Chapter I

Direction and Trends in Knowledge Management Research: Results from an Empirical Analysis of European Projects

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) has existed as a separate field of scientific research for almost a decade. It is therefore surprising that very few studies to date have been concerned with the identification of the scope and boundaries of the field, as well as the sub-topics and research themes that constitute it. This chapter reports on the results of an empirical analysis of more than 200 research projects in Knowledge and Information Management. Using an inductive methodology of pattern matching analysis, a more accurate definition of knowledge management is attempted, and an innovative taxonomy of research sub-themes within the ‘umbrella’ area of Knowledge and Information Management is proposed. Furthermore, a trend towards a gradual maturation of the presently prevailing research paradigm is identified, indicating a need for a ‘paradigm shift’ that will provide a new direction and vision for future research in the area. We suggest that targeted future research efforts in the area of knowledge technologies will contribute...
to the development of the ‘next generation’ knowledge management systems that will transform the existing ‘passive’ knowledge repositories into ‘active’ learning environments.

THE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

In a world of dynamic and discontinuous change, organisations are constantly seeking ways to adapt themselves to new conditions so that they are prepared to survive and flourish in an increasingly competitive environment. The proliferation of the knowledge economy (Castells, 1996), emphasizing the value of information as an enabler of competitive advantage, is naturally driving many companies to re-examine the ways they have treated their knowledge assets in the past and to identify ways in which they can exploit them more effectively in the future (Argyris, 1994; Albert, 1997).

In such a landscape, it is not surprising that Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) has emerged as one of the most popular strategic change management approaches in the dawn of the 21st century (Davenport and Prusak, 1997; Currie, 1999; Spiegler, 2000). Its supporters argue that organisations may achieve significant competitive advantages by analysing the data and information that often remain unexploited in organisational systems and by transforming them into useful and actionable knowledge. KIM has attracted significant attention in the spheres of both academic research and industrial practice in recent years (Davenport et al., 1998). This is hardly surprising: knowledge is long known to be one of the primary enablers of sustainable competitive advantage in periods of economic turbulence (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). At the same time, the increasing capabilities of contemporary information systems to store, process, and disseminate information and to contribute to its transformation into knowledge, have also served to enhance the role of KIM in organisations.

Despite the wide attention being paid to KIM, the definition of the field (both as an academic discipline and as a managerial application area), together with a clear description of its scope and boundaries, is still a subject of intense debate. A small sample of definitions found both in academic textbooks and business-oriented sources serve to demonstrate the sources of disagreements usually encountered. For example, Starr (1999) defines knowledge management as “information or data management with the additional practice of capturing the tacit experience of the individual,” while O’Brien (1999) defines it as “a tool of enterprise collaboration that facilitates the organisation, management, and sharing of the diverse forms of business information created by
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