

# Knowledge management at "Valtech"

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Valtech (<http://www.valtech.com>) is a Paris-based e-business technologies consulting firm, established in 1993. The company was initially structured as a distributor of new information technologies to the French and European market, which secondarily provided training in the use of its products. Valtech now positions itself as a knowledge-transfer firm that instructs clients in the strategic use and development of cutting-edge electronic technologies. This article traces the development of Valtech over nine years.

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## Introduction

Jean-Yves Hardy, Olivier Cavrel and Eric Mouilleron founded Valtech in 1993 with the objective of developing a highly profitable business, not to pursue a passion for technology. Rather than experts in emerging software technologies, they describe themselves as sufficiently informed to recognize the needs, trends and potential business benefits of a fast-moving techno-business environment.

The business concept was to import new information technologies into the French market from other parts of the world. North America, in particular, was developing software technologies in the early 1990's that were relatively unknown in France, pointing to a market that seemed virgin and promising. Valtech began by selling object-oriented technology products and offering training services that accompanied these sales. With agility, it identified and then embraced new technologies as soon as they emerged, adding products like Corba, OMT, Java and EJB to its portfolio. Created in 1975, object-oriented

technologies were on the cutting edge in 1990. Corba is a distributed object architecture that allows objects to interoperate across networks, regardless of the language in which they were written or the platform on which they are deployed, and OMT, a method for analyzing software is the predecessor of UML.

Valtech designed its training services so that customers became relatively autonomous in the use of a technology once they completed a course. It also began to expand its core business during this period by introducing consulting services - a logical extension of sales and skills transfer in the product offer.

From the mid-1990's Valtech doubled its staff each year, opened new locations, expanded its core business (training services), increased its consulting activity and reduced its software sales until stopping this activity in 1998. With the industry growing and business volume outstripping capacity, Valtech (one of France's new industrial sweethearts) established its brand name. It can be said that Valtech bypassed adolescence and entered a corporate maturity phase only

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five years after its founding. This passage was marked by the decision to abandon product sales and focus exclusively on two fundamentals: ● Knowledge acquisition (high internal expertise, accomplished in a variety of ways); and ● Knowledge transfer (profitable dissemination of internal expertise, accomplished through training and consulting services).

The following year, 1999, marked a turning point, as the company began an expansion strategy that was paired with the launch of its IPO. On April 13 Valtech was in the national spotlight as it offered 830,000 shares at • 7.35 on the Nouveau Marché in Paris and raised • 6.1 million. The IPO was well received by investors who over-subscribed the offer by 1,200 per cent in less than a week.<sup>1</sup> Valtech's Chief Acceleration Officer (The title "Chief Acceleration Officer" is Valtech's and shared by few other firms in the world.), Eric Mouilleron, commented that the offering of Valtech stock in France would support their future acquisition strategy. He said, "The country managers in each market have a shopping list, and acquisitions will start to take place shortly after the IPO." (<http://www.valtech.com/pressrelease>).

Mergers and acquisitions began with USA-based Expede Inc., a technology services company that specialized in distributed systems development. Press headlines in March 1999 read, "Valtech extends global leadership positioning in advanced technology consulting"<sup>2</sup>, and Valtech's President, Jean-Yves Hardy, stated, "Expede has a proven project delivery process and a staff with extensive advanced technology experience. The combination of expertise, market position and technical assets made the acquisition an obvious one for Valtech."<sup>2</sup> The Expede operation became a template, as the company swelled from 150 employees across 6 locations in 1999 to over 1,000 employees across 6 countries and 12 locations by the end of 2001.

### Managing Valtech

From 1993 to 1998 Valtech assembled young and dynamic people who wanted to work in the information society's avant-garde and doubled their numbers each year. This collection of youthful expertise, the company's own youth as an entity and the technological frontiers it navigated combined to produce the

Valtech culture: an ensemble of rules, routines, systems, structures and a thick layer of psychosocial expectations that can be characterized by the following:

- Personal commitment to work;
- Company commitment to individuals;
- Agility with new technology and avant-garde business;
- Informality and community; and
- Speed.

