TECHPOD – An Introduction

TechPod plays an interesting role in the functions of organizations and their internal and external relationships. TechPod is the world’s leading supplier of enterprise self-service applications (core product) and technologies that enable organizations to create immediate business value by fundamentally transforming the way they do business. TechPod* has 49 offices across the globe from North America and South America to Europe, Asia and Middle East and Africa. Its executive management team is led by a team of five gentlemen under Dr. Gerard Seed* – President, CEO and Chairman of the Board.

TechPod customers are leveraging the web and using TechPod products to unify and extend their information and business processes to better serve their employees, partners and customers in a personalized and collaborative way. TechPod’s focus relies largely on the interaction of people within organizations and they claim that “no matter how large an extended enterprise – employees, suppliers, partners and customers – it is still made up of individuals.” Therefore, the company emphasizes the importance of interacting with each of those people as individuals in order to capture attention and win loyalty and trust.

One of TechPod’s specific product lines is a solution that enables users to access relevant information, manage business processes, and collaborate across organizational boundaries (typically internal to an organization). These portals, as they are called, extend information, resources and business processes to all party players. The portal solution is dedicated to bringing together structured and unstructured data, organizational knowledge and self-service transactional data from multiple systems to provide information without overload and to generate a community through collaboration.

According to the TechPod, “every organization has tremendous amounts of content, but each person served by the organization can only benefit from specific pieces of it.” “An organization”, TechPod further claims, “can only realize the value of its content when it can consistently create content and connect the right people with it.” TechPod makes content relevant and valuable by delivering it in an accurate, targeted fashion. While organizations once aimed simply to publish content, it’s a proven fact that in this new corporate market, with the way information is transmitted and shared, that simply publishing is no longer enough. Making content relevant, efficiently, can help organizations deepen customer relationships and ultimately improve lifetime customer value.

TECHPOD – An Organization

I find it most interesting that on the surface, so many companies look so well organized, well managed and well structured. Their products are highly defined and developed in order to make life easier, to make information and knowledge transfer seamless and abundant. It’s no wonder some of them are succeeding – they’ve got it all together, right? Surprisingly enough, there’s typically more going on internally that occasionally seems to drive directly against their external commitments and assertions. And unless
elements of disorganization are inadvertently leaking outside of the organization, the company can pretty well keep up the impression to outsiders that they’re working in a corporate utopia.

As was outlined, TechPod is committed to the accurate, timely and appropriate dissemination of information to employees, customers and partners. Are they walking the walk or just talking the talk? I went inside of TechPod’s corporate headquarters to find out if what they preach is being practiced inside the company walls.

Socialization and Information
Let’s look first at the raw, social aspects of TechPod’s internal culture and examine how that socialization influences the transfer of information and knowledge, whether internally or externally to the organization.

TechPod’s interior is an almost nauseating scene of brightly painted walls and corridors. Distinctive colors of orange, purple, yellow and green plaster the walls of two main campus buildings. The carpeting is patterned in similar tones and the ceilings boast their height by exposing the silver heating and air ducts crisscrossing overhead.

The President and CEO inhabits an office located just past the general entry of the main building. That central area is where the eclectic mix of paint and patterned floor merges together into a diamond-shaped nucleus that is the heart of the corporation. When people or customers walk through the lobby, the first office they happen upon is that of the President. It was originally designed to give the impression that the President is truly central to the organization, and at the same time, available and accessible to all employees. Simply put, the President wanted to be the innermost player of his family. It used to be that there were no barriers between the front lobby and the wings of the main building. Eventually though, the company grew big enough to worry about its intellectual and physical capital and constructed floor-to-ceiling glass doors with badge readers to prevent uninvited intruders past the main reception area.

The wings of both primary buildings are neatly organized with cubicles, offices and meeting rooms. Within the space, managers and directors sit central to the cubicles in their enclosed offices with shades (normally drawn) on the windowed openings. However, one can hardly sneak to her own cube without passing the Senior Director or even the VP of his or her organization. The locale of these offices makes it opportune for such managers to interact directly with their teams. All in all, that provides a pretty valuable setting since a manager, without leaving his seat, can practically summon an unsuspecting employee without raising his or her voice. In contrast to mid-level management, the executive level individuals (Senior Vice Presidents) are pushed out to posh offices in the corners of the buildings where they are less likely to be seen and least likely to be accessible.

