

Foreword

A second edition of the Encyclopedia of Knowledge Management in four years! Two volumes of new and revised entries reflect an accelerated growth of an academic field, theoretical and applied, that is here to stay.

It might be of value to readers of this foreword to stop for a moment and consider where knowledge management came from—intellectually and in practice and how it evolved from a collection of disparate insights and models from several disciplines into a reasonably coherent subject that can have an entire encyclopedia be devoted to it.

In the realm of theory there were several social science disciplines that were the foundation of the subject, economics may have been the most important of these. Economists had been looking at the subject of knowledge as long ago as Adam Smith in the 18th century—the division of labor being, after all, a knowledge-based concept. The great Victorian economist, Alfred Marshall, wrote about knowledge often being the basis for firm location and clustering. More recently economists during World War II began measuring how long it took to build a combat plane, and then how long it took to build the second and third plane. This early focus on learning-by-doing proved to have a significant influence on subsequent knowledge studies. The contemporary emphasis on evolutionary economics, behavioral economics, and the economics of information, have all emphasized the role of knowledge as has many areas of development economics.

Sociology, too, has offered many insights. The current fascination of networks and knowledge derives from sociological tools developed in the past forty years. The interest in communities of practice is strongly influenced by sociological analysis and methods. Trust, too, falls into the category of sociology and is proving a very durable way of understanding why knowledge is effective (or not) in organizations and nations. In fact, the whole movement that emphasizes knowledge as a social phenomenon is a function of much social theory and analysis. The recent emphasis on the various forms of collaboration found in management and sociological literature is often focused on knowledge sharing

Philosophy has given us at least two critical thinkers for us to digest and reflect on, Michael Polanyi (originally a chemist) and Gilbert Ryle. It can even be argued that Aristotle and Plato play behind the field roles that still influence what we say about knowledge, especially in recent discussions of how knowledge is related to judgment and wisdom that use knowledge

The fields of computer science, cognitive science and information science have given us much to think and work with. Artificial intelligence may not have lived up to all its hype, but it had a very strong role in stimulating thought on what knowledge can and cannot be modeled that is still being debated. There are also some applications that can truly be said to be knowledge-based. The same can be said for expert systems. Cognitive science, especially when it is applied to system thinking, has also proven

to be a powerful stimulant with great potential for understanding and modeling knowledge. The use of ontology to map and represent knowledge and appropriate tools such as those found in Web 2.0 bring closer the automatic application of knowledge to diverse domains of life such as medical diagnosis on the basis of electronic medical records.

Of course, management and business scholars have often taken the lead in the field, synthesizing some of the work mentioned above, as well as developing theories, cases, approaches, proscriptions that can be applied fairly easily by actual knowledge practitioners at work. Often this work was influenced in turn by several earlier management trends, especially information management, the quality movement, and re-engineering. The need for business schools to develop cases for teaching the growing number of KM classes has also spurred practical research into how the theory looks and works out when actually implemented in an organization. However it is still a mystery that courses particularly focused on organization knowledge and learning are still fairly rare in business schools in the USA although there are quite a few such courses offered in Europe and Asia. This is even more confusing since one of the popular methods of doing strategy is the usually called “the resource based theory of the firm” - knowledge being chief among the resources being discussed here. Maybe this situation will change by the time the 3rd edition of this fine work comes out.

Reviewing the contents of this encyclopedia, I am struck by the diverse and eclectic nature of the field as well as how much convergence and coherence has emerged in such a short time. These volumes manages to deal with virtually every aspect of the field without becoming some huge unwieldy black box of a thing focused on data, information, knowledge and everything else under the sun. It is fascinating to see just how much agreement there exists amongst researchers and practitioners as to what KM is, what are its component pieces and core processes, and what are the drivers and mechanisms that make it work.

There is no doubt in my mind that knowledge will only grow in the coming decades as a source of wealth throughout the world economy. The various forms of knowledge—from an individual speculating at her desk to a patent or embedded practice—will gain in value and subsequently gain in management attention and focus. More and more organizations and countries are focusing on knowledge as bedrock of their policy. This volume should provide all of these pioneers with an essential reference source for ideas as to what needs to be addressed and what we have learned about the subject over the past few decades.

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