Chapter 1.3
Exploring the Knowledge Management Landscape:
A Critical Review of Existing Knowledge Management Frameworks

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ABSTRACT

Relevant literature suggests that the field of knowledge management (KM) at the service of contemporary organizations is characterized by a plethora of diverse frameworks. However, none of these frameworks has achieved such a wide acceptance so as to be conceived as a standard. In fact, practice proves that each research or consultant group follows its own approach while many initiatives are based on custom approaches, developed each time from scratch, or even worse do not follow a structured method at all. In this chapter the authors attempt to go deeper by proposing a classification of knowledge management frameworks based on their macroscopic characteristics followed by their evaluation against a set of predetermined content elements that a complete approach should possess. The main result propagated from their critique is a common understanding of current theoretical and practical shortcomings of the field and the specification of a consistent set of course of actions and guidelines for researchers and practitioners engaged in knowledge management and its applications.

INTRODUCTION

Back in 1987, Robert Solow was awarded a Nobel Prize in economics for identifying the main sources of growth, capital and labor. Since then the global socioeconomic scene has dramatically changed, leading researchers such as Krugman (1991) and Lucas (1993) to propose that in addition to traditional

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production factors, knowledge has also become a vital source of growth. Along this evolution path organizations are not becoming more labor, material or capital-intensive, but more knowledge intensive (Drucker, 1993), thus giving rise to a brand new economy labeled as the knowledge economy.

Surprisingly, despite the wide acceptance and the proliferating implementations of Knowledge Management (KM), many organizations have failed to realize its expected results. These failures and shortcomings form the ground for severe criticism, which cannot be easily overlooked. In our view, overcoming current deficiencies requires the design and development of a solid architecture integrating methods, processes, tools, knowledge resources and technologies capable of supporting Knowledge Management in a holistic fashion. In other words, in order to take the field a step further, it has to be structured, through the development of a comprehensive and practical approach. Otherwise, the field's "progress is nothing but a fortunate combination of circumstances, research is fumbling in the dark, and dissemination of knowledge is a cumbersome process" (Vatter, 1947).

This need has already been recognized drawing the attention of researchers coming from a variety of disciplines, including Organizational Science, Strategy and Management Science, as well as Information Systems. As a result, there have been several efforts at developing frameworks, varying in scope and nature, trying to understand and describe the Knowledge Management phenomena. Despite, or maybe because of, this multicultural attention, a consensus regarding Knowledge Management has not been achieved yet. Such a deficiency is widely accepted and is summarized by Spender (2003) who states that, "as we look at the literature it is immediately clear that it is neither homogeneous nor well integrated. There is no single set of terms or even theoretical constructs".

The aim of this chapter is to investigate the current understanding of the discipline by analyzing and critically evaluating existing frameworks. In doing so, we first explore the concept and definitions of Knowledge Management in an effort to set the boundaries of the field. Moving to the core of the chapter the benefits and limitations of standardization are discussed, and a short description of some of the most well cited approaches is provided. Finally existing approaches are critically evaluated in order to understand current theoretical and practical shortcomings of the field and set a roadmap towards the development of an improved approach, supporting the successful adoption and assimilation of Knowledge Management in contemporary organizations.

BACKGROUND

Summarizing the concepts and processes which Knowledge Management entails in a few lines has proved to be a rather difficult task. As Quintas et. al (1997) pointed out "it is difficult to scope and define this disparate and emergent field and understand the processes involved to determine programmes and interventions". Some even claim that the term is rather an unfortunate one since it implies the painless control of knowledge, which is largely unstructured, in the same way that structured organizational facets are managed (Cloete & Snyman, 2003). However, in order to provide a complete specification of the term, a categorization and analysis of existing definitions is mandatory and will be presented in the remainder of this section.

A thorough reading of the definitions reveals that numerous perspectives exist. For one thing, some authors view *Knowledge Management* from a social and humanistic point of view, focusing on the management of the human factor. On the other side, IT focused approaches disregard organizational aspects, which are considered 'soft', in favor of 'hard' ones mostly in the form of IT tools