Segregation
TechPod initially housed employees in two main buildings, merely hundreds of yards away from each other. (Later, as will be discussed, they leased a third building). Both of these primary buildings are segmented into quadrants. Patches of color (the same colors that create the mixed pattern near the CEO’s door, are brightly framed by the cubicle walls and designate each quadrant. Those intense oranges, greens, purples
and yellows bleed from the CEO’s space throughout the two-story buildings and the walls are painted
erratically in matching hues. When an individual is hired into the company, there is a clear definition of
space, marked not only by one of the kaleidoscope colors, but also by the welcoming mug to match the
cubicle space so one is constantly reminded of his or her cubicle association.

Ironically enough, there are almost invisible lines drawn between the cubicle colors – for example, on the
first floor of the main building, purple is home to marketing folks and yellow is the engineers’ pad. Though
people are bustling around the spaces, it seems rare to find people venturing unabashedly through the other
quadrants. It certainly isn’t frowned upon, of course, as the company’s own product touts the criticality of
information sharing, right? But people seem content to work diligently and keep some sort of allegiance to
their coded quadrant. I wonder, as I recall this situation, if this color delineation only further cultivates an
outsider’s impression that people truly don’t socialize outside of their own organization (for example, in a
typically large company where organizations are well defined, most marketing people won’t connect with
most engineering people, right?). So is the color-coding unnecessarily emphasizing the ‘invisible walls’
because people are ‘tagged’ as part of a group or is it true that people are really socially affected by being
‘pegged’ into a certain organization or relationship to the company? Does it really prevent people from
communicating with people outside of their ‘color’ if they have no reason to? I’ve clearly acknowledged the
fact that this might be an unconsciously social phenomenon that I can’t reliably answer.

Regardless of the apparent lack of social transfer between color quadrants, I was fortunate enough to live
for a while in the second building’s yellow quadrant. Unlike the main building, yellow space in the secondary
building is the training or corporate education quadrant, not the engineering space. Here I engaged with the
team of people who develop webcasts – real-time, web-based, informative sessions for disseminating
information to customers, partners, and internal employees. Situated much like a radio station, this small
studio in the back of my quadrant encases a circular table full of microphones and laptops for guests, a large
soundboard for the moderator and a variety of expensive recording equipment. In the spirit of their quest to
deliver appropriate and valuable information in a fashion of immediacy, the company employs the
technology that allows audiences, through their own computer stations, to hear and see live demonstrations
to partners about products, to listen to speeches to customers and investors about earnings announcements
and get live-feed presentations to employees about private, internal information. Having access to this
studio and being part of the team that managed it, my fellow yellow team sees everyone from the basic
project manager to the Executive VPs or even the CEO of the company who occasionally spend the time to
give live, web-based, informative presentations that can be viewed all over the country. This quadrant is
special, I think. Project managers from every discipline, Executive VPs and even the CEO come looking for
the studio on a weekly basis. The yellow training quadrant probably sees more faces any other colored
quadrant between the main buildings.

TechPod expanded rapidly and eventually leased a third building. Unfortunately, it is lackluster, quiet, and
“morbid”, according to its new residents, most of who have been kicked out of the main, vibrant and dizzying
building and moved to this new location to accommodate their expanding group. The first floor is populated
by rows of enclosed offices or meeting rooms and the top floor is a maze of gray cubicles with no color
differentiation at all. Suddenly, the invisible walls of color segregation are no longer there and no longer can
one distinguish the boundaries of their own group! The managers no longer sit near to or with their employees, but down a long, rather detached corridor, departed from their team. Managers are no longer central to the groups and cube neighbors are less inclined to roam around – will they ever know how to return to their spaces without color coding? Or was there just too much work to do, preventing them from wandering further than the restrooms?

