

Just as cities grow through connections between neighbouring villages, organisations are held together by patchworks of communities that, if properly supported, can ensure people learn, innovate, collaborate and share knowledge. As Martin

Dugage, knowledge management director at Schneider Electric, knows, these activities characterise some of the world's most successful organisations. His appreciation of the value of communities extends back to his first engineering job at aerospace company Dassault where employees were given the space, resources and support to not only perform their roles to the best of their abilities, but also explore new ways of working. Since then, his discovery of knowledge management (KM) and hard-fought experiences building communities of practice (CoPs), have given him an in-depth understanding of what makes or breaks a community.

Graduating from L'École des Mines de Paris, one of France's respected grandes écoles, Dugage joined Dassault as an expert in composite materials. He describes the company as the most elaborate knowledge-driven organisation he has known and acknowledges its ongoing influence in his work.

"Dassault had a family structure where people knew each other very well," he says. "On an early project, I had to develop the carbon fibre component structure of the front fuselage of the Rafale A fighter. They asked what resources I'd need but gave me considerably more than I had requested as they knew engineers always spent more than we asked for. We had no excuses for cutting corners and we had the time and space to test new ideas and help others if they had problems. It is an expensive approach – many thought we were throwing money out the window – but it worked: we were the only company able to develop a Mach II fighter prototype in three years."

From Dassault, Dugage returned to academia to study for

The knowledge | Martin Dugage

Communities of practice hold the key to the learning organisation.

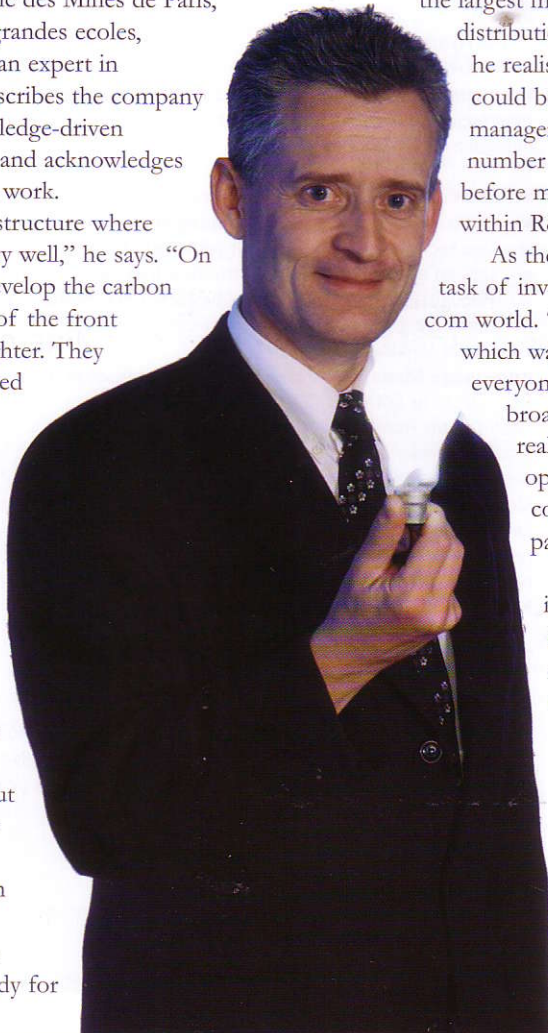
Martin Dugage tells Sandra Higgison how he has unlocked their value at Schneider Electric and examines the roles of trust and knowledge spaces in ensuring success.

an MBA at Insead, another socially charged institution. While students build dense and valuable networks during their time at the top-tier business school and can take advantage of the environment's high levels of social capital, they are also taught to be highly professional in their work and that they must focus on return on investment. "I became wrongly convinced that being 'professional' involved counting a lot and running a tight ship," he says. "I even started wondering if Dassault's approach was wasteful and whether it was managing research and development properly."

It wasn't until Dugage joined Schneider Electric, one of the largest manufacturers of equipment for electrical distribution and industrial control and automation, that he realised how short sighted and limiting this approach could be. Following several years in strategic management consulting after Insead, Dugage took on a number of marketing and strategy roles at Schneider before moving to the US to tackle product development within R&D for the company's automation group.

