

Chapter 6.6

Bridging the Gap from the General to the Specific by Linking Knowledge Management to Business Processes

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ABSTRACT

A phenomenon common to almost all fields is that there is a gap between theory and practical implementation. However, this is a particular problem in knowledge management, where much of the literature consists of general principles written in the context of a 'knowledge world' that has few, if any, references to how to carry out knowledge management in organisations. In this chapter, we put forward the view that the best way to bridge this gap between general principles and

the specific issues facing a given organisation is to link knowledge management to the organisation's business processes. After briefly reviewing, and rejecting alternative ways in which this gap might be bridged, the chapter goes on to explain the justification for, and the potential benefits and snags of, linking knowledge management to business processes. Successful and unsuccessful examples are presented. We concentrate especially on the issues of establishing what knowledge is relevant to an organisation at present, the need for organisational learning to cope with the inevitable

change, and the additional problems posed by the growing internationalisation of operations. We conclude that linking knowledge management in terms of business processes is the best route for organisations to follow, but that it is not the answer to all knowledge management problems, especially where different cultures and/or cultural change are involved.

INTRODUCTION

The main topic of this chapter is the implementation or the application of knowledge management. By this, we mean how the ideas and theories of knowledge management can be made applicable in an organisation. Too often we hear or read the rhetoric of knowledge management without there being any route mentioned to turn these ideas into practical applications. As Americans might say, what happens when “the rubber meets the road?”

We begin by explaining why we believe the application of knowledge management in a specific organisation is problematic. We then propose that the concept of business processes is the most suitable way to help resolve this problem, and go on to review some of the consequences (actual and potential) of rooting knowledge management in an organisation’s business processes. We believe that this is the most appropriate way to make the theories of knowledge management applicable. However, the approach is not without its difficulties.

We discuss both the justification and some of the potential snags in the main body of this chapter, with a special emphasis on problems of internationalisation. Our conclusions, however, given the current state of knowledge about knowledge management, are as much in the way of a question as an answer. However, it is clear that while a process orientation may be necessary for successful knowledge management in an

organisation, it is not sufficient on its own. For example, an appreciation of cultures and cultural distance is also essential, given that we now live and work in a “global village.”

CAN KNOWLEDGE BE MANAGED?

Baseline Definitions

Despite the surge of interest in knowledge management over the past few years, there is no general agreement as to whether knowledge can be “managed” in any meaningful sense. Three views on this topic are apparent to us (others may suggest more):

1. Meaningful knowledge resides only in people’s heads, and therefore managing organisational knowledge is an oxymoron (Weick & Westley, 1996).
2. All knowledge can be managed; the principal challenge is to “extract” it from its current location, whether that is a human mind or somewhere else.
3. The statement that “knowledge resides in people’s heads” is literally true, but there are knowledge processes in organisations (and elsewhere), and these processes can be managed, even if it is not possible to manage the knowledge itself directly.

View number 1 implies that not only this chapter, but indeed the entire book is a waste of time, and thus need not be discussed further here. Many software vendors may be found advocating view number 2, which has its ancestry, at least in part, in the more mechanistic aspects of the expert/knowledge-based systems field. In our view, the history of that field demonstrates that this view is unlikely to be valid in most domains of knowledge (see for example Gill, 1995). Even the oft-cited Huber has modified his thoughts over

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