

Rethinking Knowledge Management: From Knowledge Management to Knowledge Processes

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preface

“Knowledge Management.” Today, the term suggests a plurality of techniques, methods, and epistemologies: from information management to communication “capturing” and management to database management and visualization.

Historically, the term arose out of an interest in the Japanese methods of post-Fordist production, where methods such as just-in-time production, made possible in part by the greater use of information and communication technologies in the production process, were merged with a renewed interest in workers’ experiences on the factory floor and “flattened,” team-oriented, management structures. The flattening out of hierarchical management structures in the 1980s and 1990s and the emphasis upon team production emphasized communication and learning as a tool in production. From the other side of production—consumption—there was a renewed emphasis upon consumer driven production, inventory, and sales, stressing, again, the processes of communication and learning. Here, communication served the tailoring of products to consumers’ desires--though not only to their desires, but increasingly, to the individual body’s common, though unique, manners of attention (the “attention economy”). Learning, here, is the process of leading, and learning how to lead, consumers from one product to another within a common brand or corporate family which in the case of increasingly large multi-national conglomerates may encompass what previously had been unimaginably different production sectors and their products (cinema, newspapers, television, banking, etc.).

In the discourse of Knowledge Management in this period the term “social capital” became important (the term originates in Marx’s writings). “Social capital” in the Knowledge Management context means the power of social relationships and intellectual creativity (“intellectual capital”) to act as reserves of, and sources for, capital. The term gained popularity in management circles in North America and Europe at an historical moment when the traditional sources for increased productivity and profit were constrained by increased labor costs, competition, and global trade. Add to this the shortage of employees in some labor sectors in the United States during the 1990s and the ease with which workers were both dismissed, and in some sectors, could move from one job to another, and one can then see that “knowledge” during this period was viewed not only as an unused productive capacity, but as a temporary or potentially transient resource within organizations.

Although, Knowledge Management had its genesis in industry, the service sector adopted KM practices as well in the 1990’s. Just as re-engineering and quality management made their way from business to the non-profit sector, Knowledge Management, too, was seen as a way for government, education, and service agencies to manage “smarter,” using technological tools. As distributed computer systems were installed in organizations outside of industry, knowledge artifacts were increasingly seen as important in a “knowledge society.” After 2000, establishing knowledge management programs became a way for governmental entities and NGOs to keep up with trends in the profit sector, especially in the US, the UK, Australia, and the European Union. In the United States, the military saw the value in Knowledge Management and some chief information officers of the armed forces established elaborate KM practices and systems.

If the sociological history of Knowledge Management is clear, the epistemology of Knowledge Management has been anything but clear. The problem is: how does one locate knowledge, social relationships, and intellectual creativity within traditional management concepts and practices of quantitative financial models and accounting procedures? Beyond this, of course, and even more importantly from an executive managerial and consulting perspective, is the existence or development of conceptual categories so that profit by means of social and intellectual capital can be explained to stockholders, analysts, and the public at large as causes of measurable effects (hence, talk of the “new economy” of knowledge assets and of social and intellectual capital during the dot-com era). In brief, during the 1980s and 1990s knowledge assets and social and intellectual capital became viewed with renewed vigor as unused resource which can drive a new resurgence in both private and public organizational productivity.

The tools for arriving at a theory of knowledge which would serve the discourse of capital and the quantitative measure of productivity in modern management were readily available in the cultural stock of philosophical,

psychological, and popular discourses about knowledge. Common Knowledge Management understandings of personal knowledge, which saw it as a quasi-physical mental entity stored in the mind, seated in the head and the brain, and expressed by spoken or written mediums, made use of popular psychology traditions and traditional cognitive science assumptions. The communicative adjunct to this mentalist epistemology was what Michael J. Reddy termed the “conduit metaphor,” namely, the idea that successful communication or understanding is a problem of transmitting ideational mental contents from one mind to another through a medium such as spoken or written language. Successful communication or understanding, according to this metaphorical “model,” is the transmission and correspondence of intended ideas from one mind to another.

Together with the popular and spreading use of data-mining techniques, knowledge in many Knowledge Management epistemologies was, explicitly or implicitly, viewed as quasi-physical mental materials of memory, experience, and belief which needed to be formally expressed for common, public consumption. Whether it be an individual person or a group in which manners of belief and action were embodied, it was the duty of managers and knowledge management systems to encourage the expression of this knowledge through communication technologies and encourage the capture of this knowledge as information in information systems. What was implicit or tacit for persons or groups ought to become explicit, for the good of “sharing” information toward increased productivity and toward knowledge retention should the individual or group no longer be available.

Hence, in many Knowledge Management discourses, the concepts of “implicit” or “tacit” knowledge become equivalent to the traditional psychological notions of private and even “unconscious” knowledge, and the term “explicit” suggested the “public” expression of private or unconscious ideas. Knowledge needed to be formalized, captured, and perhaps even cleansed, so as to fit the modes for “public” information sharing and transfer allowed by communication and information technologies.

In the midst of this formalization of knowledge, what has sometimes been forgotten is the role of process and learning in any knowledge acquisition and expression—whether in terms of persons or groups. While a process oriented view of knowledge acquisition and expression stresses learning and development, classic Knowledge Management epistemologies have understood knowledge to be quasi-physical entities that are somehow “hidden” and need to be made visible in some “public” fashion that wasn’t possible before. There is the suspicion in the “KM” tradition that employees don’t know all that they know, both individually and as a group, but with appropriate management techniques and technical systems they can be coaxed to express that hidden knowledge.

