
Knowledge is about people, not databases

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Abstract

Knowledge and knowledge management are popular phrases these days. Despite the increased sophistication of knowledge management projects and of knowledge management theory development, the information technology-led perspective dominates. Knowledge transfer is about connection not collection, and that connection ultimately depends on choice made by individuals. There are many mechanisms that enable knowledge transfer, but these mechanisms, such as information technology, are only tools. Despite it presenting a seemingly more complex approach, the behavioural choice of people is the key to the success of knowledge transfer. Whether this can be successful as an additional "program" in our organisations, or whether a new strategic approach is required, is a matter of debate. However, the development of knowledge management as a discipline gives us the opportunity to model, by engaging in dialogue, the dynamic interpersonal process of knowledge transfer. Furthermore, such discussions can help increase the profile of "people-centred" strategic thinking.

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Why is the term "knowledge" so popular these days?

Discussing and debating knowledge *per se* is not new (it has been an issue in philosophy for centuries), but its prevalence in both the business environment and the world of academia and research has grown exponentially in the last few years. In particular, knowledge has become a substance to be "managed", to take the phrase "knowledge management" at its most literal sense. Knowledge managers or officers are being appointed in large organisations, academic journals have changed their titles to include the word knowledge (business change and re-engineering has become "knowledge and process management") and consultants have become specialists in the new corporate function of knowledge management.

Knowledge management as a subject in its own right has developed from ideas that suggest that we are living in an age in which "intellectual capital", the "knowledge, information, intellectual property, experience" (Stewart, 1998) or, to put it another way, what we have in our minds, is our primary commercial resource. Raw materials and the manufacture and transportation of goods are no longer considered the central drivers of competitive advantage. "Information and knowledge are the thermonuclear competitive weapons of our time" (Stewart, 1998, who was then considered by The Planning Forum to be "the leading proponent of knowledge management in the business press").

This view, that could theoretically force the significance of people and their minds to the top of the agenda in strategic dialogue and decision making, has been evident in descriptions of the changing nature of our economy for some time now. In schools and universities we were taught about the shift from being a manufacturing-based economy to being "service" based. But, by transferring the subject from school and university books to glossier, high profile management books, knowledge, intellectual capital, call it what you will, is now visible to the management world and is fast becoming the sexiest subject to be consulting in, to be introducing in your company, to be a specialist in . . .

Portraits of the late twentieth century also regularly describe the rapid growth and

development of digital technology. We are now considered to be living in the “information age”.

This focus is a particularly common one and it may be so because of the tangible impact of digital technology. As well as the huge industry it has spawned for itself, it has also severely affected our working and personal lives. However, despite the extraordinary levels of energy and excitement generated by information technology (IT) it does not necessarily follow that the IT industry can provide the best framework for considering the subject of knowledge and knowledge transfer.

Many of our knowledge management programs are being developed around the use of digital technology. Software houses are creating databases and digital network products such as intranets and groupware. IT is an established discipline with its own language and ways of working that reflect certain assumptions about life and people. Is it right that this discipline is leading the development of “knowledge management”?

If the process of knowledge management is led by IT, knowledge can too easily become “information” or data only: to be stored and, theoretically retrieved, from databases. “Too much for what passes for knowledge management is glorified data processing” (Stewart, 1988). Digital technology provides us with incredibly useful tools for efficient information transfer, but IT should only be seen as that, as a tool.

There are instances where a software package is installed as a panacea answer to knowledge “management”. At least one company planned to introduce a “database” in answer to the cries of sales people about duplication of effort and lack of knowing what their colleagues were doing. No time was given to fully understanding how the database would be the answer the problem. Often one hears of software companies belatedly realising that they need expert help on the “soft” issues when implementing knowledge management.

Not all theorists and protagonists of knowledge management are so naïve as to only focus on software applications. In a recent article in *People Management* (1999) Harry Scarborough of Leicester University Management Centre cautioned on technology-driven knowledge management programs, stressing the important role of HR

and the need to develop a knowledge-sharing culture.

