Chapter XXXIII
Knowledge Management: Fad or Enduring Organizational Concept?

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge management and knowledge-intensive work are two of today’s hot buzzwords, though both already have a history of managerial usage. While some authors claim that knowledge is the most important organizational asset in contemporary society, others retort that much of knowledge management literature and practical solutions are just perfunctory and propagandist and many, if not most, managerial polices rely on manipulation of emotions and identity creation. This chapter aims to capitalize on this fascinating and timely research area. We want to present the current business fad of knowledge-management in terms of excess and forgetful repetition of ideas. We look at knowledge management as an idea of highly suspect utility, and search for explanations for and possible counterbalances to its ubiquity.

INTRODUCTION

The concepts of knowledge management and knowledge-intensive work have been developing for quite a while. Some authors claim that knowledge is the most important organizational asset in contemporary society, and that as a result, knowledge workers are crucial for a company’s success (e.g. Stewart, 1997). Others claim that much of the knowledge management literature and practical solutions are just perfunctory and propagandist (Styhre & Sundgren, 2005). Many managerial policies rely on the manipulation of emotions and identity creation (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).
Another interesting issue is that knowledge-workers are perceived and presented as the most valued members of an organization, leading and defining it; at the same time they are manipulated, “engineered,” overworked until they burn out, and deprived of family life (Perlow, 1997). The conflict between the worker and manager is often more obvious than in other settings (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). These and other paradoxes mark knowledge work and knowledge-intensive companies as a particularly worthwhile object of study.

This short chapter, which concludes this book, capitalizes on this fascinating and timely research area. We want to present the current business fad of knowledge-management in terms of excess and forgetful repetition of ideas, dating back not only to Mallet (1975), but also perhaps to Plato. We believe that the praise for excessive consumption has also been taken to the world of ideas, and that knowledge management is a conspicuous example of the overproduction of notions, old crumbs of wisdom infinitely regurgitated into a pop-culture pulp – all done in the name of promoting knowledge-intensive organizations.

KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS PULP FICTION

One of the most disingenuous characteristics of knowledge management literature is the fact that its content can be often reduced to a truism: knowledge is good, so make people share it.

Alexander Styhre and Mats Sundgren (2005) describe this phenomenon, characteristic of the pop-management literature on creativity and knowledge in organizations, by merciless exposure of arbitrary references, wishful thinking, methodological ridicule, and obtrusive didacticism of William C. Miller’s Flash of Brilliance (1999). Indeed, all too many knowledge management books resemble children’s storybooks: they are full of colorful images and diagrams, they are written in a simplified language (do the authors of books on knowledge management really think that their readers are so stupid?), and include simplistic advice that is little different from what is found in the bestselling Chicken Soup series (Canfield & Hansen, 1993).

This has been confirmed by our short, and mostly anecdotal, research experiment at the 2008 Standing Conference for Management and Organization Inquiry (SCMOI) meeting in Philadelphia. We looked up “knowledge” and “knowledge management” in books.google.com. From the eight top books in both categories we chose one sentence with the word “knowledge” (not “knowledge management”). We distributed the sentences among SCMOI participants and asked them to try to determine whether or not the quotation had been taken from the knowledge management literature. The examples included such obvious sentences as:

- “knowledge evolves as our purposes change in creative response to our environment” (Alle, 1997, p. 19)
- “‘maps’ to knowledge experts are useless if these experts cannot be reached at the moment when knowledge is needed” (Malhotra, 2000, p. 124)
- “the knowledge transfer process involves the transmission of knowledge from the initial location to where it is needed and is applied” (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003, p. 110).

We contrasted these with statements like:

- “the boundaries of distinct disciplines became a more entrenched feature of the production of knowledge, embodied in the constitution of university” (Goliński, 1998, p. 67),
- “the behavioral account of knowledge has considerable plausibility with respect to third-person epistemic judgments” (Kornblith, 2002, p. 91)