Chapter 6

An Empirical Study of Knowledge and Organizations

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An empirical investigation into perceptions about the handling of knowledge in organisations. The findings are based on replies to a non-random postal questionnaire based survey. The respondents were the senior human resource management (HRM) and information technology (IT) specialists at the 60 largest Scottish companies (as measured by market capitalisation). The findings in the main confirm both ideas in the literature in general and the findings and conclusions from previous studies including Alavi, and Leidner (1999). In addition some new aspects are reported which can be construed as showing support for the idea of professional groupings holding onto knowledge and for the existence of ambivalence towards the emphasis placed on the role of IT in conducting KM.

INTRODUCTION

Bibliometric studies (Ruggles, 1998; Scarborough et al, 1999) show a considerable growth in knowledge management literature since the late 1980s. Although on simple reflection the fundamental importance of knowledge,

> "Every human activity, child-rearing, hunting, farming and crafts, no less
> than administration, research and government depends on the use and
> transmission of skills and knowledge." (Parker, 1994)

and its attendant economic impact, "Knowledge is our most powerful engine of production" (Marshall, 1890) may be obvious, the study of knowledge as a business topic has been patchy and sporadic.

Until recently the only area of consistent knowledge work has been the development of copyright and patent law. This was conducted to protect some aspects of the exploitation of knowledge to help overcome some impediments to knowledge diffusion:

> "... the obstetrical forceps, introduced by a French Huguenot, William Chamberlen (c 1540-96), ... Chamberlen kept the instrument a family secret, passing it on to his son, Peter, who passed it on to his son, Peter (1601-83), who passed it onto his son Hugh (1630-1720). When called to a confinement, they supposedly hid the forceps m a box to preserve their trade secret..." (Porter, 1997: 232)

BACKGROUND AND LITERATURE REVIEW

A frequent starting point for a discussion of the business and economic importance of knowledge is Bell (1976) with his emphasis upon the growing importance of a scientific approach to knowledge discovery and the role IT has to play. Although Bell's work has been "indicted on a number of counts" (Blackler, Reed, and Whitaker, 1993) it retains its influence. The next well-recognised staging post is Drucker's vision (1989) of knowledge worker based organisations. There then starts what becomes an avalanche of texts dealing with knowledge and various knowledge related ideas such as "systems" and "learning organisations": Senge (1990), Nonaka (1991), Peters (1992), and Drucker (1993) leading to Swan's comment that *now* there is considerable consensus that 'knowledge' is an increasingly important business topic (1999).

Examination of the literature content shows immediately considerable confusion about what knowledge is and considerable debate over its relationship to data and information. This has provided (Godbout) "a challenge in semantics" with Starbuck noting "knowledge itself is almost as ambiguous an idea as value or importance, and it has many guises" (1992) and Alvesson commenting "knowledge easily becomes everything and nothing" (1992). But as well as confusion there is broad agreement on some issues.

First, whereas historically firms did not need to manage knowledge because there was a sufficient natural flow (Ruggles, 1998), now knowledge management is important because of factors including growing international competition, changing requirements of customers, and rapid economic changes (van der Spek, and de Hoog, 1994). Ruggles' argument echoes a comment of Tricker made 20 years earlier with respect to information that it *was* like sunlight to Victorian botanists, there or not there, but something about which nothing could be done (Tricker, 1982).

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