BOOK REVIEW

Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management

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International Journal of Knowledge Management, USA

David G. Schwartz (Ed.)
Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management
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Most book reviews are on books that people tend to read cover to cover. This review looks at the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management, a reference work that I wouldn’t expect readers to just sit down and read like a normal book. So, in order to do this review, I did a Google search on the term encyclopedia to see if I could find a framework to guide me. The most interesting and useful result was found at Wikipedia, which defines an encyclopedia as a compendium of knowledge defined by four elements: subject matter, scope, method of organization, and method of production (Wikipedia, 2005). The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management is an outstanding attempt to create a source book of critical knowledge on the discipline of knowledge management (KM) by providing an edited collection of 117 entries on knowledge management. These entries, each a focused research paper, cover a variety of concepts and topics whose understanding is critical to the KM researcher, practitioner, and student. To review the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management, we’ll first evaluate how well it meets the four elements that define an encyclopedia, and then we’ll discuss how well it meets its stated goals.

Meeting the Elements of an Encyclopedia

An encyclopedia’s subject matter can be general and can contain articles on topics in many different fields, or it can specialize in a particular field. The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management focuses on the discipline of knowledge management, as its title suggests. This is an important issue, as the question of KM’s status as a discipline has not yet been resolved decisively. Dave Croasdell and I addressed this issue in the inaugural issue of this journal and concluded that KM is a young discipline (Jennex & Croasdell, 2005). David Schwartz, in preparing the encyclopedia, also concluded that KM is a discipline (Schwartz, 2005). The conclusion is that the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management has a specialized and academically recognized field as its subject matter.

The next element is the scope of the encyclopedia. What are the key KM topics and concepts? What are its seminal works and theories? These are not easy questions to answer when you have such a new discipline. The International Journal of Knowledge Management considers KM to be a very interdisciplinary discipline and lists the following topics as suggested topics (but not an all-inclusive list) of interest to KM (Jennex, 2005):

- Cognitive theories of knowledge management and organizational memory
Basic theories associated with knowledge creation, knowledge management, and organizational memory
- Use of semantic networks, topic maps, the Internet, digital documents, XML, taxonomies, ontologies, and other technologies to implement knowledge management systems
- Organizational culture impacts on knowledge management
- Design of information and communication systems that facilitate knowledge transfer and sharing
- Enablers and inhibitors of knowledge sharing and knowledge transfer behaviors
- Knowledge transfer and sharing behaviors within emergent organizational forms such as virtual communities
- Knowledge reuse in organizations
- Organizational and economic incentive structures for knowledge sharing and use
- Knowledge acquisition and transfer processes
- Case studies of knowledge management and organizational memory systems
- Metrics and effectiveness of knowledge management and organizational memory systems
- Knowledge management in small and medium enterprises
- Methodologies and processes for developing knowledge management systems
- Global issues in knowledge management and organizational memory
- Knowledge management strategy
- Issues related to the capture, storage, search, retrieval, and use of knowledge and organizational memory
- Knowledge management training issues
- Organizational learning

This is a wide-ranging set of topics that does not completely define KM. It illustrates the challenges in defining the scope for a KM journal and a KM encyclopedia. While the journal can redefine its scope on a continuing basis (as editor in chief, I can say that it has been as often as almost every submission), the encyclopedia had one opportunity. The encyclopedia approached the scope issue through a call for papers with some topics listed. Responses to the CFP were used to generate a database of topics covered. This database was circulated to the encyclopedia’s review board for concurrence of coverage, to perform a gap analysis, and to identify any missing topics. The resulting revised list then was used to generate the articles included in the encyclopedia. My review of the encyclopedia’s topics finds only two issues to be lacking: KM ethics and KM education. KM ethics is addressed only with respect to privacy and intellectual property protection with other social issues not specifically addressed. KM education is not addressed. Both these topics are relatively new and are topics that come into use once a discipline starts to mature. Given that KM is a young discipline, the weak coverage of these two areas is not unexpected, and I don’t consider that much of an issue with the scope of the encyclopedia. Overall, I’d have to rate the coverage of the encyclopedia as very comprehensive of the KM discipline.

The third element is the organization of the encyclopedia. The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management is alphabetically organized by article title. However, searching for content is simplified by a couple of table of contents, one by alphabetical listing and one organized into six thematic sections: (1) Theoretical Aspects of Knowledge Management, (2) Processes of Knowledge Management, (3) Organizational and Social Aspects of Knowledge Management, (4) Managerial Aspects of Knowledge Management, (5) Technological Aspects of Knowledge Management, and (6) Application-Specific Knowledge Management. Each thematic section is broken down into a series of topics with articles for each topic listed alphabetically. Add in a good index, and I found the organization of the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management to be logical and easy to use.
The fourth element is method of production. The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management is a traditional hard-bound volume. This is useful but does limit the effective life of the encyclopedia. A Web-based version is available to libraries and will be a real benefit to the KM community, once issues such as revision and update schedules and sponsorship are worked out. Another aspect of production is how the articles are generated. The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management solicited articles from all KM-related fields and from an international audience. Articles went through a rigorous review process and were formatted strictly to give the encyclopedia a very good and consistent look as well as a well written and high quality set of articles. The list of contributing authors reads like a Who’s Who in the KM discipline and is globally representative. Overall, I rate the quality of articles high, but do consider that since the encyclopedia is a hard-bound volume rather than a living document such as a Web site, there is a severely limiting factor to the useful life of the encyclopedia.

Meeting the Goals of the Encyclopedia

The primary purposes of The Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management are to serve as a research reference work and a course reference work. I used the encyclopedia in my graduate class as a course reference work and received very positive feedback from my students. They also found it easy to use and rich in knowledge and citations. I’ve used it some in my research, in particular for doing literature surveys, and found it useful. Additionally, I’ve had a couple of practitioners look at the encyclopedia, and they found it a valuable reference. In terms of content, I haven’t read all 117 entries, but those that I have read or perused provide solid theoretical background and insight into their topic.

Conclusion

David Schwartz has done a fine job leading this effort. This is not unexpected, as Schwartz has served as editor of the journal Internet Research since 1998 and has published an earlier collection of research dealing specifically with the relationship between KM and the Internet (Schwartz, Divitini & Brasethvik, 2000). That experience is apparent in this encyclopedia, as manifested by the strong Editorial Advisory Board that Schwartz recruited and the vision used to conceptualize this expansive discipline into a very usable research form.

Overall, the book makes a solid theoretical and state-of-the-discipline contribution to the KM literature. It is a recommended reference work for all KM libraries and any course dealing with KM and for any student, practitioner, or researcher either trying to learn more about KM, establishing a KM initiative, or conducting research into KM.

References