

ACCENTURE GETS RAPID ANSWERS TO KNOWLEDGE WORKER QUERIES USING STARMIND

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June 2020

Sponsored by **Starmind**

IDC #EUR146346220



Accenture Gets Rapid Answers to Knowledge Worker Queries Using Starmind

Overview

Accenture is a global professional services firm, focused on Strategy and Consulting, Interactive, Technology and Operations, with digital capabilities across all of these services. It employs over 500,000 people worldwide, serving clients in more than 120 countries and across more than 40 industries. Accenture is a market leader in IT consulting, applications, and IT services, generating global revenue of \$43.2 billion in FY19 and an operating margin of 14.6%.

This Expert ROI study focuses on the German-speaking countries within Accenture (Austria, Switzerland, Germany). Together the three countries employ about 8,500 people.

Accenture's Business Challenge

IDC believes access to the right skills at the right time will be a key determinant of success for organizations in the decade ahead. Global consultancies such as Accenture need to be increasingly nimble to spin up talent and teams fast to take on and deliver high-quality projects. Siloed working and a lack of knowledge sharing can be a risk when operating across multiple geographies, languages, and markets. Talent attrition is another challenge, which can expose gaps in knowledge and subject matter expertise.

What Accenture needed is an integrated platform that could capture "undocumented intelligence" from within the business, and enable information exchange to take place to benefit other teams and individuals, regardless of location.

Accenture looked to Starmind, whose platform uses artificial intelligence (AI) neural networks, to create a dynamic database of employee subject matter experts. The platform enables consultants and other employees to locate the right expert within the system by building up internal skills maps, from which they can ask questions and receive answers, while creating a central knowledge resource that becomes richer the more it is used. It then generates a skills map that business leaders can use to look across their workforce and determine areas of strengths and weaknesses, where they should look to reskill certain employees, and even assess who is most likely to adopt that knowledge or consider whether they should look outside the organization.

BUSINESS VALUE HIGHLIGHTS

ORGANIZATION:

Accenture

LOCATION:

Austria, Switzerland, and Germany

CHALLENGE:

To improve knowledge exchange among consultants and create a central knowledge base for expertise

SOLUTION:

Starmind

FINANCIAL AND OPERATIONAL BENEFITS:

- » 295% three-year ROI
- » Net present value (NPV) €2,921,144 after three years
- » Less than 8 months to payback
- » On average, 5 minutes saved per hour using Starmind
- » €1,800,000 saved in consultant and FTE time per year

Frequently asked question (FAQ) functionality can also be used to automate time-consuming repetitive queries that may get asked during employee onboarding, for instance how to reset IT passwords or check public holidays in different countries. Currently, around half of the questions asked of the system tend to be day-to-day operational FAQs for a wide audience, but the other half are very specific questions from consultants and analysts. Accenture has found this to be an added side benefit to the system.

Together these capabilities make StarMind a high-value skills intelligence platform, occupying a new space at the intersection of AI, automation, HR, collaboration, and knowledge management.

IDC conducted interviews with Accenture Germany's client partner, Jens Frühling, principal director and digital AI capability lead, including assessment of IDC's ROI model. Based on these interviews, IDC calculates that the technology company realized a strong ROI of 295% over the first three years of its investment in StarMind and broke even on its investment within the first eight months.

Implementation

Accenture decided to go ahead with the implementation after what Frühling considered to be an "amazing demo." As the platform is solely web-based, implementation was straightforward, taking six weeks, but the main concern was being able to motivate people to use the tool. Lots of effort therefore was put into the internal marketing of the StarMind product. For internal purposes, further AI tools were integrated, therefore creating an enhanced version of the tool.

A detailed marketing and incentive campaign was put in place with various teasers, Skype sessions, webcasts, and training, which encouraged the consultants to think of StarMind like Wikipedia. With more users, the content becomes better: In six months, they had increased the number month by month to the point where two-thirds of the German-speaking employees (approximately 6,000 people) in Austria, Switzerland, and Germany now use it, which Accenture considers a great success.

IDC calculates that Accenture Austria, Switzerland, and Germany realized a strong ROI of 295% over the first three years of its investment in the StarMind product.

