The Past-Present-Future Conundrum: Extending Time-Bound Knowledge

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ABSTRACT
This paper extends the Knowledge Management-discipline’s understanding of knowledge. By including the concept of time, this extended conceptualization of knowledge could make knowledge management and decision making more responsive to the complexity found in organizational and social environments. The authors suggest that knowledge tends to be past-oriented in terms of its formative components, while emergent situations are future-oriented, which may or may not have roots in the past. In this article, the authors explore this past-present-future conundrum by explaining how reliance on the past may restrict an organization’s ability to deal with emergent situations in the future. The role of wisdom will be introduced as a bridge connecting current past-oriented knowledge to unknown and unpredictable future-oriented events. The paper concludes that handling complex business decisions requires wisdom and that knowledge management and information systems must be designed and developed to support decisions by providing an integrative framework of analytics and insight.

KEYWORDS
Analytics, Big Data, Complexity, Insight, Knowledge, Knowledge Management, Wisdom

INTRODUCTION
Today, businesses operate in a considerably more volatile environment than businesses in the past. Environmental stability in the past created a world of relatively simple systems where Newtonian perspectives could be applied to organizational decision making. Events seemed predictable, organizations had mechanical characteristics, expectations of regularity were achievable, causal relationships and limitations were well-defined, and ‘tried and true’ principles, rules and policies controlled behaviors (Stumf, 1995). Nowadays, however, volatility and instability, products of time-compressed and information-rich environments, cause high levels of uncertainty and are regarded as distinctive characteristics of the current world (Buckley & Carter, 2004). The future is no longer seen as a reliably certain continuance of the past and present (Intezari & Pauleen, 2014). Tremendous and ever-increasing rates of technology advancement as well as increasing uncertainty spurred on by an interconnected global environment make the future unpredictable. Problems are multi-causal and trends are rarely linear, simple decisions may no longer be appropriate and any attempt to solve a problem may lead to uncertain and unplanned results. To cope with continual changes in global
markets, organizations must be willing and able to continually change (Cash, 1997). Traditional organizational perspectives on the environment may no longer be appropriate or sufficient.

The development of practice and theory in knowledge management has been one important response. Knowledge is one of the most valuable and vital assets an organization can have (Drucker, 1993). Success is not necessarily achieved, however, by the organizations that know the most, but by the ones that can best use what they know (Bierly, Kessler, & Christensen, 2000). Moreover, the nature of knowledge, including its sources and uses, must be carefully considered. A clear understanding of what knowledge is and of its strengths and weaknesses is essential if organizations are to successfully cope with rapid, emergent change.

The challenge of managing knowledge in a turbulent business world must address these questions: to what extent can organizations trust their information, experience and their previous knowledge to prepare for future circumstances and what else can assist them when facing future situations never seen, experienced or possibly imagined?

This article is organized into four main sections. In the first section, knowledge, the source of knowledge and the use of knowledge are discussed. The second section discusses the role of knowledge and managing knowledge in emergent business environments is examined. This is followed by an introduction to wisdom theory and the proposition that a blended approach of analysis/rationality and insight/non-rationality is a possible way to overcome a lack of appropriate knowledge when confronting uncertain and unpredictable situations. Finally, it will be proposed that developing innovative and more effective responses to deal with complexity requires an integration of knowledge and wisdom in organizational learning systems.

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Taking a continental philosophical perspective on knowledge and knowledge management, Hassell (2007) argues that knowledge is embodied. He articulates knowledge by differentiating between ‘computerized knowledge’ and ‘embodied knowledge’, and notes that knowledge resides in a physical human being and, therefore, there is no knowledge outside of experience. Knowledge is associated with a social group as knowledge develops and manifests through human action in a societal context. In this sense knowledge engages emotions, which makes any attempt to capture knowledge doomed to failure (Hassell, 2007). Computerized knowledge is simply un-/semi-structured and structured data. Knowledge management systems cannot computerize embodied knowledge (or as stressed by Hassell, ‘the real knowledge’).

The researchers extend Hassell’s understanding by arguing that not only do knowledge management systems fall short in capturing embodied knowledge, in their contemporary forms such systems may not be very useful in supporting decision making in unpredictable and unforeseen circumstances. From the current mainstream knowledge management perspective, knowledge can be developed from data and information and likewise, knowledge can be converted back into information and located in an information system. Hassell would call this type of knowledge, ‘organized stuff’ (2007, p. 189). Central to our argument is that data and information are past-oriented, which makes knowledge built on data and information past-oriented in nature as well.

It is difficult to find a universally agreed upon definition of ‘knowledge’, as there are many perspectives regarding knowledge (Krogh, Nonaka, & Nishiguchi, 2000). Philosophically, knowledge is defined as a justified true belief (Nonaka, 1994; Weatherson, 2003). That is to say, our belief is knowledge if we have a true justification for it. Although this understanding of ‘knowledge’ has endured over centuries, there are numerous debates in philosophy about whether or not such a definition of knowledge accurately describes the concept of knowledge. Gettier, for example, logically demonstrates that a justified true belief may not be knowledge (see Gettier, 1963, p. 122). Rather than engaging in an extensive philosophical debate, here the researchers examine knowledge from a managerial perspective.
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