The early Valtech was informal to the point of being unstructured. While it stocked itself with IS and sales expertise, for example, it had added only one administrative employee to shoulder HR and accounting functions by 1998. Corridors and offices, on the other hand, were alive with employees looking for the expertise needed to make a project work because, "... you simply did whatever it took to get the job done" (Paul, a consultant). Recruitment was a feelings-based process, career development an organic affair, and turnover unheard of, not only because Valtech had trouble finding enough of the right people, but because the people it employed found a comfortable fit inside its knowledge-intensive organization. Policies and procedures existed, but not on paper: they stirred through the company culture and were absorbed on an experience basis. If a newcomer asked about an operating policy, the classic response would have been, "There are no rules and everyone knows them" (Franck Halmert, Knowledge Assets Manager). The majority of employees were passionate about their work but the other message was also clear: only full commitment was admitted and the pace was fast.

This portfolio of technological, structural and human competencies wove together a distinctive competitive edge for Valtech. The well-known challenge was to create customer value by applying expertise and transferring skills. Valtech and its employees were constantly working to stay on the leading edge of new developments because its technological environment moved fast, and obsolescence was swift and costly. But the company had few financial worries, was expanding and seemed to stay on top of its situation. Motivation, enthusiasm, challenge and initiative were the hallmarks of work during this period.

Around 1999, Valtech began confronting new internal challenges, occa-

sioned by continuous growth on all fronts and a shifting business environment. The leadership worked to maintain the company's sense of community and continued to value the motivation and loyalty of its staff. But the organization was becoming more hierarchical despite itself, and as Jean-Pierre explained, "It's hard to organize a nice company weekend with the group when you have Sweden, America and South Korea in the equation." Valtech thus began to employ vision and mission as a partial antidote to its growing complexity and dispersion. The management style remained active: the founders were hands-on and kept the business model clear (reconciling business objectives with technology solutions). The Valtech Way was prescribed, which included the leading-edge, enabling clients through knowledge transfer, opportunistic development and business agility.

### KM in Valtech

Knowledge had always been Valtech's only real asset. From its inception the company's core activity was to map new technologies, determine their potential, develop internal expertise and then apply it to the marketplace. This expertise was ● repatriated to Valtech and ● injected into new or developing product markets. In doing so, the company was also learning ● how to capture and transfer skills and ● how to deliver customized solutions to its clients.

Valtech's intellectual capital therefore grew in single loops and double loops: it learned about technologies, products and markets (single loops), but it also learned how to continue learning (double loops).<sup>3</sup>

While the typical Valtech engineer of this period learned and transferred what (s) he learned, the company learned from the acquisition/transfer process and created a secondary stockpile of company-specific intellectual assets. Michel Ezran explained it in Figure 1.

Valtech's knowledge could be categorized in the following way:

1. *Content expertise*: Knowledge of technologies, applications and processes that were transferred (sold) to Valtech's clients (e.g., Java, CORBA, UML);
2. *Process expertise*: Knowledge of the ways and means for effectively ap-

plying content expertise (e.g., training designs, classroom pedagogies, consulting procedures, systems design methodologies);

3. *Functional competence*: Knowledge of Valtech's internal organization and infrastructure, formal and informal, through which content and process expertise was delivered to clients (e.g., software sales, training programmes, consulting assignments); and
4. *Business competence*: Knowledge of market trends and developments, together with the ability to generate economic rents (e.g., client relations, accounts, business development, sales).

