Chapter 8.1
The Emerging Discipline of Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

This article presents some of the findings from the editorial process of creating an Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management. The global view of knowledge management (KM) research made available by this process provides interesting insights into the state of knowledge management research today and raises some questions regarding future directions for knowledge management as a discipline. The popularity and interaction between the different foundations of KM research is discussed, and specific attention is given to the discipline of social epistemology as a frame of reference for knowledge management research.

INTRODUCTION

After more than 40 years of information systems research, there remains great divergence and diversity in how to accurately define this important discipline. Banville and Landrey (1989), Backhouse, Liebenau, and Land (1991), Vessey, Ramesh, and Glass (2002), Adam and Fitzgerald (2000), Baskerville and Myers (2002), and Avison (2003) are but six of the many attempts to reach a broadly accepted definition. Fortunately, the lack of acceptance of any such definition has in no way hampered the development of the field. On the contrary, some, such as Frank (1998), question whether a common profile for information systems research is even desirable.

One is tempted to apply this same sort of qualification process to the endeavor of knowledge management (KM) and ask what constitutes the field of KM, what common profile can be ascribed to KM researchers, and if, in fact, knowledge management can be considered a discipline in its own right. Jennex and Croasdell (2003) have called for a determination that knowledge management be considered a discipline. As they discuss, meeting

Kuhn's (1996) criteria for the establishment of a discipline may be a necessary step—it is clearly not sufficient. The actual nature, characteristics, behavior, and interaction of those researchers identifying themselves as KM researchers will ultimately determine whether we emerge as a discipline or not. The analysis presented in this article moves us a step forward in that direction by taking a broad analytical view of KM research underway from both departmental and geographic standpoints.

This article will present some of the initial findings from the editorial process and draw insights regarding the global knowledge management community. We will present a number of findings based on the initial response to a Call for Papers (CFP) for the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management that was issued in October 2003 (Schwartz, 2003, 2005). We will present some descriptive statistics that form what in essence is a profile of the self-described knowledge management community. Our discussion of these findings will address the question of whether KM should be considered a discipline and raise number of additional provocative questions.

Reviewing the extant KM-related literature, and examining the various research forums in which KM is addressed, one is inexorably drawn toward a conclusion that KM is an increasingly important subfield of information systems research. And, in fact, it was from that perspective that the creation of an Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management (EKM) was initiated. The early stages in the process of creating such a volume have shed light on how KM is viewed around the world.

In this article I will respectfully suggest that most of the IS community, myself included, has it backwards. KM is not an important area of IS research, rather IS research is an increasingly important part of the discipline of knowledge management. In doing so, I will proffer a holistic definition of the field of knowledge management,

placing it within, or perhaps replacing it with, the discipline of applied social epistemology.

BACKGROUND AND MOTIVATION

If the field of knowledge management can be considered a meta-level pursuit in which we create and collect knowledge about organizational knowledge and how it can be created, captured, organized, and reused, then the creation of an Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management must be a meta-meta-level task.

Attempting to manage the knowledge of knowledge management means creating an overall map of research being conducted that impacts KM both directly and indirectly. It means reaching out to practitioners and academics in a wide range of disciplines to elicit their views on what makes KM the pursuit that it is (acquisition of knowledge management knowledge). And it means attempting to organize that knowledge in a meaningful way (organization of KM knowledge) so that it can be delivered to and made use of by KM researchers and practitioners in the future (delivery of KM knowledge). In essence the same Acquire-Organize-Distribute model (Schwartz, Divitini, & and Brasethvik, 2000) that can be used to manage the knowledge of a single enterprise is being modified and applied to a multi-organizational and multi-party knowledge management task.

In an attempt to provide as broad coverage as possible for KM, the call for papers including a detailed list of topics and subtopics (Figure 1), prepared in consultation with the international Editorial Advisory Board (faculty.biu.ac.il/~dgk/ekm/EAB.htm). It was through the interactions of the EAB that the CFP metamorphosed from what was originally a very IT-centric world view, to the knowledge- and organization-centric view of its final form. Further modifications (shown

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