

Chapter IX

Knowledge Strategic Alignment: Research Framework, Models, and Concepts

Derek A. Asoh

*Southern Illinois University, USA
University of Yaounde I, Cameroon*

Salvatore Belardo

University at Albany State University of New York, USA

Peter Duchessi

University at Albany State University of New York, USA

ABSTRACT

Knowledge has been recognized as a key organizational resource. Yet, despite commitment in knowledge management (KM), many researchers and organizations overlook the need to engage in the alignment of knowledge-related resources with business-related strategies (knowledge strategic alignment). Although many reasons may be advanced for the lack of research and practice on knowledge strategic alignment, two reasons stand out. First, the alignment concept is difficult to understand and measure (Chan, Huff, Barclay & Copeland, 1997), and second, the KM field is relatively new and lacks appropriate frameworks, models, and methodologies for expected research and practice (Earl, 2001). The objectives of this chapter are twofold: The first is an attempt to respond to the call for frameworks, models, and methodologies for research in KM; and the second is an attempt to “simplify” the understanding of the alignment concept within the KM field. To attain both objectives, we first review the KM literature, and then opine on research from the alignment “reference fields” (Information Systems/Information Technology (IS/IT) and strategic management), where the alignment concept is well researched and practiced to propose a framework for research on alignment in the KM field. We identify relevant research models, discuss conceptualizations of alignment in KM, and illustrate the application of the framework, models, and alignment concepts.

INTRODUCTION

The recognition of knowledge as the new important production resource of the firm has motivated researchers and practitioners to give considerable thought to how to manage knowledge. As a result, knowledge management (KM) has emerged as a formal field of research and practice. However, as a formal field of activity, KM is still in its infancy and is not well understood by many organizations (Earl, 2001; Zack, 1999a)

Although some adopters of KM, such as Skandia, BP Amoco, Dow Chemical, IBM, Hewlett-Packard (HP), Bain & Co., and Xerox (Belardo & Belardo, 2002; Earl, 2001), have realized and reported significant benefits from their efforts, a good number of others appear to still be struggling with KM. For these struggling organizations, significant benefits are yet to be accrued because of multiple difficulties associated with the initiation and implementation of KM. Earl (2001) eloquently describes the state of affairs and the difficulties confronting organizations that have embarked on the formal but relatively new practice of managing knowledge. Following a study aimed at developing a taxonomy of the strategies used by organizations engaged in KM, Earl (2001) notes: “once organizations embraced the concept that knowledge could make a difference to performance and that somehow it should be managed better, they often have not known where to start ... initiating a knowledge management program was a nontrivial issue. One approach was to appoint a chief knowledge officer ... but then he faced the same dilemma—where or how to begin” (p. 216).

Questions regarding where or how to begin, and even how, when, and why to proceed, in KM are implicit in the concept of alignment. Though highly developed and practiced in other fields, such as information systems/information technology (IS/IT) and management, little or no research has been carried out on alignment in the KM field (Asoh, Belardo, & Duchessi, 2003).

One is left to wonder why, given the value of knowledge and the interest in managing knowledge, research on alignment of knowledge-related resources with business strategies has lagged compared to research on alignment of other resources with business strategies. One explanation for the paucity of research on alignment in the KM field is the absence of research frameworks and models. In fact, to further the discipline and practice of KM, Earl (2001) suggests “there is a need for models, frameworks, or methodologies that can help [researchers and] corporate executives both to understand the sorts of knowledge management initiatives or investments that are possible and to identify those that make sense in their context” (p. 216).

This chapter is a contribution in response to the call for models, frameworks, or methodologies in KM by Earl (2001). Specifically, we draw from the body of knowledge from the KM field and the IS/IT and management fields (referred here as the “alignment reference fields”) to propose an alignment research reference framework to guide research and practice of knowledge strategic alignment. We also highlight alignment research models and elaborate on various conceptualizations of alignment for knowledge strategic alignment. We are interested in strategic knowledge alignment because knowledge has been recognized as a key organizational resource; yet, despite commitment in KM, many organizations overlook the need to align knowledge-related resources with business and other organizational strategies, just as is done with other resources. We believe researchers and executives would stand to benefit from an understanding of the application and implications of the alignment concept when it comes to committing and engaging in the management of today’s most valuable resource—knowledge.

The rest of this chapter is organized in seven sections. In section two, we present the background to our discussions. We first synthesize the literature on alignment and its importance as a general organizational and specific KM

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