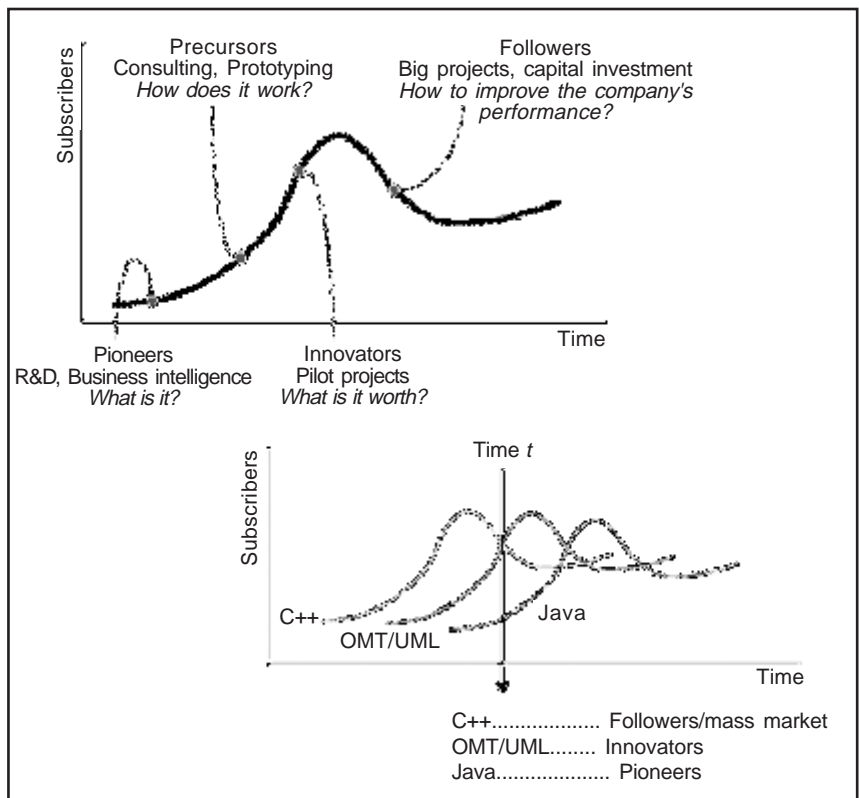
"Up until 1999, the different waves of new technologies (C++, OMT/UML, Corba, Java, J2EE, ...) arrived at an increasingly fast pace. At the end of the second or third wave, we realized that we were repeating an acquisition and transfer process - so understanding and institutionalizing this process became the smart thing to do. We didn't miss our mark: the value added in this business doesn't reside in the new technologies, even if they're hard to understand; it lies in the way they're dealt with. To understand and master this second loop was for us a guarantee that Valtech could remain current in a world that changes at an accelerating rate," said Ezran (Figure 2).

These knowledge assets were unformalized: they existed and their existence was acknowledged but between 1993 and 1998 no systems or structures were dedicated to their management. Informal discussions, collaborative work, hallway encounters, team-based projects and drinks after work were the managerial method. Knowledge assets were therefore deeply embedded in everyday action. Emergent routines assembled new technology-based, employee-rooted knowledge assets; consulting teams applied these assets with (not to) clients; client engagements generated meta-knowledge on how to transfer or install the expertise; the employee's increased knowledge was brought back into the company. Small numbers, geographic proximity and a high level of professionalization allowed consultants to know who knew what in the company and how to access the expertise when necessary.

Figure 1: The Valtech learning environment

	Product	Process
Valtech	1 Content expertise <i>Acquiring technology</i>	2 Process expertise <i>Stockpiling expertise</i>
Customer	3 Functional competence <i>Installing technology</i>	4 Business competence <i>Transferring expertise</i>

