

Chapter 7

The Professionalization of Knowledge Management

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ABSTRACT

Although knowledge management is becoming increasingly recognized as a critical component in the operations of both public-sector and private-sector organizations, it has yet to attain the true status of a recognized profession for information and knowledge professionals. In order to determine the emerging boundaries of this potential profession, the authors analyze the roles and responsibilities outlined in descriptions of knowledge management job advertisements. Empirical data concerning the organizations recruiting, the location of position, the qualifications needed, and the position's role and responsibilities were gathered from 1200 job postings within the United States over the course of 12 months. The content analysis of the job postings and job description are used to identify potential areas specific and significant to knowledge management as an emerging profession. Further suggestions as to potential indicators of the professionalization of knowledge management are offered.

INTRODUCTION

The emergence of the global information-rich economy, termed the knowledge economy, can now be considered essentially complete. The ability to create, disseminate, and apply knowledge efficiently is deemed essential to competitiveness at both firm and national levels (Roberts, 2001). Seminal work by Machlup (1962), Bell (1973), and Porat (1977)

in identifying the various sectors of the knowledge economy led to the next four decades of scholarly attention to its different aspects, and economists are well aware that this aggregated knowledge has immediate and long-term global impact, both positive and negative (Andersen, Bollerslev, Diebold, & Vega, 2007). As information has become the key driver in the world economy, the creation and management of knowledge remains the new frontier of corporate endeavor (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995).

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The borders of organizations in today's global economy have become porous as a result of dissolving hierarchical structures and the adoption of open systems of horizontal communication (Montgomery & Oliver, 2007). Open systems permit people to communicate both inside and outside the organization, share their knowledge, and expand their knowledge into a variety of fields (Mack, Ravin, & Byrd, 2001). Open system organizations encourage people to increase their overall expertise and to specialize in innovative areas. They also provoke important new ethical questions regarding privacy and property rights in this sharing of knowledge within organizations (Baskerville & Dulipovics, 2006). Thomas, Kellogg & Erikson (2001) refer to this as the "knowledge community" in which people can discover, use, and manipulate knowledge. This chapter will explore the ongoing development of knowledge professionals within the corporate sector of the global knowledge community. It is intended to be useful both to the aspiring knowledge management professional and to those hiring firms planning to make use of knowledge management competencies to help achieve their organizational goals.

THE INFORMATION AND KNOWLEDGE DOMAIN

The importance of knowledge for the performance of professional work, decision making, and maintaining competitiveness has long been recognized and documented in the literature. This acknowledgement, however, has come well ahead of any recognition of formalized ground rules to establish how one can define, or become, a knowledge professional (Cortada, 1998). Despite the considerable academic and professional attention that has been given to knowledge, the term appears to be used differently across domains with each claiming that its partial understanding represents a definitive articulation of the concept. Baskerville and Dulipovici (2006b) provide an

excellent overview of the wide variety of theories from different domains that are forming the theoretical foundations of knowledge management. This continues to be the case as we struggle to find consensus on how knowledge roles should be assigned and classified.

A simple delineation would be to view knowledge management as being cross-disciplinary: comprising the IT Track and the People Track of KM as proposed by Sveiby (1996). The first approach focuses on the management of information. Proponents of this view tend to be researchers and practitioners who come from computer and/or information science backgrounds. In this case knowledge management activities comprise the construction of information management systems, artificial intelligence, data mining and other enabling technologies. Accordingly, knowledge can be treated as objects that can be identified and handled in information systems. This is in line with the understanding that information is an explicit form of knowledge. In the second approach, proponents adopt a people-centered knowledge management perspective, maintaining that knowledge management is about people. These researchers and practitioners tend to come from domains such as philosophy, psychology, sociology, business, and management. They do not believe that knowledge can be captured, codified and separated from the people who possess such knowledge. The core knowledge management activities encompass assessing, changing and improving human individual skills and/or behaviour. It is a complex set of dynamic skills and know-how that is constantly changing. The assumption that information and knowledge can be treated as separate entities and evolve as a distinct profession is viewed as highly problematic.

This differentiation between the two perspectives is largely due to the confusion surrounding the definition and understanding of these terms. Wiig (1999) defines information as facts and data organized to characterize a particular situation, and knowledge as a set of truths and beliefs, perspec-

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