

Chapter 1.1

Are We Stuck With Knowledge Management?

A Case for Strategic Knowledge Resource Development

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ABSTRACT

This is a conceptual paper offering an approach to apparent practitioner and academic dissatisfaction with the field of Knowledge Management (KM). Discussing definitions of knowledge, the drivers for its value as an organisational resource and comparing these against definitions of Knowledge Management, this paper suggests a divergence between operational needs and KM as the medium for coordination. Offering an historical perspective of knowledge as a resource it suggests KM to be too broad a concept to be effective in fulfilling the needs of organisations. The authors suggest a

continuum for knowledge resource development from which Strategic Knowledge Resource Development is offered as a potential solution for current unsatisfaction.

INTRODUCTION

In a 2009 survey of 1430 global executives across sectors KM was found to be one of the least effective strategic management tools available to organisations today (Rigby & Bilodeau, 2009). This practitioner dissatisfaction appears to be mirrored by academics; ‘Knowledge Management is a poor term, but we are stuck with it, I suppose’ (Sveiby, 2001, cited in Wilson, 2002). We set out

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to address the complex issues that trouble both practitioners and academics in the KM field. From the perspective of value creation in organisations, we suggest that Sveiby is correct and Knowledge Management (KM) is in fact a poor term. However we refute the assertion that we are 'stuck with it'.

This is a conceptual paper that examines the current position of KM and finds a field at odds with itself. We begin by first establishing a working definition of knowledge and identify the Knowledge Economy drivers for value in organisations. We examine KM as the mediating force for the coordination of organisational knowledge resources, within an exploration of knowledge as an economic resource. Establishing a history that is easily traceable over 250 years, we question whether today's practitioners and theorists are actually speaking of Knowledge Management at all, which we believe is not the case. The argument evolves to present a continuum of perspective from HR-Centric (knowledge as a process) to Techno-Centric (knowledge as an object) views with an eye to the interface between the two as the point of value extraction for organisations. We suggest this to be the focus of organisations and propose Strategic Knowledge Resource Development to be the medium for maximising organisational assets and capital.

The paper concludes that, contrary to Sveiby's damning prognosis for the future, the field is not 'stuck with' KM but that there appears to be a case for a more focused field, being Strategic Knowledge Resource Development.

WHAT IS MEANT BY KNOWLEDGE?

Theorists such as Mingers (2008) have identified a lack of definition as a weakness in the field, where too many papers fail to establish a situated definition of knowledge, and thereby take an overly simplified view of its economic value.

Knowledge in its epistemological form is frequently referred to as 'justified true belief'

(Plato, cited in Kakabadse et al., 2003, p. 76). It has also been described in the modern context as 'information combined with experience, context, interpretation and reflection' (Kulkarni et al., 2006). Wilson (2002) states that:

'Knowledge involves the mental processes of comprehension, understanding and learning that go on in the mind and only in the mind, however much they involve interaction with the world outside the mind and interaction with others.' (p. 2)

Others present an ontological position in suggesting that Knowledge exists in three states: 'Knowledge-as-data', 'Knowledge-as-meaning' and 'Knowledge-as-practice' (Spender, 2005). It is also said to be part of a flow or evolution process: 'Data – Information – Knowledge – Understanding – Wisdom' (Sarah & Haslet, 2003). Wilson (2002) makes an important differentiation between knowledge and information from an organisational perspective by positing that the externalisation of what we know outside of the mind constitutes information.

Popular theorists in the KM field argue there to be two fundamental types of knowledge, tacit and explicit (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) - Explicit knowledge being described as 'knowing that', or codifiable and tacit knowledge as 'knowing how'; knowledge that exists within the mind of the individual or group collective therefore and is difficult to articulate or extract (Armstrong, 2006). This pervasive KM view of knowledge as being either tacit or explicit is perpetuated from the seminal work of Nonaka & Takeuchi, whose SECI (Socialisation, Externalisation, Combination, Internalisation) model is founded upon the work of Polanyi (1969). The work of Nonaka & Takeuchi receives critical treatment from Wilson (2002) who suggests that the authors misinterpreted or manipulated the founding work of Polanyi. Polanyi states that tacit knowledge is inexpressible, whereas the core of Nonaka & Takeuchi's (1995) work relies on the conversion

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