Figure 2: Technology adoption



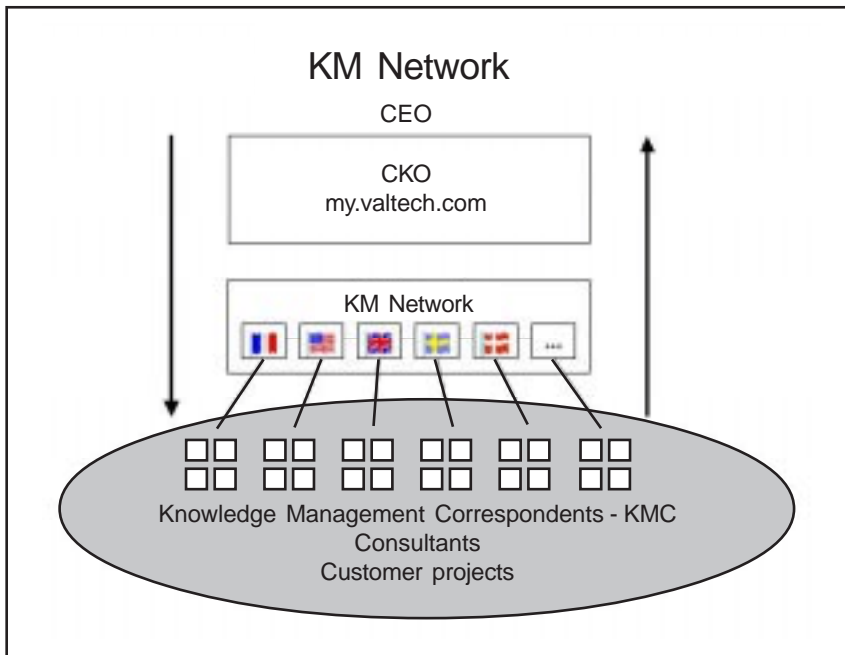
At the beginning of 1999, Valtech's 151 employees were spread across 5 offices in 3 countries and the spontaneous community it had once been was changing. Interactions were less impulsive due to size and dispersion; routines that had been the signatures of community spirit were fading; business leverage and capitalization were entering the management vocabulary.

Against this backdrop the top management decided in early 1999 that the

position of R&D manager – until then focused on the development of training materials – would be transformed into that of Chief Knowledge Officer with a budget representing 7 per cent of the company's turnover (considered as an expense) and reporting directly to the CEO. A month later the position of Asset Manager was created and charged with capitalizing the training know-how and expertise. The two people that assumed these roles thus formed the nucleus of

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Figure 3: The Valtech KM network



Valtech's formal KM initiative. Neither knew of KM as a domain of study and practice at the time, but their situation took on the contours of a now-familiar logic: the CKO would focus on knowledge formalization in the consulting function while the Assets Manager would mine the training function for greater returns.

Their first 6 months were devoted to structuring a lessons-learned system that captured the meta-knowledge acquired by consultants during a client engagement. Each client solution, they reasoned, was a source of fast-decay experience that could be formalized, codified and made accessible for genuine business benefits. They also began structuring the company's ensemble of training expertise, a body of content and pedagogy that varied across topics, client populations and geography.

The results were mixed. Despite Valtech's communicative culture its middle managers balked at the idea of adding their know-how to a "database" because, in large part, it required time. The different operating styles and cultural expectations in offices outside of France also complicated the task. A standardized production process for training material was established, on the other hand, and the work of the KM team was web-enabled with the July 1999 launch of the portal *my.valtech.com*. Valtech employ-

ees now had access to commercial and technical documents for re-use, learning and support.

The KM movement was now underway and gaining speed. Its materialization in *my.valtech.com* was important as a sign that things were in motion, it delivered a tool that consultants could actually use in their daily work, and it served as a communications vehicle that facilitated corporate information flow. "I think this early portal sped up the integration of acquisitions and helped our revenue stream by making it easier for people to service our clients, and I think it was eventually seen that way. But not immediately," said the CKO in 2002.

A Denver-based R&D lab was also launched with the objective of merging French content and American pedagogical know-how. The goal was to develop leading-edge training packages for consultants, nested in a library that was consistent from one pedagogical unit to another. The CKO also published a standardized project management method - the Valtech Unified Process - that was aimed at the delivery of e-business projects on time and on budget.

