Chapter 4.6
Direction and Trends in Knowledge Management Research:
Results from an Empirical Analysis of European Projects

George M. Giaglis
University of the Aegean, Greece

ABSTRACT

Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) has existed as a separate field of scientific research for almost a decade. It is therefore surprising that very few studies to date have been concerned with the identification of the scope and boundaries of the field, as well as the sub-topics and research themes that constitute it. This chapter reports on the results of an empirical analysis of more than 200 research projects in Knowledge and Information Management. Using an inductive methodology of pattern matching analysis, a more accurate definition of knowledge management is attempted, and an innovative taxonomy of research sub-themes within the 'umbrella' area of Knowledge and Information Management is proposed. Furthermore, a trend towards a gradual matura-tion of the presently prevailing research paradigm is identified, indicating a need for a 'paradigm shift' that will provide a new direction and vision for future research in the area. We suggest that targeted future research efforts in the area of knowledge technologies will contribute to the development of the 'next generation' knowledge management systems that will transform the exist-ing 'passive' knowledge repositories into 'active' learning environments.

THE FIELD OF KNOWLEDGE AND INFORMATION MANAGEMENT

In a world of dynamic and discontinuous change, organisations are constantly seeking ways to adapt themselves to new conditions so that they

are prepared to survive and flourish in an increasingly competitive environment. The proliferation of the knowledge economy (Castells, 1996), emphasizing the value of information as an enabler of competitive advantage, is naturally driving many companies to re-examine the ways they have treated their knowledge assets in the past and to identify ways in which they can exploit them more effectively in the future (Argyris, 1994; Albert, 1997).

In such a landscape, it is not surprising that Knowledge and Information Management (KIM) has emerged as one of the most popular strategic change management approaches in the dawn of the 21st century (Davenport and Prusak, 1997; Currie, 1999; Spiegler, 2000). Its supporters argue that organisations may achieve significant competitive advantages by analysing the data and information that often remain unexploited in organisational systems and by transforming them into useful and actionable knowledge. KIM has attracted significant attention in the spheres of both academic research and industrial practice in recent years (Davenport et al., 1998). This is hardly surprising: knowledge is long known to be one of the primary enablers of sustainable competitive advantage in periods of economic turbulence (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995). At the same time, the increasing capabilities of contemporary information systems to store, process, and disseminate information and to contribute to its transformation into knowledge, have also served to enhance the role of KIM in organisations.

Despite the wide attention being paid to KIM, the definition of the field (both as an academic discipline and as a managerial application area), together with a clear description of its scope and boundaries, is still a subject of intense debate. A small sample of definitions found both in academic textbooks and business-oriented sources serve to demonstrate the sources of disagreements usually encountered. For example, Starr (1999) defines knowledge management as "information or data management with the additional practice of capturing the tacit experience of the individual," while O'Brien (1999) defines it as "a tool of enterprise collaboration that facilitates the organisation, management, and sharing of the diverse forms of business information created by individuals and teams in organisations." Laudon and Laudon (1998) claim that knowledge management is "the process of systematically and actively managing and leveraging the stores of knowledge in an organisation," while Malhotra (1997) maintains that knowledge management "embodies organisational processes that seek synergistic combination of data and information processing capacity of information technologies, and the creative and innovative capacity of human beings."

Even from this small sample of definitions, the epistemological and ontological basis of KIM as an independent and distinguishable field of research and practice is rather unclear. Some authors see it as an extension of traditional information management, while others view it as the synergistic outcome of combining information management and human creativity. Moreover, some definitions seem to adopt a primarily soft organisational stance and view KIM as a 'process,' while others follow a more technologically oriented hard approach and view KIM as a 'tool.'

Perhaps some of this confusion may be attributable to the fact that the terms 'knowledge' and 'information,' while not necessarily meaning the same thing to everybody, are explicitly or implicitly treated as synonymous in many definitions. Another source of confusion may be the fact that different types of knowledge seem to exist, each with potentially different management requirements by organisations and individuals. For example, the distinction between explicit and tacit knowledge may prove to be ultimately misleading (Marshall and Brady, 2000), as it tends to split the co-existent and inter-twined types of knowledge into mutually exclusive categories. Finally, a main source of disagreement seems to stem from the use of different analytical lenses to view KIM depending on one's background:

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