Realising the knowledge management vision

Portuguese pharma firm BIAL provides an interesting case study on improving access to scientific information

By Mitja-Alexander Linss

BIAL, Portugal's leading pharmaceutical company, invests over 20 percent of its revenue in R&D to discover, develop, and deliver innovative therapeutic solutions, but is also developing its knowledge management processes in order to ensure its continued successes.

To this end, BIAL has recently transformed its scientific information services into a knowledge management ecosystem, led by Teresa Silveira, whose role at the company is managing scientific knowledge and building a global strategy for a knowledge-driven brand.

The result is an environment that has eliminated the barriers that previously stood between vital content sources and the people who rely upon a smooth, efficient, and unimpeded content workflow. In doing so, Silveira has elevated the very definition of the real challenge: "The core problem is not accessing information," she says. "The problem is transforming that information into knowledge that can drive the business. There is a huge difference between the two."

BIAL always had a document delivery service in place, but lacked any kind of automated content delivery system. The first challenge was to make access to scientific content fast, easy, fully automated, and independent of anyone's mediation in document management. "What BIAL had," Silveira explains, "was a manually-intensive process that was single-threaded through a mediator. You can't scale up a system like that. It was also impossible to capture the vital business information associated with the actual content usage."

With that, Silveira set out to find a solution, eventually settling on working with Reprints Desk. "BIAL's knowledge management vision needs partners that are able to adapt to specific requirements in this domain. Being able to provide information from a micro level (daily research activities), as well as information for decision making (macro level) is key. To be able to tell a story—a narrative that reveals how the new capabilities are having an effect on the company's culture—is also important."

Silveira explains that there are three big things that support all research. "The first is in-house experience and the connections you have with your partners. The second is the access you have to information to improve what you know and to help you discover new things. The last, but no less important, is the network you can create with your knowledge, especially in-house. The big difference since deploying the new platform is that people feel much more comfortable gaining access to things because now they don't have any barriers. And as for the Documentation and Scientific Service at BIAL, we no longer have to spend so much time preparing statistics and trying to understand users' information behavior, because all the needed data are just a few clicks away."

Silveira was able to confirm her thesis that the more open a system is, the more people will use it. "It's natural," she says. "We are a company based on research. The very foundation of our work is accessing and reading new content. Once we eliminated the bottlenecks and barriers between people and information, we saw an immediate increase in the article orders."

Silveira also says that results come quickly when one takes this approach. "It's a challenge, of course," she adds, "but it is doable. The way that you proceed with information management makes all the difference, whether you're in a small, medium, or large company context. It's not a problem of size, but of strategic vision."

So far in this process, the feedback from BIAL user communities has been positive. "They are enjoying having a system like this," she explains, "because it is such a simple way for them to access information. All of them are now better able to share knowledge and close gaps."

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