By the end of 1999, the KM team numbered 10 people and results were satisfying - at least in France. Valtech's KM strategy was formalized as: "Contribute to business value-added by capi-

talizing on skills, know-how, expertise and past experience". This emphasized the capture and re-use of know-how from the company's two core activities - training and consulting. The website *my.valtech.com* provided access to this intellectual capital, a portfolio of model projects (exemplars) and advice from qualified experts.

Portals of all kinds require the expert and tailored content that makes a visit worthwhile, however, and this challenge was attacked by creating *KM Correspondents* in each Valtech location: a group of volunteers who would promote the KM effort, capture local content and assist in its formalization (Figure 3).

The website *my.valtech.com* developed into an icon of the Valtech culture, leveraged on three levels: ● Corporate life, by sharing news and contacts; ● Competency development, by facilitating learning; and ● Productivity, by displaying content, artifacts and exemplars. Nonetheless, problems did exist. One involved content management, because contributions remained uneven and difficult to obtain. KM Correspondents were recruited on a relationship basis, their contributions were voluntary and the return from their efforts, personal. Hence, *my.valtech.com*'s lifeblood - front line insights and experiences - remained outside the traditional management process, including salary and time allocation. But the concept was in keeping with the Valtech Way (skill transfer through collaborative work) and therefore in conceptual harmony with the culture.

By the end of 2000, an assessment of the KM function and the company's emerging needs outlined the structure of a new portal, defined around five objectives (Figure 4).

- Productivity, through the access, transfer, retrieval and re-use of information and expertise;
- Efficiency, by providing access to the *right* information at the *right* time and facilitating communication flows;
- Visibility, aimed at clients (extranets) and Valtech employees (intranets);
- Capitalization, the systematic and methodological accumulation of intellectual assets; and
- Client value-added, through high quality service delivery, access to Valtech know-how and empowered client relationships.

During 2001 the success of the KM programme, in general, and *my.valtech.com* in particular, were measured with three principle indicators:

- Volume of contributions to the knowledgebase;
- Intensity of knowledgebase utilization; and
- Level of KM integration in properties and local processes (measured, for example, by activity level and local recognition of KM correspondents).

The company was entering a period of financial turbulence, however, coincident with the worldwide decline of technology shares and Valtech's aggressive M&A policy. Top management continued its support and launched the project, but restricted the overall KM budget to four per cent of turnover, reassigned five members of the KM team to other functions and closed the Denver R&D lab.

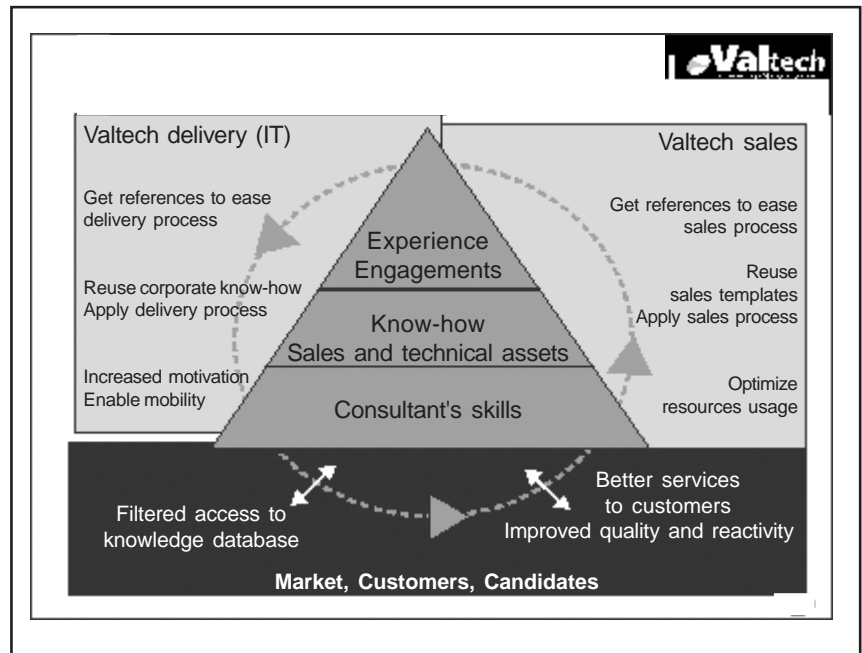
While *my.valtech.com* continued its role in the company, *project@valtech* was prototyped by a project team with representation from each location and user group. If *my.valtech.com* was a classic but personalized intranet that included a knowledgebase, *project@valtech* materialized the desire to make KM omnipresent in Valtech's core business by supporting the key processes of creation and collaboration - where learning and knowledge development flourish. *project@valtech* therefore provided the following innovations:

