Chapter I
Reflections on Knowledge Management Research and Practice

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ABSTRACT

This is the third volume in the Advances in Knowledge Management and I thought it appropriate to start this volume with some reflection on where KM is at and where it is going. This chapter reflects on two key issues—the need to ensure KM is relevant and the risk of KM becoming a fad. The chapter concludes with reflection on the future of KM.

KM RELEVANCE

In December 2006, I presented a keynote speech at the Australian Conference on Knowledge Management and Intelligent Decision Support, ACKMIDS. The theme of the conference was integrating “doing” and “thinking”: KM as reflective practice. While preparing my talk I got to reflecting on KM and the differences between doing and thinking and contemplated the issues of rigor and relevance in KM research. Research relevance has been an issue in IS for several years (see the 2001 special issue on research relevance in the Communications of the Association of Information Systems, CAIS). It is argued that academic researchers are not looking at the problems of interest to business and are losing credibility from the perspective of practitioners. Researchers argue that basic research will ultimately lead to knowledge that can be used by practitioners but should not be judged on its immediate usefulness. Many believe this is leading to a relevance gap between practitioners and academics.

Is there a relevance gap between doing and thinking in the KM discipline? As editor in chief of the International Journal of Knowledge
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Management, an active researcher and consultant, and a contributor to the research relevancy debate I believe there is a relevance gap in KM between doing and thinking. This section explores the differences between doing and thinking and proposes that a third function, integrating, is needed and should be done by researchers using qualitative research methods and who can reflect on KM. Integrating are those activities focused on bridging the gap between doing and knowing.

To begin this discussion lets define three groups of KM professionals, doers, thinkers, and integrators. Doers are those who build and implement KM systems, KMS, with the goal of solving business problems. This is the group associated with doing. Thinkers are those seeking to understand how and why KM and KMS work or don’t work. This is the group associated with knowing. Doers are looking for solutions to help their specific organizations utilize knowledge better; they don’t care about generic issues unless they affect their organization. Thinkers are looking at the organization as a unit of measure and interest, but aren’t necessarily focused on changing or improving a specific organization. This leads to the need for integrators. Integrators understand the theory and transfer it to the doers using methods such as case studies, action research, actor-network theory, ANT, and socio-technical interaction networks, STIN. Integrators are focused on improving performance in specific or groups of organizations and on generating generic KM theory.

Thinkers and integrators tend to be academics but with differing philosophies. Thinkers tend to be positivists, academics who validate theory through quantitative methods. The academic world is dominated by positivists. The higher ranking journals tend to publish articles with heavy quantitative components and more credence is given to theory that has been “proven” through statistical analysis of large populations.

Integrators also tend to be academics but with a differing philosophy from positivism. Integrators tend to be interpretists, academics who discover theory and hypotheses through the direct observation of and sometimes participation within organizations. The higher ranking journals tend to not publish articles with heavy interpretist methodology with the result that most interpretist research tends to be published in the second tier journals (Note though that these are still quality journals).

So why do we need integrators? I have found that my jobs of consultant, engineer, manager, and now editor in chief have led me to being predominately an integrator. I found that I have little knack for doing basic KM research that I can’t see as being able to be applied right away. If I never read another paper discussing the definition of knowledge I will be a happier person (this is a pure editorial comment and not meant to influence current or potential authors and journal contributors in any way, note that this book contains an article discussion basic tacit knowledge). This doesn’t mean I can’t do basic research, I think all good integrators can, but it means I want to see my work used and applied to helping solve problems right away. However, I am not a doer. I also have little knack for staying with one organization and doing the necessary but mundane tasks needed to build and implement a KMS. I find that integrators are those doing the job of walking around and applying theoretical knowledge to the problems and tasks that need it. This is where the integrator becomes important. Many doers do not have the time or desire to read the academic literature and to determine how the knowledge in them can be applied to real problems. Integrators do just that, and more. We also perform research focused on solving current business problems, only we use case and action research methodologies so that we can gain new insight into how something may have worked in an organization. This insight is what we provide back to the thinkers, we provide them the raw ideas and theories that need validation. We in effect take lessons learned from the doers along with our
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