Preface

WHO WILL BENEFIT FROM THE BOOK AND WHY?

The contributors to the book define knowledge management broadly as follows:

- Knowledge management encompasses the policies, practices, conventions, and habits associated with discovering, acquiring or capturing, storing for future access, manipulating, sharing, and then applying data, information, and insight to organizational work processes.
- In turn, the knowledge management processes of finding, sharing, and applying knowledge produce new data, information, and insight to be captured and stored.
- The many tools used to support knowledge management processes are necessary enablers but do not in themselves constitute knowledge management.

Accordingly, the book was developed to support several groups of professionals working in the field of knowledge management or in a knowledge management associated role:

- Organizational leaders and professionals in private and public sectors wishing to understand and apply “real life knowledge management”
- Analysts and planners supporting organizational strategy and budgeting
- Information professionals and librarians supporting knowledge workers
- Information technology professionals wanting to see the bigger picture into which their work fits
- Students aiming for careers in information and knowledge management and information/data technology
- Instructors desiring to equip students for employment with a bridge between theory and practice
- Researchers examining how knowledge management responds to evolving business practices and technological change
- Knowledge workers interested in optimizing the effectiveness of their own and colleagues’ work

Throughout the book, the term “knowledge worker” is used in its broadest meaning. It refers to individuals whose work consists primarily of finding, applying, and producing information and knowledge in support of the employing organization’s goals. The definition certainly includes the professions in science, engineering, law, and so on, and it encompasses members of academia, think tank experts, and business executives; but it is wider. Policy analysts in government preparing white papers or briefs for senior civil servants or politicians, subject matter experts in regulatory agencies or administrative bodies, and professionals in most areas of an organization (such as HR, Legal, Sales and Marketing, Finance, Client Relations, and Corporate Services as examples) are all knowledge workers. Their ability to suc-
ceed at their responsibilities depends to varying degrees on the ease with which they have access to the right information at the right time – when they know they need it, and when they do not. Retrieving a needed number, fact, or document from a data warehouse or repository is a basic entitlement for a knowledge worker; in addition, knowledge workers rely on mechanisms such as current awareness feeds (or a corporate information specialist aware of their projects) to keep them abreast of relevant developments. The final requirement for knowledge workers—and the one most difficult to manage—is the ability to serendipitously discover something for which they could not have formulated a request (sometimes called the “aha moment” or “I’m so glad I found out your team was working on a project similar to ours!”).

Organizational leaders intuit that optimal means for retrieval, current awareness, and serendipity are success factors. Their interest in providing such optimal means is clear through their willingness to allocate considerable sums to infrastructure and tools. Their challenge lies in the uncertainty and complexity surrounding the options available and the implications flowing from each option.

In other words, there is no need to “sell” good knowledge management, but what, precisely, constitutes good knowledge management in any given organization?

The authors created this book from decades of experience in the field. While references to further readings are supplied, the emphasis is drawn from real life observation. We share our collective experience and expertise in the trust that readers will be able to apply that experience and expertise to their own environments.

**KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: WHERE ARE WE?**

It is a common assumption that today’s technology is an improvement over what preceded it. A simple image of the “central file room” illustrates the contrast between *then* and *now* – here, in the area of corporate memory and access to an organization’s records:

**Then …** An organization’s knowledge was stored—as paper documents and records, usually the final or official version—in file rooms and archives, often managed by individuals with deep knowledge how to retrieve information on a topic or event. Mechanical limitations—How many readable carbon copies of a typed document could be produced on a typewriter?—dictated how many “classification slots” an item could go into and thereby influenced how easily it could be found: Would an employee curious about a topic be able to hit on one of the few headings chosen by the central files manager? When an employee retired, the contents of his or her office were typically inspected by the archivist so as to ensure capture of corporate memory or activity evidence. A misfiled document was lost forever, and detail buried in the middle of a page could never be found if it was unrelated to the topic or name under which it was classed. In practice, the central files manager had control of the organization’s information assets and immense influence on what the organization’s employees could retrieve from the past.

**Now …** An organization’s knowledge is stored—as drafts in multiple versions along with the final version—in documents, data sets, images, and other objects kept in shared drives, memory sticks, intranet portals, document management systems, collaboration tools, and data warehouses. In theory, all non-confidential information is available to anyone, and findability is assured because every word in any information object is searchable. When an employee retires, it is not a given that his
or her files are examined for retention. In practice, no one has central control of the organization’s information assets, and retrieval of past knowledge is a factor of the sophistication of the search tools implemented by the IT department. Attention is paid to the value of appropriate management of knowledge, and an entire industry focuses on that value. When Peter Drucker (2008) established the study of management as a discipline in its own right, he included—as the title of one of his chapters—the notion that “knowledge is all” in his book, Management. By using in their books’ titles such concepts as information ecology and social capital, knowledge management experts (Cohen & Prusak, 2001; Davenport, 1997) point out the multiple elements in an organization’s approach to capturing, protecting, and using employees’ expertise.

