The nonsense of knowledge management

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What is ‘knowledge management’?

- Karl Erik Sveiby can be thought of as the founder of km - he wrote the first book on the subject in 1990 - in Swedish
Drucker agrees...

- "You can't manage knowledge, Knowledge is between two ears, and only between two ears." When employees leave a company, he says, their knowledge goes with them, no matter how much they've shared.

... so does Frank Miller...

‘Knowledge is, after all, what we know. And what we know can't be commodified.

...if we...were constrained to say “what I know”, the notion of “knowledge capture” would be seen for what it is - nonsense!’
Through the Looking Glass

“When I use a word, it means just what I choose it to mean, neither more nor less.”

(Carroll, L. Alice through the looking glass, 1871)

The explosion of km

[Bar chart showing the number of titles with 'knowledge management' in Web of Science from 1990 to 2020.]
...but what IS it?

- Subject fields of journal titles:
  - Computing & Information systems 26
  - Information Science, etc. 18
  - Management 13
  - Artificial Intelligence 10
  - Engineering 8
  - Medicine 4

Tacit knowledge - 1

- the idea of ‘tacit knowledge’ and of ‘capturing’ such knowledge appears to be central to km - but what is it?
- the term originates with Polanyi - chemist turned philosopher of science - and has been described as:
  - ‘the idea that certain cognitive processes and/or behaviors are undergirded by operations inaccessible to consciousness’
  - [http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/tacitknowledge.html](http://www.artsci.wustl.edu/~philos/MindDict/tacitknowledge.html)
Polanyi himself appears to equate tacit knowledge with ‘acts of comprehension’:
- ‘tacit knowing achieves comprehension by indwelling, and... all knowledge consists of or is rooted in such acts of comprehension’
- In other words, ‘tacit knowledge’ is not a something, but a process - as anyone who has learned how to ride a bicycle can testify.

So - tacit knowledge is an *inexpressible* process that enables an assessment of phenomena in the course of becoming knowledgeable about the world. In what sense, then, can it be captured?
- The answer, of course, is that it cannot be ‘captured’ - it can only be demonstrated through our expressible knowledge and through our acts.
So what’s going on?

- Essentially, Sveiby’s original vision of helping organizations to make better use of their people has been taken over by the IT industry in its continuing efforts to sell software and business consultancy services.

Search-and-replace marketing

- Three possible answers:
  - 1. No, we’ve added important new features designed to help you with your KM chores.
  - 2. Sort of. We have the same features as always but have discovered new applications for them.
  - 3. Yes, you pathetic loser.
You’re being conned!

- tacit knowledge is inexpressible and, therefore, cannot be captured
- whatever knowledge is captured becomes information until another knowing mind assimilates it (applying tacit knowing) and creates its own knowledge
- only information resources can be managed - never ‘knowledge’, which is personal
- managing organizations to achieve information sharing is management NOT knowledge management

The people perspective

- knowledge management is associated with people, as Sveiby pointed out
- is there any more to km under this definition than under the information perspective?
The World Bank

- ...is often held up as a pioneer in KM techniques, but the ideas originally set out by Denning have now disappeared from the site, which now promotes *knowledge sharing*.

The original ‘global vision’

- Supporting the enabling environment...
- Building human capacity...
- Expanding access...
- Supporting research, net-working and communities of practice...
A global km strategy?

- Not quite… it’s about:
  - technology and access to technology
  - education and training
  - staff exchanges among agencies and companies
  - and… a Web portal

- not a sign of any attempt to manage ‘knowledge’, even if it was possible.

The new view from the World Bank

- through Economic and Sector Work research evaluation
- with our clients, partners and outside world...
- through learning from the outside world...
- with staff in the organization
- and learning our successes from failures and
- through products and services...

What it means in practice?

- Relevant bibliography reference materials
- Relevant best practice
- Relevant policies, guidelines, procedures
- Relevant knowledge is made available just-in-time
- Most frequently asked questions
- Country conditions, correspondence personae, issues
- Most frequently made mistakes in the past
- Relevant country, sector data
- Text of previous similar task outputs
- Best analytical tools, e.g. economic, financial analyses
- Most knowledgeable gurus on key issues

Another view of what it means

- Do you:
  - Know who knows what throughout your organization?
  - Capture problem solutions and make them available to everyone?
  - Find out and use what your clients think about your product?
  - Know how your products and services compare to competitors?
  - Know what information is available in all your internal system data bases?
  - Have easy access to that information?
  - Know where and how to get external information about prospects, competitors, the industry, and the economy?
  - Know how to combine external and internal information to answer questions?
  - Know what you don't know?
Another km legend, promulgated by Davenport is that Microsoft has a km strategy...

What does this turn out to be?

the IT group has focused heavily on the issue of identifying and maintaining knowledge competencies.

Training?

With unimaginable creativity, M'soft has decided it needs competent people, who know their jobs, and that it needs continuously to train them to keep abreast of developments in the business.

This is a km strategy worthy of a Davenport case study?
The reach of the new technology for information sharing: Many factors have transformed the way in which organizations now view information, but perhaps the pivotal development has been the dramatically extended reach of know-how through new information technology. Rapidly falling costs of communications and computing and the extraordinary growth and accessibility of the World Wide Web present new opportunities for information-based organizations, to share information more widely and cheaply than ever before. Information sharing is thus enabling — and forcing — institutions that are international in the scope of their operations, to become truly global in character by enabling information transfer to occur across large distances within a very short time.

(Denning, 'What is knowledge management?')
Conclusion

- The km movement is, in large part, a management consultancy fad, which will fade away like the rest.
- It rests on two foundations, the management of information - where a large part of the fad exists, and the effective management of people.
- However, whatever businesses claim about people being their most important resource, they are never reluctant to rid themselves of that resource (and the knowledge it possesses) when market conditions decline.
- If holding your job, or getting promotion, or finding a new one is based on the knowledge you possess - what incentive is there to reveal that knowledge and share it?

Follow the debate...

- Information Research, Volume 8, No. 1, October 2002
- @
- and
- http://www.jiscmail.ac.uk/lists/IR-DISCUSS.html