Knowledge transfer

Knowledge-sharing or “knowledge transfer” is an increasingly popular phrase in the literature as writers attempt to highlight the human aspect of “knowledge management”. For example, Paul Miller of TEG (1997) stresses the importance of looking at knowledge networks and what he calls knowledge mobility.

There is often a distinction made between knowledge transfer that occurs naturally or informally, and that which takes place in more formalised routines. Davenport and Prusak (1998), when reviewing knowledge management programs in practice, highlight the difference between the more formalised transfer mechanisms such as documents, databases, intranets and groupware, and informal exchanges which are more casual events that usually take place face to face i.e. in conversation. These unstructured exchanges “are vital to a firms success” and one of the essential elements of knowledge management is to “develop special strategies to encourage such spontaneous exchanges” (p. 89). Evidence of such efforts can be seen in Japan, where “talk rooms” are deliberately established in which people meet to converse when and how they wish and “knowledge fairs”, notably at Ernst and Young, which are deliberately unstructured events.

von Krogh *et al.* (1996), take a more social perspective and describe “knowledge connections”, which provide the potential for people to convey messages. These are principally made up of relationships, both those formed on an informal basis and those that occur through more formal means as a result of structure and the underlying culture of an organisation. At this level, potential connections, such as when a customer asks for types of services other than those obviously provided by the organisation, may be ignored or filtered out.

These explorations of the issue of knowledge mobility and references to organisational culture and behaviour indicate a recognition of the complex and dynamic nature of knowledge and knowledge transfer in organisations. The mechanisms for knowledge transfer are readily described but is the pivotal role of people in those dynamics sufficiently proclaimed?

Knowledge is fundamentally about people

I recently asked a colleague (who was totally unfamiliar with the concept of knowledge management) to describe what he saw as the difference between information and knowledge. He answered by saying that you can get information from somewhere else, whereas knowledge comes as a person uses information and combines it with their personal experience. Information becomes knowledge when it has been digested and thought over by a person's mind. There is always lots of data available but it is the individual that interprets data through information, chooses to make use of it and so create knowledge. Knowledge only exists because of people.

Although some knowledge management programs may address the informal and less tangible mechanisms for knowledge transfer (such as knowledge fairs and talk rooms described earlier), it appears that there is a belief that this provision of an infrastructure for knowledge transfer will be sufficient to see it take place.

A road-building program can provide new roads that may act as enabling mechanisms to increase the traffic between two places. But ultimately the success of the new road will be determined by whether people choose to use the road. In the same way people make the pivotal decisions in the process of knowledge transfer, for example choosing to share or give up knowledge or to search for new information.

People have the ultimate key to successful knowledge connection because they make choices: of sharing or concealing knowledge, wanting to know more, wanting to learn. In order to raise the volume and quality of knowledge exchange (presumably a goal of an organisation that claims that knowledge is its key asset), people must choose to interact and share knowledge at a level over and above that required to get their job done. For knowledge to be shared at an organisational level, for it to connect, there has to be a voluntary action on behalf of the individual. To connect is a human thing. It will only happen if people choose to do it.

People, and their choice to exchange knowledge in complex networks within an organisation, should be the driving issue in considering knowledge management. People are fundamental to most organisational

strategies, but in particular a strategy of knowledge sharing and mobility must be founded on a respect for the behavioural choice of individuals.

Technology, and deliberate strategies of encouraging more “informal” contact and conversations, become just tools used by people as they choose to find out, share, create and use knowledge. IT needs to come second in priority if an organisation wishes to see the intellectual capital among “knowledge workers” become the predicted primary resource for competitive advantage.

The allure of IT

It seems that IT has a certain magnetism that induces us to think about knowledge, and consequently deal with it in our organisations as “knowledge management”, from an IT-driven perspective. The phenomenal growth and commercial success gives the IT industry palpable power. Furthermore, we are sold on the idea that such technology will improve our businesses and will provide competitive advantage. The increased spending of British business on IT has been phenomenal and the recent prosperity in the USA is allegedly a consequence of the growth of the IT industry.

Certainly a product or indeed a whole system (information management) that looks as if it can simplify and give order to processes that range from manufacturing through to the soft people processes of interaction must be attractive. In addition such products provide objective “management information”, a perceived bonus by many “managers” of organisations.

