Abstract

Group Support Systems enable harvesting knowledge from groups. The minutes of a typical GSS meeting are mostly textual reports of 10 to 50 pages summarizing the issues discussed, the set priorities and proposed actions. Capitalizing on knowledge generated during GSS meetings appears to be very difficult without additional automated support. In this paper we describe our experiences with several prototypes for computer-aided support for consolidating the results of GSS meetings over time. The development of the prototypes resulted in an online service called GroupIntelligence™. This service transforms accumulated group knowledge from various sources into a dynamic consolidated website.

1. Introduction

This paper describes the results of a R&D project executed over the last year. The goal of the project was to invent a software tool that allows users of GSS software to do more with the results from their electronic meetings. The R&D effort resulted in an Internet service called GroupIntelligence, or GroupI in short. The project was carried out in an industrial environment, in close cooperation with the Eindhoven University of Technology in the Netherlands.

Group Support Systems in general enable collecting large quantities of experience and knowledge available in groups [3],[4]. The result of a typical GSS meeting is mostly a textual report of 10 to 50 pages. The participants and leaders of the groups involved typically use these minutes of individual meetings. From practice it appears to be interesting but also very complicated to put the results of a large number of GSS meetings to use. It is difficult to answer questions such as:

- "Did we not discuss this before?"
- "What were the results of our 20 meetings held during the last twelve months on the topic e-commerce?"
- "When did we discuss the quality problems with our suppliers and what were the most remarkable results?"

One could go through the minutes of all electronic meetings manually to find out the most interesting results, but our experience indicates that users hardly reserve time for this laborious job. It is even more compelling to capitalize multiple sources of group knowledge. For example: a business plan for a company may be represented in a formal text document and be the result of group processes, for instance a series of GSS meetings. One would like to be able to access all the information used in that group process like documents and reports with background information, as well as information available in other data types such as presentations and audio and video files.

GSS as a vacuum cleaner

Group Support Systems are very good for collecting information from a group of people. It acts as a vacuum cleaner that gathers any data, information or knowledge it comes across in a group. After the meeting, a report is created that can be put to use by the participants of that specific meeting. The dust-container is replaced for the next meeting. With each meeting, the organization builds up a collection of hundreds of dust-containers that is hardly accessible as a whole. For real dust-containers this is not a problem, because they contain nothing valuable. For the results of GSS meetings, this is a waste since GSS meetings typically contain very valuable group knowledge that can be of value to an organization in a later stage. (This metaphor is only to be used by insiders i.e. people that are convinced of the added value of Group Support Systems)

2. The initial idea and customer response

A R&D trajectory was started to develop automated support for improved processing of the results from GSS meetings. The initial idea was to pursue the development