As the internet boom took hold, he was given the task of investigating what the group could do in the dot-com world. "I was part of the new e-business division, which was like an incubator for Schneider. At the time everyone was focusing on the web as either a broadcasting medium or a sales channel. But I was really interested by the social aspect and the opportunities it held for establishing new connections between people. I became very passionate about this area."

The division launched many initiatives including those that Dugage honed-in on relating to communities. "Schneider being a technology-oriented business, we all believed that we could change the way people worked through web-based collaboration tools," he says. Building a team of ten people, Dugage led the development of a tool called Knexsis, which he likens to a platform for group weblogs. "The vision was that Knexsis would support a company's alliances. For example, Schneider Electric has developed and owns global standards in automation. We wanted to create a platform that enabled the communities



involved in their development and implementation to discuss any issues and help them evolve. Knexsis had tags, collaborative filtering, member profiles and the ability for people to evaluate and grade the quality of posts.”

Even though, after only eight months, the project fell foul of senior management’s decision to stop all initiatives not deemed to be part of the core business, Dugage now admits that Knexsis was doomed from the outset. “From a systems standpoint it was very interesting and the concept was certainly visionary for the time as it really extended the idea of a user group. It was, however, totally out of touch. These things only happen from the ground up. People start blogging individually and then form their own communities to blog as a group. It needs too much energy to be pushed down from the top.” Despite the business failure, Knexsis received much attention from external and internal customers, and Dugage says he is very proud of the innovative work that went into its creation.

For the next few months, in true KM style, Dugage took some time to reflect on the lessons he had learnt from the Knexsis experience. It was mid-2001 and he was living in Boston, Massachusetts – a hub of KM people and activity. Taking advantage of this location he met and had interesting conversations with some of the most forward-thinking people in knowledge management, including Larry Prusak, Steve Denning, Hubert Saint-Onge and Alex Bennett. “I learnt a lot about their thoughts on communities and knowledge sharing, and I started to put together a toolkit for creating communities at Schneider,” he says. “We based the toolkit on that of the US Navy and adapted it to our company’s culture.”

Dugage published the toolkit online and was soon contacted by a senior vice president who said it was exactly what he needed to support a series of competence centres he was building across the organisation. Like many companies, Schneider was making the transition from selling products to selling solutions or systems, which required that it fully understand its clients’ businesses and needs. The competence centres would enable the company to tap into a number of its major markets. While each centre was based in the most relevant country organisations, management teams were struggling to find a way to hold each one responsible for sharing its knowledge globally. Communities of practice provided an obvious solution.

Similar to his work with Knexsis, the creation of these communities provided Dugage with a rich learning experience. “We asked each country to take responsibility for building a global community around its domain of expertise, be it textiles, packaging or material-handling industries,” he says. “The programme worked very well; there was a lot of energy and we were impressed to see how people responded to the challenge. To support them we held worldwide meetings where each leader had to get on stage to explain the objective

of his or her community in one minute without any notes or slides. It was a great exercise as it forced them to go deep into the meaning and benefits of their community.”

Their success also impressed Schneider Electric’s CEO who called in the senior vice president in charge of the competence centres and asked him to speed up the communities’ work. Unfortunately, this interest dealt them a near-fatal blow. “When you want communities to move faster they morph into project teams,” says Dugage. “Whereas the people in them had been sharing knowledge for their own benefit and storing it in ways that would be useful to the next generations, they were suddenly made to focus on creating visible assets that served the needs of others outside the community.” This initial shift caused the communities to lose much of their energy, while a major corporate reorganisation then sapped most of the remaining momentum.

Three years on and Dugage is in the process of building new networks of communities at Schneider. “We have 13 CoPs for people working with the company’s infrastructure clients, such as electrical utilities or airports. Focused on understanding their key issues and detecting potential future projects, they are like think tanks, but are also very operational.” In addition he is building eight communities that aim to bring product and application specialists together within the company’s sales process. “It’s an enormous programme that organises global communities around product families and trains people on the offering.”

