



## What is Knowledge Management

Patrick Onions, The Knowledge Studio discussion forum, 29 April 2011

The briefest or even most diligent scrutiny of knowledge management forums leaves one in no doubt that there is little consensus as to what knowledge management is really all about. Well, maybe if we indulge in a little armchair philosophy we do all agree that it is about “managing knowledge”. But that is the point at which the eyes of business and friends begin glaze over. And quite rightly so.

These KM forums also reveal that practitioners from all over the globe and in all sizes and shapes of industry are still asking some fundamental questions. How do we persuade organisations to adopt KM? What are the first steps to take when implementing KM? Which portal should we buy to manage our knowledge? How do we get people to share their knowledge? What is the value of KM? And even, what is the value of knowledge?

Really? Is this honestly how far the field has progressed in 20+ years?

There is undoubtedly a causal relationship between not agreeing on what it is that we are doing and not knowing how to do it, but actually things have moved on. After a decade in practice and reviewing several thousand publications I can comfortably say that many of the fundamental questions have been answered, and even tested at the coalface. The problem for research and especially for practice lies in the nature of the subject.

A universal framework would be nice to hang new ideas off and guide practitioners in their search for appropriate tools and techniques. And a ‘grand theory’ or snappy one-line definition would really help things along over the boardroom table or in a sales pitch. Unfortunately the field is too broad to be treated as a *fad du jour* or conveniently marketed in a nice cliché. It is a nasty mess that has grown organically, been unfettered by theoretical underpinnings, and driven at breakneck speed by unscrupulous marketing. Recent research published by Heisig in 2009 identified over 160 models and frameworks, a figure confirmed by my own research (Onions, 2010). In ignorance or disregard for this breadth, journals and conference proceedings confirm that academia persists in trying to develop the ‘Holy Grail’ – a mythical and entirely elusive universal model, theory or

definition for KM – often (and ironically for prospective knowledge managers) without having done their homework first. And with each new model or concept that goal recedes just a little further.

The only viable definition for knowledge management is one that recognises and embraces the diverse and amorphous nature of the concepts it describes. Treating KM as an umbrella term may seem to be impractical philosophising, but this approach is possibly the only one that can lead the field out of its current chaos and stagnation.

Learning from others is part and parcel of knowledge management, yet it was only in 2008 that a conceptual link was drawn between that project management and KM by Donovan McFarlane in a paper entitled “Toward a Knowledge Management Body of Knowledge”. Project management is a field that has adopted many practices and which Koskela and Howell regarded in 2002 as having “no explicit theory”. Project management concentrates its knowledge around a variety of bodies of knowledge (BOK), collections of techniques that are framed by a lifecycle or methodology and which are used to guide both research and practice. A project manager facilitates and enables a project, not delivers it, using a set of appropriate techniques they have acquired from a BOK and experience. This collection represents a toolbox of know-how, the most appropriate of which will be used by a skilled practitioner in any given situation.

Knowledge management practice can add value anywhere by responding to immediate situational needs of the organisation and applying the most appropriate tool from a deep toolbox. Flexibility, adaptability and facilitating are all driven or just enabled by a toolbox approach. The umbrella-toolbox-facilitation approach outflanks the head-on complications of codification, culture, resistance, budgets and buy-in. And it is remarkably easy to adopt...

- Acquire a toolbox of useful techniques;
- Learn when and how to apply them;
- Pass this knowledge on to individuals in the organisation;
- Help them manage their knowledge.

(And yes, that does imply that no-one can capture or manage another person’s knowledge, but that is a subject for another post!)