- Access to clients and partners so as to include them in the process of knowledge creation;
- A collaborative intranet that made no distinction between contributors and users: all actors participated in knowledge and know-how creation; and
- Knowledge and know-how that was automatically captured and indexed by the system.

Its introduction was supported by a change management programme that included the following:

- Meetings with key actors to plan the project's deployment;
- Surveys to measure satisfaction and perceived problems during the pilot phase;
- *Think Orange* days (Valtech's official colour), and internal newsletters designed to attract the interest of employees;

Figure 4: The Valtech KM strategy



- Meetings and training sessions, held throughout the organization, aimed at fast applicability to everyday work and ease-of-use;
- Surveys to gather information and develop the user base, directed at the KM network, consultants and middle managers;
- A series of email campaigns that kept employees updated as to the project's objectives, benefits and development; and
- A periodic review with top management

The adoption of *project@valtech* was phased in over time and six months after its introduction, utilization was widespread. "The change management programme was a big factor, something you don't give enough attention to normally. But in our case it got everybody on track and was a big key to success," said Bernard (consultant). The CKO agreed and added, "It's clear from our experience, and hundreds of our consulting assignments, that the world's best technology goes nowhere without the right kind of organizing around it.

Change management, in the form of communication, user support, training and coaching requires constant effort. The victory is never assured and the loop of improvement (exchange - support - measurement - support - feedback - improvement) should never be broken.

This can be tiring for teams dedicated to KM and can't function unless the teams themselves are very motivated..."

The KM team began to analyze return on investment for *project@valtech* at the end of 2001 by analyzing two broad types of measures:

- Objective and measurable: Including time-saving in accessing and delivering information, reuse of knowledge, systematic capitalization of experience and user satisfaction; and
- Subjective and perceived: Including work methods in project teams, faster business development, increased collaboration between Valtech offices and better project management.

As of May 2002, results were abundant and encouraging for the second category but difficult to assess for the first. The KM team found it very difficult to link hard, quantified evidence to the positive but subjective judgments of the KM initiative. It assessed "clicks" and user contributions, but judged these types of measures to be intermediate, as opposed to fundamental, assessments of performance (Figure 5).

The time of innocent spontaneity passed with the introduction of *project@valtech* and the KM team positioned itself at the heart of Valtech's business. It continued to organize return-on-experience sessions, for example, "... but

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Figure 5: KM utilization measures by country

	Contribution							Total
# consulting assets	517	13	25	30	273	13	11	882
# project references	152	34	42	21	14	78	N/A	
# skills profiles	43%	65%	65%	80%	80%	77%	33%	
	Utilization (last 3 months)							
# consulting assets (# downloads)	940	64	133	167	172	222	254	1952
project references (# visits)	188	60	87	32	51	81	N/A	499
	Organization							
# KMCs	13	9	1	3	12	3	1	42
# active KMCs	10	1	1	1	6	1	1	21

only in the late afternoons so that they didn't interfere very much with client schedules," said Franck Halmert. The work of KM correspondents was legitimized with objectives assigned to local management and KM-specific tasks in the job descriptions of correspondents themselves. "Our KM programme is built around investment in sales support channels, in services on the company intranet, in a network of active correspondents in each office, in a strong and continuous training programme supported by the training department" (Valtech annual report, 2000, p. 8).