Socialization seems to have become increasingly difficult between the groups that are now pollinated across divergent neighborhoods. No longer are these people walking distance from the rest of the company, but secluded a few miles away in a cluster of other corporate buildings. Suddenly they are faceless, out of sight, out of mind and it is complicated to engage properly with a group that is no longer so easily accessible. Certainly, to rely on the technology of the internet is grand, but what about face-to-face meetings? Who visits whom and how does one begin to allocate an additional one-half hour a day to commute back and forth between buildings? It becomes apparent to me that, despite the fact that the company was once ‘segregated’ by colors, it has become far more difficult to exist in spaces where face-to-face communication was not readily available. Could it truly exist as an electronically social world? This was leading me to believe that TechPod would be challenged to answer that question.

Projects
Projects are generally created in somewhat of a top down fashion. Work is created at the Director or VP level in the organization. However, since the organization is rather flat, there is a lot of opportunity to brainstorm with one another about how to approach particular problems. The opportunity is there and encouraged for people to make decisions and generate new ideas, but in the end, the executive level individuals (Executive VPs and the CEO) are responsible for making final decisions about what was ideas go and what gets left behind. Even this poses great challenges, as executives don’t always agree with each other. Huddling at the bottom of the totem pole, the employees find themselves in ‘hurry up and wait’ mode after submitting ideas or projects, facing written deadlines but anticipating the conundrum of opinions and decisions that might surface from the execs. It primarily seems to result from communication issues.

Communication and Location
Communication is a tricky component of any company and certainly is no strange beast to TechPod. The training group is in a major deficit when it comes to communicating and informing individuals outside of its own little nest (or colored quadrant). Communication seems also an issue within the entire company itself and not just a targeted problem. It was hard enough between the two buildings that were just down the street from each other but proves even more challenging when a full group is transported to another neighborhood location.

But location isn’t even the biggest factor. Idealized communication sometimes just seems non-existent. And I believe that the more people who are involved in an organization, the more difficult it is to communicate properly. A historical example from TechPod emulates that problem. A major issue arose when the marketing group changed the corporate website design template. The education group had their own, self-standing website, and while they recognized the value of consistency, they rightly had their own ideas about how that site should be designed. In the initial stages of getting the educational site up and
running, the training group was not informed of any templates or requirements to follow in the design of the site. They went through numerous design iterations when designing the site and days turned into weeks as they spent time perfecting a choice vision. When the VP (and subsequently, the Senior VP) of the organization was approached, the group had no trouble getting the final design approved. It was suggested that there was a time that the marketing group had been contacted for their expert input and the training group encountered little or no conflict. However, days after the final design decision was on its way to implementation, the marketing group swooped in on training and told them that they weren’t following procedure – that they would have to redesign the site to follow marketing templates. The group was furious! What had happened to the communication process, not only between these two groups, but also in higher-level, executive decision-making? Why hadn’t they stopped training, considering that the marketing group was going to have an issue with the new design? Who was in charge of bridging the two groups and making sure that proper methods of communication were not breached? Where had the ball been dropped and why didn’t this faux pas erupt earlier?

Such challenges don’t only affect groups located between the three local buildings at TechPod, but also plague internal employees working outside of the country. These international groups are not typically privy to any proceedings within the organization – not purposely – but simply because they are the last groups to be recognized when decision-making is taking place (out of sight, out of mind!). The groups try to keep a global focus but, consequently, do a lot of local action. Things heat up when there are major glitches that affect a project or process. By the time I departed from the company, international contacts were requiring frequent updates to make sure that they were all on the same page with the domestic headquarters. Working directly with organizations in Europe and Australia I learned how frustrating it is for them when their clocks are ahead but their information is behind. They constantly struggle to find efficient and effective ways to acquire information in a timely fashion, or better yet, to remind people to include them – out of sight, out of mind!

Conclusion
TechPod invariably falters slightly in implementing for themselves their own strong-willed directives to make information sharing effective, efficient and appropriate. Perhaps they are focusing too much on sharing that with the outside world that they forget to implement it in their own community. Will TechPod succeed despite the impression that internally, they don’t necessarily function like the product they sell? As a stakeholder in the company, it would be in my best interest to hope so. But time can only tell. Every corporation will eventually share timeworn stories of how it finally bridged the gap in information sharing.

* company and personal names have been changed to protect the privacy of people, internal operations and conventions