But it is unclear whether any technical system now, or ever, can “capture” and represent knowledge if knowledge is an event and not a thing. Each representation of an event constitutes an event itself, and thus changes the nature of whatever

expression emanated from the first event, ad infinitum. A photograph of a painting is not the painting itself. One can reproduce photographs to infinity and keep the values of each in a technical sense, but their distribution changes their meaning. One can, of course, then attempt to regulate the values of reception as well (as happens with the photographs of Hollywood 'stars,' politicians, etc.), and from that, regulate the viewer's range of possible expression. This is what technical "Knowledge Management" systems have done by treating knowledge as information, but this, in turn, narrows the creativity of social interactions and personal thoughts by constraining the modes of expression allowed.

Yet, organizations, as any cultural institutions, have always regulated forms for expression, and thus for knowledge. As always, the question, though, is that of to what degree does such regulation constrain or limit knowledge creation (if this is what we seek in knowledge management)? And if we wish to view "Knowledge Management" in its full, post-Fordist, range, we must also ask to what degree does the regulation of forms for expression stimulate consumption? Even in consumption and in attention economies, the range of desires cannot be infinite or completely variable—modern production cannot serve such nor can desires be fixated without limit upon given commodities or points of attention--overload and distraction make themselves present

Hence, learning is an issue of process, and thus, to some degree, of management, but it is not a process that can be tied to absolute values and outcomes. We learn what we can, given the persons that we are and the forms for expression and the social constraints or freedoms for expression, and the knowledge that we express is, then, to some degrees, variable and situationally dependent. Management and organizational culture can learn much from selling and advertisement—processes of learning are specific to the subject. If one hopes to maximize creative expression from a given individual, one must maximize the appropriate entranceways and exits—the social situations and the cultural forms--through which the individual's development and expression may occur.

In recent years some large organizations have seen the value in encouraging and supporting "communities of practice," that is, relatively small groups of individuals interested in similar topics or work processes. These small groups come together in-person or online and discuss subjects of mutual interest that can be beneficial to the individuals involved and to the organizations to which they belong. The processes involved in meeting and in conversation and their relationship to learning have been recognized by some managers who are in charge of formal knowledge management programs. "Safe rooms" for discussion are being provided so that organizational members can have freedom of expression, the freedom to organize a community of interest (or practice) within a culture that trusts that learning will develop. Not all managers nor all organizations trust employees to this extent, however.

The chapters in this book discuss problems of process, learning, and knowledge from a variety of perspectives: critical, professional, theoretical, and applied, across a variety of organizational structures and disciplines. Mark Aakhus presents a Conversations for Reflection model that offers a method to augment and support professional expertise based on reflective inquiry and ordinary conversational practice. The model and its use illustrate knowledge as a process. Stephen Gourlay gives a remarkably broad and interesting investigation of “tacit” and “explicit” knowledge in terms of activity. Claire McNerney and Stewart Mohr explore collaboration, learning, and trust as the basis for knowledge management within organizations. Caroline Simard and Ronald E. Rice explore best practice transfer and three barriers to it: organizational context, diffusion, and management practices. Emil Turc and Philippe Baumard investigate organizational change from the aspect of “knowledge neutralization” (unlearning, rivaling enactment, and knowledge inactivation). Jacky Swan reviews and critiques the relationship between knowledge management and innovation, according to the perspectives of production, process, and practice. Elisabeth Davenport and Keith Horton, from a social informatics perspective, investigate competing discourses or multiple versions of KM within a case study, suggesting that KM versioning is an under-explored phenomenon in studies of knowledge management. Donald Hislop’s chapter examines mobile teleworkers and how their spatial mobility affects their communications and interactions with co-workers. Robert Mason also presents a model related to learning and knowledge processes. He builds on the work of Carlile where the model for learning across cultures consists of syntactic, semantic, and pragmatic levels. In his essay, Mason makes the case for librarians as central figures in knowledge management processes because of their potential as boundary spanners.

Minu Ipe’s essay discusses the contributions of storytelling and conversation to sensemaking and to creating social webs in a work environment. She also makes suggestions on ways to encourage the use of storytelling and conversations in sharing knowledge in organizations, including the context of virtual, global work. Andreina Mandelli addresses sensemaking, as well, in her essay on knowledge processes in consumer communities and the negotiation of brand identity through customer-organization relationships. Another contributor, Angela Nobre, describes and discusses semiotic learning as a work methodology that encourages learning in knowledge-intensive organizations. Manuel Zacklad challenges the tacit-explicit dichotomy in his essay that connects knowing with the transactional theory of action. Finally, Ron Day presents a critique of mentalism in classic cognitive psychology and its use in Knowledge Management theory. Subsequently, he proposes a reading of indexical psychology as an alternative model. We end this volume with Day’s essay that suggests an understanding of personal knowledge as hypothetical and potential knowing acts, constructed and expressed through cultural forms (such as language) in social situations.

Expression and knowledge in the processes paradigm usually relies upon action, experience, and interaction with others and with knowledge objects or forms

in order for learning to take place. Communication, experience, and activity all contribute to how we know and the adaptations we make to our knowledge. Rather than the traditional notion of stores of knowledge that we hold in our mind, the view presented here is a constantly changing notion of what we know, feelings related to that knowledge, and a more holistic understanding of the act of knowing. The dualistic presentation of knowledge as contained in tacit and explicit categories is limited in explaining the multiple facets that comprise knowing processes.

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