In early 2002, the company announced organic growth of 15 per cent and revenues of • 121.5 million for 2001, a 42 per cent increase over 2000. The slogan, *think globally and act locally* seemed to be working since consultants were using Valtech's international network and the company's position in most of its markets was strengthening.

The KM team began integrating *my.valtech.com* and *project@valtech* into a new and more comprehensive portal. Results after 3 years of work are concrete, uneven and encouraging. The third generation portal is anticipated by line employees because they now expect real benefits that will help them deliver real results. The KM network is disappearing into the company's everyday activity - the best of all worlds. Some clients praise the access to information and

experience that quickly-deployed extranets provide in consulting assignments.

The major issue remains KM's ROI. "Fundamentally speaking, we are skeptical, skeptical regarding quality, regarding KM. But intellectual and business logic has provoked us to develop the KM programme and it's making sense," said Jean-Yves Hardy. "But there is a critical need for measurement. We are at the parting of the ways: either we continue investing in KM or we stop. Only a clear ROI will help us make the right decision."

Common measures, such as frequency of use and client satisfaction, are deemed inadequate because the KM team embraces a more strategic perspective on its work. "For Valtech, the future of KM will be defined by KM-based products that are replicable and easily transformed into models for clients. We also need easy and reliable measurement systems, and easy ways to port our KM tools into extranets that wrap clients and providers together in a consulting assignment," said Hardy. He continued, "We want to develop a very pragmatic firm where we can provide instant access to exemplary projects and highly qualified expertise."

### Lessons learned

Valtech can be considered a good example of KM-based strategic commitment

and organizational design, but arriving at this state as a result of competitive pressures and new organizing logics.

Valtech optimized its product offer and service delivery by reorganizing according to KM principles at the group level. In the company's collective mind, it was *pulled* to this policy by business necessity and organizational exegesis rather than *pushed* by academic or consulting trends. This, we argue, departs from a number of other cases in the literature where the "hype" surrounding KM seems to have driven a conversion experience that caused one or more top managers to impose strange new systems and structures on to an unwilling organization.

After an initial period where informal knowledge sharing featured in its culture, Valtech formally embraced KM to manage its fast-paced development, achieve scale efficiencies and reach higher levels of business performance. KM at Valtech is squarely focused on business performance but relatively unique in that it arose naturally ("organically," in the words of its founder) as a result of new organizing logics. This has been a "chemin faisant" in the mind of this company or, from the French, a path it traced as it navigated its way forward. "KM is federative for the brand, the corporate culture, and defines our business model," said Valtech CEO JY Hardy, in April 2002.

This case history presents nine elements that both academic insight and Valtech's experience advance as important factors in a KM initiative:

- **Commitment.** Valtech's KM initiative was the product of several dynamics, but from the perspective of sustainable organizational development, top management's decision to commit the company and its resources was clearly a key. Among the formal and informal symbols of this commitment in evidence, the KM team's direct report to the CEO is prominent.
- **Strategy and integration.** Following from the above, the company formulated and refined a KM strategy that featured the integration of KM structures and systems in its everyday business. KM was firmly linked to business benefits.
- **Resources and infrastructure.** Valtech allocated resources commensurate with the objectives of its KM effort (budget, staff, infrastructure). The KM team numbered up to 10 people and financ-

ing has varied between four per cent and seven per cent per year of the company's ever-growing turnover.

