EDITORIAL PREFACE

Reflections on Knowledge Management Research and Practice: The Need for Integration

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Welcome to the third issue of the third volume! This issue presents six articles with a wide range of focus. Hornett and Stein map the evolution of topics of interest for knowledge management (KM) research. Holsapple and Jones further our discussion on KM success with an article that examines how KM activities improve organizational competitiveness. Li, Ardichivili, Maurer, Wentling, and Stuedemann further our discussion on the impact of culture on KM by looking at the impact of Chinese culture on knowledge sharing in online communities of practice. Hazel Taylor summarizes the literature on tacit knowledge and discusses the impact of the aspects of tacitness on knowledge capture. Rech, Decker, Ras, Jedlitschka, and Feldmann apply software engineering principles and introduce the concepts of knowledge patterns and antipatterns. Finally, Mohamed, Stankosky, and Ribière apply Grid Computing technology to KM.

In December 2006, I presented a keynote speech at the Australian Conference on Knowledge Management and Intelligent Decision Support (ACKMIDS). The theme of the conference was integrating “doing” and “thinking”: KM as reflective practice. While preparing my talk I got to reflecting on KM and the differences between doing and thinking and contemplated the issues of rigor and relevance in KM research. Research relevance has been an issue in IS for several years (see the 2001 special issue on research relevance in the Communications of the Association of Information Systems [CAIS]). It is argued that academic researchers are not looking at the problems of interest to business and are losing credibility from the perspective of practitioners. Researchers argue that basic research will ultimately lead to knowledge that can be used by practitioners but should not be judged on its immediate usefulness. Many believe this is leading to a relevance gap between practitioners and academics.

Is there a relevance gap between doing and thinking in the KM discipline? As editor in chief of the International Journal of Knowledge Management, an active researcher and consultant, and a contributor to the research relevancy debate, I believe there is a relevance gap in KM between doing and thinking. This editorial explores the differences between doing and thinking and proposes that a third function, integrating, is needed and should be done by researchers using qualitative research methods and who can reflect on KM. Integrating are those activities focused on bridging the gap between doing and knowing.

This discussion defines three groups of KM professionals, doers, thinkers, and integrators.
Doers are those who build and implement knowledge management systems (KMS), with the goal of solving business problems. This is the group associated with doing. Thinkers are those seeking to understand how and why KM and KMS work or do not work. This is the group associated with knowing. Doers are looking for solutions to help their specific organizations utilize knowledge better; they do not care about generic issues unless they affect their organization. Thinkers are looking at the organization as a unit of measure and interest, but are not necessarily focused on changing or improving a specific organization. This leads to the need for integrators. Integrators understand the theory and transfer it to the doers using methods such as case studies, action research, actor-network theory (ANT), and socio-technical interaction networks (STIN). Integrators are focused on improving performance in specific or groups of organizations and on generating generic KM theory.

Thinkers and integrators tend to be academics but with differing philosophies. Thinkers tend to be positivists, academics who validate theory through quantitative methods. The academic world is dominated by positivists. The higher ranking journals tend to publish articles with heavy quantitative components and more credence is given to theory that has been “proven” through statistical analysis of large populations.

Integrators also tend to be academics but with a differing philosophy from positivism. Integrators tend to be interpretive, academics who discover theory and hypotheses through the direct observation of and sometimes participation within organizations. The higher ranking journals tend to not publish articles with heavy interpretivist methodology with the result that most interpretivist research tends to be published in the second tier journals. (Note though that these are still quality journals.)

So why do we need integrators? I have found that my jobs of consultant, engineer, manager, and now editor in chief have led me to being predominately an integrator. I found that I have little knack for doing basic KM research that I cannot see as being able to be applied right away. If I never read another article discussing the definition of knowledge, I will be a happier person. (This is a pure editorial comment and not meant to influence current or potential authors and journal contributors in any way; note that this issue contains an article discussion basic tacit knowledge.) This does not mean I cannot do basic research; I think all good integrators can, but it means I want to see my work used and applied to helping solve problems right away. However, I am not a doer. I also have little knack for staying with one organization and doing the necessary but mundane tasks needed to build and implement a KMS. I find that integrators are those doing the job of walking around and applying theoretical knowledge to the problems and tasks that need it. This is where the integrator becomes important. Many doers do not have the time or desire to read the academic literature and to determine how the knowledge in them can be applied to real problems. Integrators do just that, and more. We also perform research focused on solving current business problems, only we use case and action research methodologies so that we can gain new insight into how something may have worked in an organization. This insight is what we provide back to the thinkers, we provide them the raw ideas and theories that need validation. We in effect take lessons learned from the doers along with our own observations and turn them into constructs that the thinkers can further investigate.

Is there backing for an integrator role? Integrators seem to be common to several disciplines. Some examples include registered nurses and nurse practitioners who act as integrators between the doctor thinkers and the mother and parent doers who are implementing health care in their homes. Another example are engineers and field engineers who integrate between construction manager and general contractor doers who are building things and the research engineer and physicist thinkers who do the basic research on materials and component design that ultimately gets incorporated into building designs. This seems to support the need for integrators; that they are used in many industries and organizations suggest they fill an important role.

Is this a good role to be in? I think so, for the academic who likes to get involved with their subjects and who likes to see their knowledge used to solve problems in real time, being an integrator is good and rewarding. However, there is a danger. Integrators still need to publish and be perceived as legitimate academics in order to get tenure and promotion. This is a real issue; the top
research institutions and academic journals tend to not reward this type of research. This may mean that integrating is not something new academics should try to pursue. This may be a function that more senior academics should be performing. I tend to like this view and believe it would also serve the secondary purposes of keeping senior academics involved and current in their field as well as providing a relevant base of knowledge and experience that can be used to enhance our teaching. I also tend to think that the integrators are the better teachers as they bridge the doing-knowing gap with students as they can answer the question of, “how will I ever use this when I graduate?” Finally, we need to encourage journals to publish integrator work. I do seek out this work and give it access to the International Journal of Knowledge Management and encourage other editors in chief to do so.

This leads to the value of integrators and the conclusion of this editorial. KM needs integrator academics that can bring focus to KM research. Integrators need to be involved with practitioners to see what they are doing, to determine what is working at the specific organizational level so that they can bring this to the researchers as hypotheses and theories needing to be tested. This is also where the traditional academic journals are letting KM down. These journals do not want to publish this research and are leaving it for the newer KM focused journals to publish and push this research. The International Journal of Knowledge Management is actively doing this, having issued calls for research in several areas.

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