Unfortunately the case for focusing on people is less flagrantly appealing and could be said to have negative attributes that push people away from seriously considering the implications of not grasping that knowledge is fundamentally about people.

There are no appealing tangible products and implementation procedures as offered by software-based knowledge management programs. Exploring, understanding and undertaking to address the people side is less straightforward and perceptibly “messier”. Furthermore there are far less marketing resources behind such an approach. Indeed much of the literature that advocates, but is cautious not to prescribe, a people-centred

approach is often in a less than accessible language for the decision makers and strategists of many organisations.

The dominance of IT?

Should a technology-driven approach to “knowledge management” be chosen. It is possible that the dynamic nature of knowledge sharing will be swamped as the mechanics of collecting, storing, managing and tidying knowledge take over people’s time and energy. Furthermore, the space and freedom which is needed to favour an atmosphere of inquiry will be quashed under the formality and finality of “data” capture and retrieval systems.

This is maybe painting an exaggerated picture of the evils of technology (in which images from science fiction movies of the 1960s and 1970s where machines “take control” come to mind!). Because of its power, the IT industry can dominate knowledge management projects, and its underlying approach and discourse may ultimately direct the development of knowledge management as a business discipline.

It could be argued that while we live in an age in which full comprehension and control is a goal of organisations then, despite the increased sophistication of theories of the nature of knowledge, we will continue to wish to “manage” knowledge and the finite “solution” packages presented by IT will continue to appeal.

The way forward

Could “people-centred” knowledge management programs use IT just as a tool? Such programs would appear more complex and less straightforward as individuals “responsible” for an organisation would take greater perceived risk in trusting the unpredictability of human behaviour. Organisations would need to be flexible and open to change and evolution, allowing the dynamics of knowledge transfer to be guided by the choices and decisions of individuals.

Alternatively, do we need a wholly new strategic approach to organising in order to increase and improve the transfer of knowledge successfully?

It could be argued that the underlying principles of a people-centred approach are sufficiently evident in existing theories of organisations.

For example, a piece of consultancy that brought to the fore the value in involving people at a strategic level could be considered a knowledge mobility project. People were brought together to exchange ideas and information. That discussion created new knowledge and led to an intense period of activity very useful to the organisation at the time. Are not some of the principles demonstrated here also found in team development programs, or in the increasingly popular concept of inter-dependence? It may be that similar endeavours within organisations would be sufficient to constrain the dominance of IT.

Some organisations already display a culture of connection – people regularly meet formally, exchange documents and e-mails, talk, share ideas and meet socially. In such organisations the introduction of knowledge transfer tools, such as groupware (especially for geographically dispersed people) and arranged “casual” discussion opportunities such as knowledge fairs could supplement an already existing knowledge-sharing culture. But how common is such an organisation?

Whether we need new approaches to “managing” our organisations, or whether organisations can benefit from increased knowledge mobility through discreet knowledge management “programs” is a long debate.

Knowledge management, or “knowledge transfer” is a young discipline that, for now, is high on corporate and academic agendas. This momentum is providing us with the opportunity to engage in that debate and discuss its implications.

Pioneers of the World Wide Web set out to create a forum for dialogue, for sharing and exchanging information, knowledge and ideas. The growth of the Web has been phenomenal, possibilities continually unfold and new structures and systems continually evolve.

However, there is a risk that this principle of freedom will get eroded as the Internet grows, when fears about the chaotic, untamed nature of the Web, and competition imperatives impel people to “take control”.

In the same vein, knowledge management as a discipline must avoid this danger and must be allowed to evolve through dialogue and debate.

Knowledge management can provide the corporate world with a framework around which organisational leaders can structure debate at a strategic level. Such dialogue could not only bring to the fore a recognition of the importance of people but it also may lead to decision makers in organisations acting in a manner that models knowledge transfer and connection. They will therefore be “doing” people-centred knowledge management as knowledge connection takes place.

However much one is tempted to take the cynical view “it is just another fad”, “knowledge” could be a sufficiently powerful topic to keep the complex and dynamic issues of people and behavioural choice in the arena. This paper is just another contribution to the progress of dialogue and conversation.

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