Chapter I

What is Knowledge Management?

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Abstract

This chapter defines knowledge and knowledge management (KM) and establishes its roots. KM is not a brand new topic; organizational learning and organizational memory are related topics that have been fields of research for many years. This chapter relates these concepts to a relational model that shows that the three topics are related and influence organizational effectiveness. Additionally, this chapter explains that KM has become a research area due to a confluence of trends that have made KM necessary and technically useful.
Introduction

Knowledge management (KM) is a hot topic in many business communities. Although, the term knowledge management might suggest a rather simple definition, there are plenty of opinions on what exactly it is and how it should be used, if used at all. However, because of the ever-increasing pace of business development, the task of effective and competitive management of organizations becomes essential, and KM, if understood and implemented properly, may be a useful tool for business transformation as well as the key to competitive advantage. In this first chapter I would like to introduce the basic definitions and concepts of KM.

I thought this would be an easy chapter to write, as it seemed that we all knew what we were talking about when discussing KM. However, I became aware of the need to establish a definition of KM through the publication of an expert opinion in the Business Intelligence Journal. The editors asked three experts (this author included) about integrating KM and data warehouses. When the issue was released, I was surprised that the three experts all had different opinions on what KM was (Corral, Griffin, & Jennex, 2005). One expert described the purpose of KM as disseminating knowledge quickly and KM systems as essentially document management systems. The other expert considered KM as the process of handling unstructured knowledge. The final view (mine) combined technical and organizational initiatives to manage structured and unstructured knowledge in order to help the organization improve its effectiveness through improved retention and reuse of knowledge. Three experts expressed different definitions of KM and illustrated the need to define KM so that there is a common ground for discussion. The first step, though, is to define what is meant by the term knowledge, since this is the central theme in KM.

Knowledge

Davenport and Prusak (1998) view knowledge as an evolving mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information. They found that in organizations, knowledge often becomes embedded in documents or repositories and in organizational routines, processes, practices, and norms. They also say that in order for knowledge to have value, it must include the human additions of context, experience, and interpretation. Nonaka (1994) expands this view by stating that knowledge is about meaning in the sense that it is context-specific. This implies that users of knowledge must understand and have experience with the context, or surrounding conditions and influences, in which the knowledge is generated and used in order for it to have meaning to them. This also implies that in order for a knowledge repository to be useful, it also must store the context in which the knowledge was generated. That knowledge is context-specific and argues against the idea that knowledge can be applied universally; however, it does not argue against the concept
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