The system's success is dependent on the number of employees actively using the platform and the growth in and quality of questions and answers. This creates networks and collaboration opportunities for teams to access new sources of knowledge direct from the expert. The experts' answers are reviewed by both the community itself and by other experts.

The process starts with a questionnaire to build up an individual's skills profile, such as whether they are an expert in AI, data mining, and so on. It then learns the competency of the individual by the quality of their engagement — for instance, if an individual answers more questions on AI, they will be rated as more of an expert in that area. This has the potential to create a powerful tool for skills identification, which would make it easier for Accenture to source a specific skillset and spin up delivery teams more rapidly.

In a new version, Starmind's technology is able to integrate with more existing corporate data streams, such as corporate intranets, Slack, Microsoft Office, Jive, or Microsoft Teams, so that the business is able to capture the information flows being used for communication across the workforce. Accenture is currently performing a PoC for the integration in Microsoft Teams.

What sets Starmind apart is that it's not a static repository of information captured at one point in time. Rather, it is being dynamically updated. For instance, the question and answer system captures thousands of queries and answers that are rated by the community for their relevance and insight, and this provides a platform for experts to become seen as more expert over time.

This is important, as a static database could incorrectly show someone being a Salesforce expert, for instance, even though their skills may not have been updated from when they joined a decade ago. In this way, Starmind could also provide a dynamic resource for skills profiling.

Benefits

Ensuring the Best Possible Use of Consultant Time

It's essential that Accenture is able to optimize efficiency and productivity of its consultants, both in terms of their internal cost to the business and externally to the end customer. Based on the current number of people using the system, we estimate in total a €1 million productivity benefit per year. Having assessed the average salary of a consultant and the fact that there have been 400,000 views of the answers, this makes any assessment of the benefits much more statistically significant. IDC estimates that Accenture can save €5 per consultant and/or FTE per hour using Starmind.

Perfect Tool for New Joiners

Deployment of the Starmind platform has enabled Accenture's German-speaking employees to get answers to FAQs fast. Frühling believes this has made Starmind a "perfect tool for new joiners," to support their onboarding and get up to speed with operational processes.

For example, they can find out how to send a sick leave message, book a meeting room, change their notebook, or get a new mobile phone. There is huge demand for this sort of onboarding information too, as a significant percentage of employees are new joiners each year. The tool therefore saves existing support staff in HR, finance, and IT time dealing with often repetitive onboarding queries, enabling them to focus on more interesting and higher value work.

The focus around marketing and change management has been key to getting buy-in from staff to use the system on a daily basis.

For Accenture, Starmind has improved operational tasks in a number of ways:

- **Speed to results.** Due to the fully cloud-based solution, Starmind was implemented within just six weeks. However, due to the marketing, onboarding, and training, it took six months for the implementation to run smoothly. Payback was achieved within eight months, making overall speed to results fast.

- **Very few people were required to perform all of the change and training activities.** In all, four people from within the existing marketing, HR, and training departments were involved in the project through to the launch — one person full time and the others 30% of their time. Now that it is in a steady state, just two people are needed in IT and business (for 20% of their time) to ensure it continues to run smoothly.
- **The majority of answers are highly rated.** An internal survey of 1,000 active users found that two-thirds are either satisfied or very satisfied with the product. Every answer can be rated, and of the current 4,500 questions in the system, the average rating is an impressive 4.7 out of 5. There have also been more than 400,000 views on the question-and-answer pairs, meaning that on average, each active user has engaged with an answer 30 times.
- **Starmind helped reduce demand for low-level helpdesk queries.** This has been an additional benefit of the solution — automating FAQ type requests that were being handled by people in the shared service centers. Starmind can handle these FAQs as a first point of contact, with employees in the shared service centers stepping in to help with more complex requests. This also saves time, as it could take days to answer a simple FAQ. Frühling said, "For us, Starmind is like oil in a machine, so everything runs smoother." Such is the confidence in the results delivered from Starmind that in topic areas such as HR, compliance, and legal, answers are now labelled "Official Answer."
- **Accenture has become a Starmind reselling partner.** Perhaps the biggest endorsement of the product is that Accenture is now reselling Starmind as an add-on to its existing knowledge management service offerings. Frühling believes the product is unique because it connects people to experts for a particular task via an easy-to-use interface. This is very valuable on its own but could become even more valuable if also integrated within a broader search capability such as Google or a knowledge management strategy.

