

Sharing best practices is a key challenge for international businesses. At DANONE, **new attitudes and direct exchanges** between employees in different business units are the priority ahead of complex data-sharing tools and databases.

Marketplace and networking—getting the ball rolling

At DANONE the focus is on networking, not knowledge management, although the aim in both cases is to ensure effective circulation of know-how within the business. Our approach is nonetheless backed up by a range of tools and procedures, starting with the “marketplace”, a forum for exchanging best practices.

As in a traditional open-air market, vendors set out their wares at stands and stalls—in this case, displays featuring best practices. The concept is now used at most DANONE conventions and training sessions, giving people from different units a chance to mingle, talk and learn.

The approach is relaxed but also effective: since September 2003, DANONE marketplaces have enabled 1,000 managers to share expertise and insights on issues affecting all business lines, with 2,700 best practices aired and shared.

More recently, another type of initiative has appeared, this time working in the reverse direction. Faced with a challenge, managers launch an appeal or “message in a bottle” in the hope that someone else will have encountered the problem already and come up with a solution. The concept is based on creating communities within the Group—you can only share if you have something in common with those around you. Whence the creation of working groups and professional communities for managers within the same business line—venues, virtual or real, for the exchange of ideas. Today one manager in five participates in theme-based groups addressing issues ranging from R&D and quality to purchasing, production and more. A facilitator mediates, coordinating exchanges to make a common approach to shared problems part of day-to-day business. Once reflexes are in place, teams can move on to design and implement technologies that facilitate exchanges—specialized portals, web conferences and chatrooms, for example. This approach is illustrated by a new Group-wide directory that makes it easier to get in touch with co-workers, even as it allows each individual to showcase his or her fields of expertise—and willingness to pitch in to find solutions.



NICOLAS ROLAND, who coordinates a master's program in Economic Intelligence and Knowledge Management, is a lecturer at Sophia-Antipolis University in southern France.

Network

Networking A new approach to work

Today, many big corporations have adopted knowledge management tools. Why the interest?

Nicolas Roland → Because sharing know-how and developing new approaches to information exchange are now critical to successful business development. Not so long ago, “capital” mainly meant finance, but things have become far more complex and attention has shifted to human capital—intellectual capital. In today's fiercely competitive business environment, corporations can gain critical response time by finding effective ways to draw on the wealth of human and professional resources available in their subsidiaries. Demographics also play a role, not least aging populations in many countries—as key people retire, passing their knowledge on to the next generation becomes increasingly important.

You seem to be saying that attitudes are more important than tools and technology where knowledge sharing is concerned. Is it all a matter of attitude?

N. R. → I'm convinced that successful knowledge management is largely a matter of shaping a new culture of sharing and dialog within the corporation. All too often, big companies set up a panoply of knowledge management tools—

intranet portals to IT networks and databases or directories—only to realize that nobody uses them. Which makes it essential that you start by rallying everyone to the concept, and only then look into the tools they need. And even then, implementation must go hand in hand with promotion and acceptance of new attitudes towards knowledge sharing.

European companies are often said to be lagging behind in knowledge management. What is your view?

N. R. → To be sure, the US, Australia and Japan were well out in front for quite a while, but that is no longer the case. The gap has been narrowed by European employees' growing familiarity with the Internet, networks and other communications techniques. Even more importantly, the European approach to corporate governance, once based on rigid chains of command, is becoming more flexible and less hierarchical. ●

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Networking at DANONE means...

The exchange of **best practices** and ideas among managers to enhance **performance**. If a manager runs into a problem in one region of the world, it is logical to assume that in the **90,000-strong DANONE workforce** there will be other people—perhaps just around the corner, perhaps thousands of miles away—who have already encountered something similar and found a **solution**, or at least part of a solution. The challenge is to bring the two together, and give them the **tools** they need to exchange information more easily.



Born in New Zealand, a hit in China

“We are looking for ideas to kick-start energy drinks in China,” wrote Kin Yau, head of marketing at Robust and one of the first DANONE managers to send out a “message in a bottle.” Little did he realize that the response would lead to one of the brand's most successful products ever. That input came from Eric Wilson, marketing director at Frucor in New Zealand, who with his team suggested taking inspiration from Mizone, a high-energy drink for sports enthusiasts. Transfer of best practice soon got under way, with Mizone tweaked to suit Chinese tastes. Extra vitamins were added, and it was repackaged in a stylish easy-to-carry bottle designed to appeal to its target group—active citydwellers in tune with the times. A year after launch in April 2003, Maidong was market leader in energy drinks. In 2004, Robust sold 255 million liters or 425 million bottles in China.