Chapter 1
A Context of Challenges

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ABSTRACT

Whenever professionals meet—be their topic of conversation talent recruitment, customer service, or product innovation—they are in fact discussing knowledge management even though the term may never be uttered. It is now widely realized that technology was not the answer to the challenge of harnessing “what the organization knows” and applying it for efficiencies and strategic advantage. The chapter takes a look at common stresses experienced in today’s organizations—from dealing with information overload to facing the question “who owns knowledge management – and who should?” Contrary to the tempting assumption that “it is all figured out now,” knowledge management is very much surrounded by a number of enduring organizational challenges not solved by the evolution of technology.

BACKGROUND: KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IS INTRINSIC TO ORGANIZATIONS

When professionals meet - at a conference, for lunch, or in a project meeting - the conversation often turns to some aspect of knowledge management even though the phrase may never be uttered. The topic at hand may be product innovation, customer relations, recruitment and retention of talent, or any other facet of operations and planning … but the heart of the conversation is knowledge. The brand manager watching the competition, the business developer monitoring the industry for new opportunities, and the public sector analyst crafting policy all share the need for data, intelligence, and insight to be applied appropriately. No matter what the function and role in question, access to and application of “what we know - and what we now know we need to find out” drives the outcome of business processes. Building and maintaining massive data warehouses, organizational document repositories, and project collaboration tools or intranets housing vast volumes of information objects are the order of the day, as is a growing concern about falling behind.
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the competition in terms of leveraging social media for marketing and reputation management purposes.

At the heart of such conversations is the sense that sophistication of information technology or software is not necessarily connected to successful business outcomes. We have come a long way from central files, but even the most advanced enterprise search system is no guarantee the right insight will inform a business or engineering challenge in a timely manner. In fact, it is a common lament among employees that the corporate intranet or document management system is unfriendly and does not work properly. Looking back over decades of progress in the tools commonly used to store and retrieve information objects, information managers and business leaders wonder why it has become more difficult - not less - to manage “what the organization knows.”

Thus, it would be difficult to argue that the integration into the standard business operations of evolving technologies (data mining and enterprise search being a few prominent examples) obviates the need for knowledge management as a separate discipline within business management. Some concepts of business management - total quality management, quality circles, and business process reengineering are familiar to many - were extremely popular for a time but faded from favor. Knowledge management will likely continue to evolve into subspecialties, but attention to it will likewise continue to be demanded in our increasingly complex and increasingly fast-moving business environment.

The speed with which organizations must react to that environment is relentless. What was tried and true and comfortable is no longer reliable as, say, social media create global product demand - or public relations disasters - at a moment’s notice. Reacting appropriately to the ebbs and flows of the business environment - and predicting them even for a short time horizon - requires fine tuned mechanisms for tracking and making sense of external influences and their implications for internal operation. That is where knowledge management professionals enter the picture.

Just as business analysts bring specialized education and expertise to bear on the task of understanding and tweaking for cost minimization such processes as billing and client technical support - and on the art of deriving strategic insight from transaction evidence - so too knowledge management professionals bring specialized education and expertise to bear on understanding how insight, learning, and knowledge arise and benefit business operations. They add to the operations and management mix their unique contributions in such areas as organizational taxonomies, document management system customization, and user interface design. In addition, just as business analysts ensure transactional processes adhere to the law, so too knowledge management professionals protect organizations from litigation over copyright law violations or breach of content license terms.

As the pace of publishing within the field of knowledge management shows, a great deal of expertise is engaged in the professional domain of knowledge management. It would be tempting to jump to the conclusion that “we figured it out - now it is just a matter of implementing the knowledge management solutions.” Unfortunately, experience says otherwise, despite the success stories of enterprise content management systems producing efficiencies. The specifics differ with new generations of technology, but the basic difficulties endure. They range from departmental or personal silos to the perpetual tension between the cost of upfront investment (for example, in robust indexing and taxonomies) on the one hand and the cost of crisis...
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