Starmind has rapidly risen in popularity and use among Accenture's German-speaking employees, with productivity benefits that have elevated it to become a strategic solution for Accenture's own knowledge management service.

Challenges

Frühling sees Starmind as a strategic tool within the local business. But there are opportunities for future development that would help with broader adoption across Accenture.

Cultural Resistance

Changing the culture and people's existing working practices has proved the hardest part of the project. So while there has been success with two-thirds of employees, there remains a third of employees who don't use it because either they feel they already have the tools and knowledge they need to do their job or they haven't yet heard about it. For this second group, Accenture plans to do more marketing over the coming year.

Technical Enhancements

There are a few features that will help boost further adoption:

- Additional features that make it more of a workflow tool, such as a ticket system in the event of there being no answer available
- Integration of some "Google-like" search technologies so that users not only get an answer from the expert, but also content documents, presentations, and media links to further information

Recent Enhancements Shared with IDC

- Language translation services across English, simplified Chinese, Italian, Spanish, French, and German to enable multilingual teams to collaborate effectively
- Integration into corporate intranets and platforms such as ServiceNow and Microsoft Office 365, including Teams, so that Starmind can support knowledge queries on existing enterprise systems

Quantifying Benefits

To quantify the benefits of using Starmind, IDC asked the project manager responsible for it for costs associated with licensing Starmind, training, and marketing, as well as other related support costs. IDC calculates that **Accenture realized average consultant and FTE productivity benefits of €1.8 million a year** in the areas described in Table 1.

TABLE 1
Average Annual Benefits

Average Annual Benefits, €	
Benefits (consultant, FTE savings)	€1,800,000
Investment (product, training, marketing, HR, IT support)	€364,583
Net present value	€1,435,417

Source: IDC, 2020

Higher Consultant and FTE Productivity

The deployment of Starmind has enabled quantifiable improvements in productivity through time saved and financial cost savings to the business. Team members can manage queries and access to relevant experts more efficiently and more effectively. Due to the increase in the number of questions and answers created, and the greater engagement, there has been a cumulative improvement in operational benefits over the three-year period.

Return-on-Investment Analysis and Methodology

IDC gathered the information needed to quantify the benefits and investment associated with the company's use of Starmind, including staff time savings/efficiencies and cost savings, and created an ROI analysis from the results. IDC estimates that in the first three years of using Starmind, Accenture achieved an ROI of 295%, with breakeven on its investment in under eight months (see Table 2).

TABLE 2
Three-Year ROI Analysis

Three-Year ROI Analysis	
Total three-year benefits (discounted)	€3,910,805
ROI	295%
Payback (months)	7.6
Discount rate	12%

Source: IDC, 2020

IDC calculates the ROI and payback period in a three-step process:

- Measure the financial benefits directly resulting from use of Starmind, including higher staff productivity levels, staff time savings, and related efficiencies and cost savings.
- Ascertain the total investment.
- Project the investment and benefit over three years and calculate the ROI and payback period. The ROI is the three-year net present value (NPV) divided by the investment. Payback period (in months) is the time required to pay back the initial investment and establish a positive cash flow. To account for the time value of money, IDC bases the ROI and payback period calculations on a 12% discounted cash flow.

About the Analysts

[John O'Brien](#), Research Director, European Intelligent Application Services



John O'Brien is responsible for IDC's European Intelligent Application Services research program. His research focuses on the disruptive challenges and opportunities for application services providers as they pivot to "the new," underpinned by exploiting digital technologies such as AI, automation, analytics, and intelligent platforms to deliver enhanced customer outcomes. He is also co-lead for IDC's European Intelligent Process Automation research program, which explores this highly disruptive sector of emerging technologies and services including robotic process automation (RPA), AI, and intelligent workflows, to support future enterprise business transformation.

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Harsh Singh is a senior research analyst for the Business Value Strategy Practice, responsible for developing ROI and cost-savings analysis on enterprise technological products. His work covers various solutions that include datacenter hardware, enterprise software, and cloud-based products and services. His research focuses on the financial and operational impact that these products have on organizations that deploy and adopt them.

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