Knowledge Management as a discipline, despite being 20 years old or so, is still in its infancy. And although there have been many pronouncements of its death, I would argue that it is still very much alive and thriving. What you may find surprising though, is that, if you spent some time in the online KM discussion forums, you would discover extensive, heated debate on the nature of KM.

First, people still cannot agree what constitutes knowledge and I don’t believe they ever will. For many, knowledge can only exist in the human mind - anything in written form is information but others argue that knowledge can exist in two forms: implicit knowledge, that exists only in the human mind and explicit knowledge that is recorded, such as in a book or a digital format. These two mindsets are the root cause of much confusion and argument. And even when this difference is recognised, there is still great debate as to “What is knowledge?”

In addition, the relationship of data to information and knowledge and even wisdom is hotly argued and the validity of the so called data-information-knowledge-wisdom hierarchical model (D-I-K-W) that is much hallowed in some circles has been called into question. Even the SECI model of Nonaka and Takeuchi—long a staple of KM academics and practitioners—is dismissed by many and has been held responsible by some for the failure of a large number of KM projects.

Yet another hot debate is the role of incentives and rewards in motivating people to share their knowledge. Most people still believe that you need rewards and incentives, whilst the works of Alfie Kohn and Dan Pink show that research demonstrates that tangible rewards in the main do not work and, worse, do great harm.

As for a precise definition of KM itself, there is even less agreement. You can find hundreds of definitions on the web. They have a lot in common but they are also very different. And the definitions you are drawn to vary depending on whether you are an academic, a KM practitioner, an HR manager, a technologist, or a hard nosed business manager. Definitions are also coloured by the industry you are in. Someone in the oil industry may have a very different view of KM than a software developer at Google.

The subject is rich. The subject is broad. The subject is diverse. There is wide disagreement as to the nature of knowledge, what knowledge management is and how you best go about it. But personally, I don’t think it matters too much. I am quite capable of working with several definitions of knowledge inside my head, and I would recommend that anyone working in the KM field define what KM means to them in terms of their specific business and business objectives. This lack of a clear definition and at times ambiguity is what I think makes the field an exciting and fulfilling one to work in, though I doubt every one would agree.

What I think is interesting is that KM as a discipline has emerged and is evolving and developing in the age of the World Wide Web. In the past, the ownership, forming, and shaping of a new discipline was
restricted to a relatively small number academics and high profile early practitioners and evangelists. This is not true today. With the web, regardless of knowledge or experience, anyone can contribute to the debate and the evolution of the discipline. The shaping of KM is a more open, democratic process, and there is much to be learnt about the evolution of knowledge and KM itself in observing the conversations, dialogue, and debate that are taking place world wide.

But despite all this argument and debate and a dip in enthusiasm for KM in the mid 90s, I believe that KM today is reviving and thriving. There are many KM societies and networks world-wide. There are a growing number of conferences and an ever increasing number of on-line forums and KM educational courses. And the number of people with "knowledge" in their title and a responsibility for managing knowledge in some way grows daily.

It is still a hard fact however that most KM projects have failed or have not lived up to their expectations. I don’t believe that this is inherent in KM tools or methodologies but due more to the fact that KM projects are often poorly conceived and implemented. I think that for KM to be successful, it needs to do three things.

1. It needs to focus intensely on the critical business issues that need to be addressed within an organisation and not on visionary concepts such as creating a knowledge sharing culture or a knowledge driven organization. Such concepts deflect us from the real issue of solving business problems, mitigating business risks and identifying and exploiting new business opportunities and are too often a one way street to frustration and ultimate failure.

2. It should place more emphasis on working with and obtaining buy-in from senior managers in the organization, not only by developing a business case but recognizing that managers are human and can be swayed by other motivations other than a traditional ROI analysis.

3. It needs to obtain the buy-in from people in the organization by working with them, engaging and involving them much earlier in the project life cycle then most traditionally managed projects. Unlike other systems, people cannot be coerced into using a "KM system” —they need to have ownership.

I am often asked “How do you do KM?” My response is that “You don't do KM! We should respond to business problems and develop business opportunities using KM tools.”

I also don’t believe there should such things as KM initiatives. Again, we should not “do KM”. There is no such thing as a KM strategy. There are only business problems, business challenges and opportunities, business strategies, and business projects.

To my mind, the problem with KM initiatives and strategies is that they conceptualize problems and make it far too easy for us to take our eye off the business, and this is one of the key reasons why so many KM projects fail.

It is also rare that a business issue is purely a KM one. We usually need more than just KM tools and techniques to fully address a business problem or opportunity. We should use KM tools and methodologies to help respond to business problems and opportunities.

If we must have a KM strategy it should be in response to clear business goals and tie in to the top level business objectives of the organization or our organizational unit. The business purpose and outcomes should come first!

I also believe that there are no benefits to KM as such. As KM is about improved communication, learning and knowledge sharing it can be applied to any human endeavor. So asking what are the benefits
of KM is a meaningless question as the answer is “what ever we want them to be!” We need to start by asking “What do we want to achieve in terms of business outcomes and how can KM thinking, KM tools and KM techniques help?”

Not everyone will agree with my views. And that’s fine. That’s the nature of KM.

What I like about this book is that it includes contributions from academics, researchers, managers and practitioners in a wide variety of areas relating to KM and innovation. Much of what they have to say is in disagreement with each other or represents alternative viewpoints.

This is good. This is how we take the discipline forward. So let me finish by saying something I say again and again about KM. There are no recipes for KM. There are no prescriptions for KM. There is no substitute for thinking for yourself about KM.

Read the book, reflect, think hard and join the conversation—both the dialogue and the debate! Help shape KM for the 21st century.

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David Gurteen has over 30 years’ experience working in high technology industries. He was a professional software development manager and in the late 80s worked for Lotus Development, ensuring that Lotus products were designed for the global marketplace. Today he works as an independent knowledge management advisor, facilitator and speaker, helping people to innovate and to work together more effectively. He is the founder of the Gurteen Knowledge Community—a global learning network of over 17,000 people in 160 countries. He publishes a monthly Knowledge Letter, now in its 11th year, and the Gurteen Knowledge Website—a resource website that contains book reviews, articles, people profiles, event calendars, inspirational quotations, an integral weblog and more on subjects that include knowledge management, learning, creativity and innovation. He is known for his Gurteen Knowledge Cafés and the Knowledge Café Masterclasses that he runs regularly in London and in other cities around the world. In June 2010, He won the Ark Group’s lifetime achievement award for services to KM.