

Foreword

The emerging concept of Knowledge Management (KM) has achieved increasing prominence over the last ten years. As with many new and emergent concepts, it has provoked debate amongst both academics and practitioners about its status, provenance and validity. Is it really a new concept or just a repackaging of existing truths? Is it the latest fad of a business and organisational consulting profession that is ever hungry for new conceptual products to add to their repertoire? Is it merely a new name for an already extant issue—the re-branding of an approach? In this respect it shares much with previous so-called new approaches to the problems of organizations and attempts to solve them. Is KM the panacea for the new century as TQM was for the 1980's and BPR was for the 1990's?

Perhaps only history can judge the efficacy of these various approaches. Whatever the case, Knowledge Management has developed into an important area of interest that has generated much debate and activity amongst the information profession. In this brief discussion, the nature and origins of the concept and its importance to organizations will be discussed.

It is clearly a topic that has aroused and stimulated a great deal of interest in companies and the business world in general. It has become a much discussed issue in the general management press and among a diverse practitioner community. This has stemmed from the recognition of a genuine problem and opportunity within business based on the harnessing and utilisation of the organizational knowledge base for effectiveness.

“To a growing number of companies, KM is more than just buzz-words or a sales pitch, it is an approach to adding or creating value by more actively leveraging the know-how, experience and judgement residing within and, in many cases, outside an organization.” (Ruggles, 1998: 82)

Business, therefore, recognises it as a genuine practical issue that has a “bottom-line” contribution to make. But it is also clear that organizations have found the concept difficult to capture or turn into reality despite much effort and considerable investment. (Birkinshaw, 2001). It has certainly captured academic interest in recent years and generated a growing literature. For example, Swan et al. (2000a) reported

both an explosion in the number of journal articles produced between 1995 and 1998 and a greater number of literature search requests for the topic in that period. This indicates that the issue is, currently, on a wave of interest and intellectual endeavour in both academic institutions and organizations.

THE NATURE OF THE CONCEPT

What is Knowledge Management? It does seem to be a hard term to define and many authors have abandoned attempts to closely define it, preferring to fallback on a broad definition which encompasses "... any processes and practices concerned with the creation, acquisition, capture, sharing and use of knowledge skills or expertise." (Swann et al., 2000b)

Knowledge Management cannot yet be defined as a science or a discipline. It may more usefully, at this stage of its development, be regarded as a multi-disciplinary problem, which is informed by a number of core theoretical areas. These include data and information management and techniques, artificial intelligence, organizational theory and behaviour, sociology of knowledge and knowledge representation, and business economics and strategy.

Knowledge and Knowledge Management are complex and multi-faceted issues closely entwined in ongoing debates about the nature of organizations and the role of technologies in modern post-industrial economies. They have become central to attempts to understand what drives innovation and competitive advantage by replacing the exploitation of physical and material resources with the exploitation of intellectual capital as the key engine of business success.

"KM is the process of capturing a company's collective expertise wherever it resides and distributing it to wherever it can help produce the biggest payoffs." (Blake, 1998:2)

Such expertise, or "knowledge resources" are defined as "core competencies" (Prahalad and Hamell, 1990) or "routines" (Nelson and Winter, 1982) "capabilities" (Collis, 1991) and "core skills" (Klein et al, 1991). These are seen as "... the well-spring of future product development the roots of competitiveness, and individual products and services are the fruit." (Prahalad and Hamell, 1990: 202).

In terms of how KM harnesses these resources, "KM is equated to data mining, digging and drilling its aim is to 'mine' the tacit knowledge, skills and expertise of people" (Gardner, 1998: 24). Furthermore, the idea behind KM is to collect and make accessible workers' knowledge "... via a searchable application" (Cole-Gromolski, 1997: 6). Information technology is, therefore, a key enabler to KM: "KM is primarily IS/IT driven" (Scarborough et al, 1999: 27).

