Chapter IV
Advances in Knowledge Management: Mapping Ideas that Shape Practice

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ABSTRACT

This chapter adds to our understanding of knowledge management as an evolving body of concepts, relationships, strategies and practices. Using qualitative research methods, we examined activities of a community of practice for knowledge management professionals operating in a large metropolitan U.S. region. Accordingly, we produced an organizing framework that maps KM topics according to the tactical-strategic orientation of the KM issue and level of analysis (individual-group-enterprise). We constructed and populated the framework based on a content analysis of forty-four presentations made from 2001-2005, from survey data, from interviews conducted with key informants, and from data collected as participant-observers. The work provides insight into the decision-making processes of stakeholders with competing interests and adds to our understanding of collective sensemaking (Weick, 1995) in a community of practice. From the data, we generated a framework that can be used by practitioners to allocate resources for KM activities, technologies, and projects.
INTRODUCTION

This work adds to our understanding of the field of knowledge management (KM) through an examination of the sensemaking activities of a KM practice group. Members of such groups are knowledge workers and emblematic of the knowledge society (Drucker, 1969). They learn from a variety of interactions with vendors, peers, colleagues, and other stakeholders in an attempt to understand the practice of knowledge management through the application of tools, methods and technologies. Participation in networks and communities of practice (Barab & Duffy, 2000; Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wendger, McDermott & Snyder, 2002) is important to this learning process. This study focuses on the sensemaking activities of one such group by analyzing the KM topics it selected over a five year period from 2001-2005. The results of this analysis help us to identify the dominant ideas and concepts pertaining to KM, to clarify the “ambiguity inherent in the concept of knowledge management” (Swan & Scarbrough, 2001, p. 54), and to map the KM practices common to most business organizations.

SIGNIFICANCE AND CONTRIBUTION

The study contributes to our understanding of sensemaking (Brown & Duguid, 1991; Weick, 1995) in a multi-stakeholder environment for practice and provides empirical support for the hypothesis (e.g., Iverson & McPhee, 2002) that knowledge management is a function of the unique interactions that occur between people and technologies. It also offers a better understanding of the theory and practice of knowledge management as organizations attempt to respond to new strategic initiatives and innovations in KM-enabling technologies and builds upon case studies of knowledge management in projects and companies (Scarborough & Swan, 1999). Additionally, this work augments bibliographic studies of KM communities based on published sources only. For instance, Raub and Ruling’s (2001) content analysis of over 400 articles about KM over an 18 year period among IT/IS professional make the point that:

In order to substantiate .... propositions concerning the development of the knowledge management discourse as well as the relationship between the different groups of actors gathering around knowledge management, future research should complement the more ‘macro’-oriented view taken in the present paper with a closer look at actual knowledge management practices (p. 126).

This chapter accomplishes that end and is a contribution to this area of research because it examines the actual words and practices of a KM community not filtered by peer review or editorial processes.

RATIONALE AND RELEVANT LITERATURE

Knowledge Management

This work was motivated by the theory that knowledge management processes such as knowledge creation, sharing and use and KM strategies are crucial for successful firms of the 21st century (Dixon, 2000; Davenport & Prusak, 1998). Knowledge originates in and with people; it creates networks, communities and routines whose life spans exceed that of the tenure of the individual members (Czerniawska & Potter, 2001; Leibowitz, 2000). The salient appeal of knowledge management for corporations is that the value of knowledge endures beyond the minds of specific individuals who may have participated in the creation of that knowledge. In addition, KM systems offer opportunities for employees to access best practices, build on previous knowledge, reduce