

## Chapter 7.12

# Accountability and Ethics in Knowledge Management

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*In science, knowledge is an unmixed good; in ethics and politics it is bad as well as good*  
*John Gray (2003)*

### ABSTRACT

The purpose of this chapter is to argue the case that the study of Knowledge Management should embrace considerations of ethics and accountability. Knowledge Management—a relatively new discipline—is often seen as a necessary but benign component of any modern business organization. This chapter suggests that underlying

modern notions of knowledge management are the far older practices comprising the management of knowledge prevalent in most spheres of human activity. Many of these are political in nature, and distort and manipulate knowledge to achieve ends which may include criminal activity and fraud, but often merely serve to further the aims of organizational actors. The discipline called Knowledge Management has much to learn from the ancient art of the management of knowledge.

### INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this discussion paper is to make the case for integrating ethics and with it accountabil-

DOI: 10.4018/978-1-60960-587-2.ch712

ity into research about Knowledge Management (KM). Ethics refers to the motives and methods for KM processes, and their impact on individuals, on organizations, and on society. Ethical issues are also relevant to the researcher studying KM, where the subject being researched and the way the research is conducted can raise ethical issues. The interaction of actors, processes, and technology in all aspects of KM from research to design, and actual use can raise a wide range of ethical dilemmas.

KM has been described by a range of commentators as comprising of practices used by organisations to identify, create, represent, store, distribute and share information. It has been an established discipline since 1995 with a body of university courses and both professional and academic journals dedicated to it. Knowledge Management programs are typically tied to organisational objectives such as improving performance, competitive advantage, innovation, transfer of lessons learned, and the general development of collaborative practices.

Motivation and behaviour related to KM initiatives are necessarily embedded in power relations. Such power relations play a role in the design, implementation, use and research into KM systems, and assumptions, motivation and dilemmas, sometimes explicit, but more often tacit, may affect behaviour. At the same time, the widespread public discussion around the relationship between business organizations and ‘social responsibility’ is a relatively recent phenomenon though it has now developed an extensive literature, for example (Gray & Owen, 1996). The discussion has been a useful one for reminding business organizations, and government at times, of their position, relationship, and responsibility to a social world beyond their corporate boundaries. In doing so discussions about accountability have highlighted the ethical responsibilities associated with KM systems, processes and research. In our chapter we draw attention to the distinction between the subject matter of Knowledge Management and

the much older topic, not specifically articulated within the IS discipline, of the Management of Knowledge. The latter is much more concerned with the manipulation (and often distortion) of knowledge to obtain desired outcomes (Land *et al*, 2004).

The chapter draws on examples where the design, implementation, and use of KM systems and processes have, sometimes deliberately, overlooked questions of accountability – what we have called the dark side of knowledge management (Land *et al* 2005a,b). Examples are provided from both the business and public sector. The first part of the chapter establishes why an ethics dimension is necessary in KM theory and practice; and the second part identifies questions on how an ethics dimension could be integrated with current KM research and practice.

## **WHY KM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NEEDS AN ACCOUNTABILITY DIMENSION, ACCOUNTABILITY, AND ETHICS**

Ethics relates to codes of conduct regarded by a community as ‘right’ and ‘good’. They may be based on notions of morality or values. They may be faith based, determined by rules of proper conduct laid down by some higher authority. As such, we note the conflicts that can arise where values clash or rules differ. Ethical principles are rarely the subject of absolute standards. Nevertheless, conforming to ethical standards does require some consensus at least within defined communities such as those represented by professional associations. Some communities consider ethics sufficiently important to subject their activities to scrutiny by an ethics committee, which may operate on a mandatory basis with legal sanctions against those who flout its rulings. Others work on the basis of voluntary agreement. The medical profession has led the way in being subjected

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