internal mobility and deployment of existing employees	N	S	S
Integrate temporary and outside human resources and expertise	N	N	N
Improve training and acquisition of skills	P	S	P
Get new employees up to speed very quickly	P	P	P
Reduce time spent on menial activities	S	P	N
Improve employee retention	S	S	P
Facilitate work and integration of telecommuters	N	S	S
<b>Improve Relationships (External stakeholders and Increase Information Flow)</b>			
Improve information exchange with suppliers, partners and customers	S	P	S
Capture customer information	N	P	P
Improve customer satisfaction	S	P	P
Reduce sales costs	S	S	P
Reduce customer service costs	S	S	P

Source: interviews of KM leadership at Bain & Company, Hill & Knowlton and Context Integration

The table above clearly shows that although a corporate portal

infrastructure can be implemented to serve many KM needs and goals, the

key priorities for the three professional service firms were to improve reuse of knowledge (tacit and explicit), map the expertise held by individual consultants and foster higher levels of collaboration. Getting new employees up-to-speed very quickly was also a goal that came across as very important (they all tended to hire a large number of recent graduates and young professionals who usually needed to start working on assignments of strategy importance in a very short period of time).

#### **Key Lessons Learned**

***Lesson 1: IT does not have to be costly and modular launches make a lot of sense***

The three organizations profiled in this paper realized that deployment of knowledge portals do not have to be costly. There is no major secret to keeping portal development costs in check. The keys are to concentrate on functionality that really adds value to the business, avoid costly “bells and whistles”, leverage existing data and systems, and roll out applications incrementally. All three organizations reminded us that one of the important lessons was not to implement web applications just because it was easy to do so. These organizations proceeded with their modular launches, only after careful analysis of how work is conducted and how knowledge is shared and created. They were all intensely focused on developing solutions which immediately added value and create “stickiness” to return end-users to the environment. Closely related to this logic is the idea of modularity. The

Internet, itself, is a very modular network that allows pieces of content and applications to be seamlessly integrated into existing solutions. These firms took advantage of that. Not only did they focus on specific audiences, but also on specific clusters of content that had depth or were considered strategic enough. Hence, the taxonomy of the content environment, both ease of classifying, tagging and searching took on a higher order of management focus to streamline knowledge into a flexible infrastructure for continual growth.

#### ***Lesson 2: Organizational Support***

KM systems require a combination of technology and dedicated personnel. The level of success achieved by the three cases is the result of not only a well designed system, but also of the strong support offered by management in many areas. Senior management showed strong support through many different ways (speeches, direct involvement and usage, establishment of new reward metrics, etc). Very important in all cases were also the role played by knowledge managers and knowledge brokers. Although some employees may understand that one of their responsibilities with the organization is to share and codify part of the Intellectual Capital, it is very easy for this responsibility to take a “back seat” as employees worry about their daily tasks. In face of this situation, the knowledge brokers are seen in all three organizations as the keepers of the “Knowledge Codifying Process”. They make sure that employees do not forget to codify relevant knowledge-sharing elements of their

projects, activities and tasks and in the case of Bain and CI they also extract key insights (tacit knowledge) by interviewing managers at the beginning and end of a project. The knowledge brokers are also key resources for employees who need a human introduction to an organization's core intellectual assets in specific knowledge domains. Finally, knowledge brokers play an important role in organizing and keeping the online information up to date. All three companies had formalized knowledge managers and knowledge brokers roles and also KM representatives in each different office.

***Lesson 3: Fostering meaningful connections is key in professional service firms***

One of the most important areas for knowledge access was beyond simply access to best practices and service collaterals/points of view – but clearly documenting subject matter expertise, where they were, how to reach out to them, what knowledge they knew...The ability to rapidly talk to an expert, supported by the knowledge infrastructure of codified knowledge – together created a strong intellectual asset base for these companies.

***Lesson 4: Metrics and User Satisfaction***

In order to gauge their levels of success, these companies are using a number of “proxies”: Portal traffic and activity by office and content; Periodical surveys to gauge the level of satisfaction of consultants with the various areas and applications within the portal; Evaluation of search terms

that do not find any matches (show what people are looking for); Specific feedback to documents and content areas from the consultants. The proxies and anecdotes (publicized via general emails or postings in the portal) of how the knowledge portals have helped in specific project situations provide the best indirect solutions to determining the success of these initiatives. There was a strong belief that these actions help foster the attitudes and motivations required to make the most of the KM tools. There was also in these three cases the recognition of a leap of faith that this infrastructure was clearly a competitive imperative to support or sustain their growth and the belief that by investing in corporate portal infrastructure and developing more robust knowledge management capabilities that they could leverage the whole brain of their firms globally.