- *"The way we do things here."* A KM-friendly culture earmarked the company's working environment, often forming around the conviction that knowledge was Valtech's only real asset. The company exercised in this way Argyris's prescription for the learning organization: technical mastery combined with effective teamwork, productive client relationships and the meta-ability to critique internal practices.<sup>5</sup>
- *Task and Process.* Edgar Schein<sup>4</sup> has commented that most academics and managers hold the assumption that, "...management deals with hard things - data, money, bottom lines, payoffs, production, competition and structure. And it is even better if these hard things can be quantified." But he goes on to say that learning organizations pay at least as much attention to process - the way they achieve results. Valtech's management achieved a balance on this count, concerning itself as much with the soft and subjective ways it organized itself as with the hard results it obtained.
- *Constructive agitation.* Valtech made growth, development and improvement a part of its culture. This permeated KM initiatives such as the Denver R&D Lab and *Valtech University* which, though considered imperfect, were attempts to meet the needs of motivated engineers who needed to stay at the top of their fields.
- *Tools and technologies.* Valtech combined cutting-edge KM systems with change management and effective organization. *my.valtech.com* became a backbone of corporate communication partially due to effective portal/intranet technology, and partially because it was well adapted to the company. *project@valtech* took the next step by deeply embedding itself in the core business (giving consultants the advantage of offering project-based extranets to clients, for example).
- *Single-loops, double-loops.* The company valued, and the KM effort focused on, the meta-knowledge that developed when a Valtech engineer

worked out a solution with a client. Single-loop learning refers to the simple acquisition of knowledge in such situations, while double-loop learning implies, "...cognitive rules or reasoning people use to design and implement their actions"<sup>6</sup>

- *Assessment.* The evaluation of results stamped each step of Valtech's KM development and the evaluation process was always anchored in business objectives. Quantitative and qualitative criteria have been employed. Though considered inadequate, the KM team used these measures to shape its systems, structures and organizing principles on as clear a view as possible of the needs of its client (Valtech) and the impact of its efforts.

### Conclusion

This has outlined Valtech's journey from start-up to a multinational knowledge-intensive firm, tracing its development and specifying the conditions that motivated its organizing along KM principles. We have identified a number of the systems, structures, phases of development and successes/failures the company has encountered along this path. Both external and internal observers have recognized a number of distinctive features in Valtech associated with KM phenomena, including organizational culture, emergent routines, work rules, management styles, adaptive and generative organizational learning, and autopoietic processes. It can be said that Valtech's experience with KM is shaping its history.

Unknowingly, the company initially acted on KM principles in order to cope and survive in its environment. Four years later its approach to KM was formalized with strategies, resources and action. Today, Valtech believes that its investment in KM is playing a major role in the company's success.

### Appendix

#### Milestones in KM at Valtech

1. End of 1998: emergence of formal need for knowledge capitalization
2. Early 1999: creation of the CKO position

3. March 1999: creation of the Asset Manager position
4. January - June 1999: formalization of the consulting function
  - a. Actors
  - b. Task definition and mapping
  - c. Mapping of expertise and knowledge
  - d. Documentation
5. January - June 1999: formalization of the training function
  - a. Actors
  - b. Training course material
  - c. Content publications process
6. July 1999: creation of *my.valtech.com*
7. July 1999: creation of Denver R&D Lab
8. January 2000: KM strategy formalized
9. January 2000: KM tools disseminated
10. 2000: creation of KM Network and Correspondents
11. 2000: retooling of *my.valtech.com*
12. Early 2001: decision to invest in a new KM portal
13. Mid-2001: introduction of *project@valtech* and roll-out of change management programme
14. End of 2001: new policy and organizational role for KM Correspondents
15. January 2002: *my.valtech.com* and *project@valtech* merged and integrated

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*Note:* Proper names in this text are pseudonyms excepting those of the Company founders, the CKO and the Assets Manager. All quotes and interview transcripts are authentic, verbatim and have been validated by the Company. This case history covers the period from Valtech's creation in 1993 to May 2002.