However, the “now” scenario contains a curse along with the obvious blessing. Technology capability is immense – in addition to simple news feed monitoring and document repository searching, we now have the means to house “big data” (the electronic evidence in, e.g., every credit card purchase or access card swipe), mine the raw data, and produce data visualisations to help make sense of the data. It is easy to find information – yet today’s knowledge workers complain they are inundated and paralyzed by all that capacity and volume. They complain it is difficult or at best expensively time consuming to find just what they need to answer a question or inform a decision. Without knowing it, employees resorting to “asking around” to chase up information they require are crying out for … knowledge management! Nothing fancy – just tools and procedures that work well for their purposes. Herein lies the crux of the book’s purpose.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN SOCIETY: PERVERSIVE ATTENTION

Since computers and communications technologies upended the way things were done in society’s private and public sector organizations—and became a focus of attention in their own right—we are now living in a world where knowledge management saturates every aspect. It is difficult to imagine any function of personal or organizational life not dependent on some form of knowledge management practice or tool. Published works, conferences, blogs, and online discussion groups tell their own story of the pervasiveness of knowledge management as a durable and unavoidable component of today’s world. David Gurteen maintains a list of recurring conferences at http://www.gurteen.com/gurteen/gurteen.nsf/id/annual-conferences; the number of groups on LinkedIn labeled with variations of “Knowledge Management” is well above 600; and the number of knowledge management related titles available from popular booksellers is moving through the mid five figures.

Each professional community manifests knowledge management in unique ways, and its members are interested in particular aspects relevant to their pursuits. For example, the academic community looks at how the flow of ideas drives discovery and learning; scientists form communities to maintain virtual discussions and keep aware what others in their fields are doing; and journalists examine the ways in which mass media, the Internet, and social networks influence public opinion and shape political movements.

The focus of this book is the practical application of knowledge management understanding to the processes of decision-making, planning, and many other aspects of activity within organizations.
KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IN ORGANIZATIONS:
THE PRACTITIONERS SPEAK

There is no shortage of research into and academic commentary on knowledge management. Our book is derived from real life experience.

The contributors intend to add their voices of pragmatism to the many existing conversations. For the purpose of offering practical direction, they share the insights they have gathered through decades of experience as knowledge managers, information specialists, and specialized librarians. Each provides an angle from which to view practical knowledge management in organizations. They speak from extensive experience working in organizations in capacities such as knowledge gatherers, custodians, organizers, and disseminators – as employees or consultants. Each reader may focus on the angle most relevant for his or her environment and projects.

Except where specific entities are named, the anecdotal examples used as illustrations of points made by the authors are inspired by their many years of work experience and general professional knowledge. In the interest of situational anonymity and broad applicability, the illustrations, in some cases composites from several settings, are cast in terms to preserve the key message being described while the original facts have been altered or created to suit the point being supported.

The authors’ contributions are previewed below.

The Context of Challenges and Organizational Culture

Ulla de Stricker looks at the challenges to knowledge management with particular emphasis on organizational culture as a significant factor in the success of knowledge management strategies. Her focus is the significant set of challenges facing today’s organizations in the context of choosing the “right” strategy and investment level for knowledge management. She considers the role of human nature as it prevails in the face of common pressures, common characteristics of work in contemporary organizations, difficulties for decision makers in funding knowledge management, and the characteristics of a “knowledge culture.” The overview of KM challenges and cultural factors playing a role in KM sets the stage for the remaining chapters focusing on various strategies and options for successful KM.

Planning for Knowledge Management: Conducting a Knowledge Assessment

Cynthia Shamel brings the theory and background of knowledge assessments to life with examples from the published literature and years of consulting practice. She offers best practices for gathering and analyzing the information needed to understand how knowledge is created, acquired, shared, and stored within an organization, using examples from studies conducted over the last 10 years.

Communities and Social Media Tools

Connie Crosby zeroes in on communities and social media as day to day tools in today’s organizations, outlining options and practical implementation choices. With a realistic approach, she sets out the facts and options for organizations desiring to support business teams in communicating their discoveries and in forming relationships across and outside the organization.
Building Smarter Organizations: Culture, Complexity, and Connecting through Enterprise Social Networks

Gordon Vala-Webb looks at the role of enterprise social network tools as agents in enhancing the intelligence of organizations. By cutting through the organizational barriers and mazes, enterprise social network tools allow knowledge to flow regardless of departmental structures and silos. He outlines the considerations and steps required for a successful implementation and sheds light on the details involved in getting employees on board with using the tools.

The Learning Organization

Deborah Keller speaks to the opportunities for deriving learning from the experiences of members of groups and organizations with special attention to the means of capturing and protecting lessons learned for future use. Her focus is the paradox of the value of learning being disregarded in the context of the cost and effort of assembling and using past experience for the purpose of learning.

Tools for Talking: Conversations are Critical to Knowledge Management

Karen Huffman takes a look at methods having proved effective in fostering conversations among colleagues and members of communities and at tools to support conversations in person and virtually. Examples of tools are illustrated to provide a starting point for those interested in nurturing a culture of effective conversations. For the methods and tools employed, the emphasis on engagement is particularly effective in ensuring all participants invest personally in contributing to the shared progress and outcome.

Knowledge Management on Demand: Leveraging External Consulting Expertise

Constance Ard and Ulla de Stricker discuss the dynamics of the relationship between organizations and externally contracted suppliers of knowledge management related services. Unique considerations are relevant when knowledge management activities are purchased in via consulting engagements as opposed to being an intrinsic organizational element.

Postscript: Leadership in Knowledge Management

Four of the authors offer their comments on what makes for successful leadership in the knowledge management arena.

Summation

Constance Ard rounds out the book by commenting on the content and adding observations regarding the realistic outlook for knowledge management professionals’ work.

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REFERENCES