All communities need a space for knowledge exchange to take place, be it a page on the intranet, a meeting room, annual conference or online collaboration tool.

Armed with his hard-earned knowledge and experience, Dugage is fully versed in the dos and don’ts of community building. “Some CoPs work better than others,” he says. “The more connected to the strategy and closer to the core business, the better they work. The choice of sponsor is also critical. Not only should they be in senior management and advocate the existence of the community, but they must also give it legitimacy. For example, if you have a European community of sales people, the sponsor needs to understand the area and be credible to members rather than simply selected for their role level. Again, it’s a matter of trust.”

The biggest challenge Dugage highlights, however, is ensuring that communications from everyone involved in the communities are synchronised. “It’s not just about appointing someone as a lead,” he says. “Human resources, country managers and IT must all be involved and must convey consistent messages to employees. If experts from a community receive conflicting communications from their

Curriculum Vitae



Name: Martin
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Place of birth:
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Education:

Engineering (Ecole des Mines de Paris); MBA, INSEAD

Employment history: Aerospace Engineer - Dassault Aviation (1982-1986), Management Consultant - SRI International (1987-1989) then M2i-Stratorg (1989-1992). Various senior management positions at Schneider Electric in marketing and product development (1993-2001). CEO of an internet start-up for 9 months (2000-2001). KM Project Director at Schneider Electric (2002-the present)

Personal strengths: Turning an idea into a prototype that works

Must improve: Keeping messages simple

Biggest inspiration: Charles de Gaulle

What I do to relax: I walk along the Seine at night with Nathalie (my wife)

Favourite film: 'Splendor in the Grass' by Elia Kazan

Must read: 'Catch 22' by Joseph Heller.

community leaders and bosses, nothing will happen. It's the most difficult thing I've come across in community development." Finally, Dugage recommends writing a job description for the leaders, even if the role only takes up 20-50 per cent of their time. "If this role does not form part of their objectives and they are not recognised for their efforts, they will not be effective, despite their best intentions."

An area that has captivated Dugage's thoughts has been the importance of trust to community development, so much so that he's writing a book on the subject. "All communities need a space for knowledge exchange to take place, on an intranet, in a meeting room, conference or online collaboration tool. Just as Dassault's engineers were given time and resources, CoPs need breathing space to engage in their activities."

Dugage uses the army as an example. "The military can organise elections in the morning, fight in the afternoon and be humanitarian in the evening. This dexterity comes from cutting-edge learning systems in which communities are key. They form an organisation's information highway system as they comprise the most knowledgeable people in a domain."

Drawing on another lesson from the armed forces, Dugage is examining the value of trust within knowledge spaces and ways that it can be nurtured within organisations. "If I can tell you are knowledgeable as a software developer, for example, then you have the first quality for building trust in that area. If you then prove to be benevolent I will take you into my 'trust space' and my communities. This trust might not, however, extend outside this sphere as I may not also trust you as a manager." His book explores this theme further to show how communities are spaces of trust.

Dugage also has the opportunity to discuss these issues and many others with the members of Cop-1, the community of French knowledge managers he built when he returned from the US. "I had experienced the value of the Institute for Knowledge-Based Organisations while I was in Boston, but could not find anything similar in France, so I decided to create a basic version." As well as meeting regularly, members often speak at each other's organisations.

For example, when Dugage was first selling the idea of KM to Schneider Electric he was asked to define it. Instead of accepting this poisoned chalice, Schlumberger's knowledge manager spoke to Schneider's senior management about Schlumberger's KM programme. "It was a smart move," he says. "If someone talks about their experiences in another company, they have credibility and don't threaten management as they are not asking for anything. It's very effective."

As Dugage develops KM at Schneider - a term he wished he'd never started using at the company - he continues to learn from his work and that of his colleagues and KM peers. Indeed he recognises that much of his life has gravitated towards the word 'learning' and he predicts that it will soon become valued as a company's core asset and the next frontier of competitiveness. If his prediction holds true, Dugage's work with communities will be key. If we are to take just one thing from his experiences, it must be that we can gain immeasurable value from reflecting upon, questioning and sharing the lessons we learn from everything we do. ■

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