Typically in the KM literature the dimensions of knowledge types are classified along two axes: subjective/objective and tacit/explicit (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). Explicit knowledge is held to be that which can be captured and expressed in formal systematic language and is, by definition, codifiable. Tacit knowledge resides in people and social processes within an organization and is therefore less easy to capture and codify. It is a cultural concept in organizational terms. The relationship between tacit and explicit knowledge has not been satisfactorily explained and most of the KM literature still seems more comfortable with describing tools and techniques for knowledge capture and distribution. This is problematic as the technological focus on knowledge handling may ignore the critical human and social aspects through which actual success is derived. This issue, therefore, is the subject of a brief critique of KM, which is included here.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: A CRITIQUE

The key criticism of much of the KM literature is the emphasis on technology-based approaches to harnessing and transferring the knowledge resource of organizations. Recent surveys of the literature have highlighted the “..overwhelming emphasis on IT and major gaps in the treatment of people” (Swan et al., 2000b). Knowledge occurs within the context of the social processes of organizational life. It is therefore essential that Knowledge Management and its relationship to decision-making and organizational or business success is understood within a human and social framework.

There is a concern that the current emphasis on technological-based representations of knowledge does not adequately reflect the richness of this issue. It presents too limited a view of the problem. It assumes that knowledge can be fully and accurately transferred among groups in organisations in an objective and unproblematic way. This ignores the less concrete aspects of knowledge and information which are influenced by both people and the context of organizational activity.

“(KM) depends on tapping the *tacit* and often highly *subjective* insights, intuitions, and hunches of individual employees and making those insights available for testing and use by the company as a whole” (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995: 24).

In this way KM is involved in attempts to capture and represent some kind of organizational reality, which can help make sense of what we are doing in everyday activities. This brief critique will, therefore, begin by exploring KM’s underlying paradigm, and will then consider the validity of its relationship to the kind of knowledge underpinning human expertise.

As indicated in the above description of the processes involved in KM, it is characterised by a scientific approach to knowledge and knowledge transfer.

Reality is perceived to be an immutable phenomenon; areas may, therefore, be fragmented without loss of emergent properties. This paradigm asserts that the world can be exhaustively analysed in terms of determinate data or atomic facts. The assumption that all knowledge can be faithfully represented in codes, and shared amongst individuals is a natural consequence of these beliefs. Thus, this “technocratic intervention” (Scarborough et al, 1999: 50) can successfully divorce knowledge from its organisational context, and *all* that is relevant to intelligent behaviour can be formalised in a structured description.

In summary, the kinds of rationalist assumptions about knowledge creation and use, which characterise KM, are inadequate. Knowledge and meaning cannot be transferred as easily as data. The current approach adopted by KM is, therefore, too simplistic, limited in scope and somewhat naïve. It is suggested that a broader approach to, and definition of, “knowledge” is not only possible in this context, but an essential pre-requisite to attempts to harness and exploit it. It is also suggested that KM must have a social dimension if it is to realise its potential. If it is to avoid being consigned to the ranks of yet another “management fad,” it must recognise and address the issues raised by the fact that knowledge is socially-located and constructed and cannot successfully be detached from the social context within which it is created and operates.

SUMMARY

Clearly, Knowledge Management has become an important area of both academic debate and practical application in the management of organizations. It has been recognised as an issue that is critical to the innovative and competitive development of organizations for the new century. Knowledge Management is best understood as a complex concept influenced by a set of multiple disciplines and subjects. It is concerned with the processes of how knowledge in organizations is best captured, described and disseminated to users and managers in order to maximise the effectiveness and competitive advantage. Reviews of the literature have suggested that the area is predominated by concerns with techniques and tools for handling knowledge. There is a view that this is leading the area of Knowledge Management into technocratic paradigm, which ignores the very real human and social processes that lie at the heart of knowledge as both a concept and a practical issue. The relationship to people management will dictate how successful Knowledge Management is as an engine for organizational and business innovation and growth. Clearly there are tremendous potential advantages for technology-based solutions to improve the effectiveness of knowledge handling. But there is a need to reaffirm Knowledge Management as a socio-technical issue by linking it to the established concepts of organizational learning and development.

The collection of papers in this book represents some of the latest academic and practical research from a wide field of international contributors. It is a complex issue, which may require many approaches. We trust that the material presented here will stimulate more thinking about this area and serve to broaden the already growing base of interest from the information and management community.

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