***Lesson 5: Recognition and Rewards***

The three companies interviewed highlighted that peer recognition could play an important part in helping fostering this desired behavior. None of the companies tried only monetary rewards, but were all experimenting and introducing a few monetary incentives (affecting bonus or through more symbolic prizes). More than the actual benefits derived from the financial rewards, we think that this demonstrates the power and importance of giving explicit and visible recognition and rewards for knowledge sharing. There was a general belief that employees were highly motivated by the recognition from their trusted colleagues that their

documents or knowledge contributions were identified as a best practice.

These organizations are also sending clear signals that knowledge hoarding and lack of participation in the KM activities is not appropriate behavior. It was also evident that at Bain and CI, different offices and departments are clearly reminded that they cannot be “free riders”. They also need to contribute to the knowledge base of the organization. Knowledge sharing and knowledge codification are becoming an essential part of everyone’s job. Thus, not engaging in these activities is, increasingly, being seen as not fulfilling one’s core obligation to the organization. In Bain and CI, there were also formal audits validating contributions and adherence to the knowledge practice guidelines, further reinforcing how serious the management of intellectual assets can be and should be.

### Conclusions

KM is at the core of successful Professional service firms. It plays an important role in making each individual consultant perform “smarter” than if he or she acted and learned alone. It is no surprise that many of the best practices, concepts and vocabulary used today in the KM literature (mentoring, communities of practice, reuse of codified knowledge, etc) evolved from the consulting firms. The web, however, introduced many new opportunities to accelerate knowledge flows, provide targeted knowledge (tacit or explicit) for those who seek it, and has made it much easier for knowledge owners to distribute it widely, and rapidly. As we

saw above, all three companies focused on portal and KM features that were clearly linked to the sales cycles and/or that clients could immediately see the benefits. This was important as it generated a lot of energy and goodwill for the portal implementation across all hierarchical levels and offices. All three companies also agreed that web-enabling of routine, back-end applications could have been potentially easier to implement, but would have had minimal business impact and would have generated far less interest.

Organizations that create and structure knowledge portals are improving their knowledge assets. Some of the cornerstone business processes in knowledge portals design and ongoing evolution of content are: information/asset management, publishing and personalization. Rapidly identifying assets and best practices and sharing them widely is increasingly necessary for achieving an organization’s strategic objectives. The learning from the professional services industry are also imperative for other knowledge intensive industries – the question should no longer be “what is the value of knowledge management and investing in infrastructure to manage organizational knowledge, rather the question should be: “what are the implications to our business and the loss of knowledge if these strategic investments are not made?” Knowledge Portals can significantly improve the connections amongst people and often times may lead to connections that without access to a knowledge portal would not occur. This is, of course, only the first step in

the knowledge creation or sharing process. To go to the next level, people need to be willing to cooperate and the right incentives and rewards need to be in place.

These three case studies provide us with a social and operational context for organizational collaboration where knowledge and learning are interchanged real time. As new networks and knowledge capabilities are developed, this organic free-flowing approach to knowledge access we believe will have fundamental impacts on business strategy, organizational processes, and technology infrastructure. As companies continue to create multi-channel capabilities, accelerate their strategic alliances, and grow their customer connections, corporate portals with the adoption of KM strategies and techniques provide knowledge intensive industries with valuable capabilities for sustaining business growth and the elasticity for continual organizational learning.

### References

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**José Cláudio C. Terra** é presidente da TerraForum Consultores. Atua como consultor e palestrante no Canadá, nos Estados Unidos, em Portugal, na França e no Brasil. Também é professor de vários

programas de pós-graduação e MBA e autor de vários livros sobre o tema. Seu email é [jcterra@terraforum.com.br](mailto:jcterra@terraforum.com.br)

**Cindy Gordon** é consultora internacional da TerraForum Consultores. Participa do conselho de diretores de várias empresas de alta tecnologia nos Estados Unidos e Canadá. Foi, recentemente, destacada pela University of Western em sua publicação, e é também autora de diversos artigos e livros.

### Artigos Relacionados

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## A EMPRESA

A TerraForum Consultores é uma empresa de consultoria e treinamento em Gestão do Conhecimento (GC) e Tecnologia da Informação. Os clientes da empresa são, em sua maioria, grandes e médias organizações dos setores público, privado e terceiro setor. A empresa atua em todo o Brasil e também no exterior, tendo escritórios em São Paulo, Brasília e Ottawa no Canadá. É dirigida pelo Dr. José Cláudio Terra, pioneiro e maior referência em Gestão do Conhecimento no país. Além disso, conta com uma equipe especializada e internacional de consultores.

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