



# Perceptions of Knowledge and Knowing – A Focus Group Research

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Knowledge has been recognized as one of the most important resources that contribute to organizational competitiveness. By managing their knowledge resources effectively, organizations can, at least theoretically, enhance their performance and ensure continuous growth. Despite their attempts to pursue the prescribed knowledge management (KM) guidelines rigorously, organizations encounter thwarted results in their KM initiatives. Previous researches and studies (e.g., KPMG 2000) have found that some unmet KM promises are due to the ambiguities or misconceptions of what KM is (e.g., a purely technological solution) and described how KM contributes to business growth and development. In short, KM still remains an elusive concept to many organizations though there is no lack of available KM concepts and frameworks. It is necessary to elucidate the confusions and to fill the gap between theoretical possibilities and practicalities such that organizations can grasp the value of knowledge to devise effective KM strategies.

To shed some light on the above-mentioned issues, this study embraces a primarily objective with an examination of the fundamental notion what components there are in KM (e.g., what knowledge is). By accommodating diverse methodologies (e.g., survey, experiment) and an extensive range of views from related disciplines about KM issues (e.g., organizational learning, philosophy), the study aims to provide deeper insights and explore new facets of the extant KM theoretical ground. This study adopts a participant-driven process – focus group (FG) research - to solicit a wide range of empirical perceptions from practitioners with diverse exposure to KM, and discusses results along five KM themes to reflect considerations for possible research topics and practical implementation.

A previous KM study by Cook and Brown (1999) has contributed greatly to our conceptual understanding of the components of KM. Exploring the epistemological-centered concerns, the authors depicted the difference and interplay of both the epistemology of possession (i.e., knowledge) and epistemology of practice (i.e., knowing) as mutually enabling parts of KM that contribute to organizational learning and innovation. That is, by using the knowledge in action or as a tool of knowing, individuals and groups are able to harness knowledge assets in collective and actionable situations for new knowledge. Departing from the theoretical ground of epistemologies, this study uses the FG research to provide deeper insights into the empirical stance and to frame the preliminary findings into a conceptual framework.

FG is defined as a back-and-forth discussion that brings together a group of individuals (usually 8-10 participants) to comment on and express personal views towards a particular set of research topics/themes (Greenbaum 2000, Morgan 1988). It has been used as an effective means to elicit opinions and broaden existing ideas that would be less accessible by other methodologies (e.g., Blackburn and Stokes 2000, Gibbs 1997). In this study, FG research was adopted to yield rich data regarding the taxonomy of knowledge and the processes of knowledge being utilized; and to look beyond the technology-driven KM approach

and ponder some of the human and social factors that constitute effective KM.

In our FG research, a total of four separate sessions have been conducted in 2001 (35 participants in their early 30s ranging from business executives, consultants, programmers and system analysts with varied information systems and KM experiences). An extensive range of perceptions and insights was solicited and identified from the participants in terms of the characteristics of knowledge (e.g., assets, capability), the dimensions to categorize/classify knowledge (e.g., stickiness, communicability), the roles of individuals influencing KM (e.g., motivation, creativity), the cognitive behaviors where individuals use their knowledge in action (e.g., intuition, reflections), the social contexts where individuals interact with others to exchange and stimulate new knowledge (e.g., socialization, interest groups), the current state of KM programs (e.g., initiating, implementing), and other influencing factors that facilitate and inhibit KM implementation (e.g., technology, organizational culture).

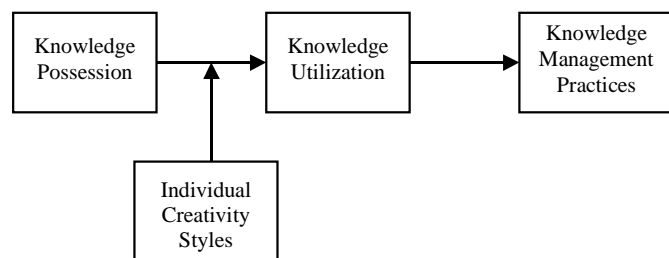
Using the thematic coding technique (Boyatzis 1998), the qualitative data generated from the FG research was summarized along the following themes. The preliminary results of each theme (extracted perceptions and opinions from participants) not only appear to be consistent but also shed light on some existing theoretical KM concepts. In addition, the above-mentioned five themes are structured to construct a conceptual framework (Figure 1) for future research and investigation.

- **Different forms of knowledge** – It is considered that knowledge appears and exists intangibly and noticeably to an individual that is largely consistent with the features advocated in the tacit-explicit taxonomy (Polanyi 1966). Interestingly, it is purported that new sources of knowledge are discovered unintentionally through judgment, intuition and assimilation of unconnected episodes present in an individual's knowledge repository. Therefore, it is surmised that the extant body of knowledge can be extended to incorporate unexplored sources that is deep-rooted in the mind as unconscious, unrealized and neglected knowledge. In parallel, the three forms of knowledge with the emergence and interplay of self-transcending, tacit and explicit knowledge, exemplified by Scharmer (2001), could shed light on further empirical research opportunities.
- **Possession of knowledge** – A number of participants expressed that various forms of knowledge are inherent and resided in individual minds or embedded in organizational routines, which is consistent with the epistemology of possession proposed by Cook and Brown (1999). The extents of possession is varied within and across individuals in accordance with their knowledge profiles e.g., knowledge inherent in repositories, absorption capability that allows individuals to assimilate, acquire similar or common knowledge with others (Cohen and Levinthal 1990, Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). Therefore, it is crucial

for organizations to grasp the knowledge in their employees' possession and incorporate external sources of knowledge to seize opportunities of innovation and development.

- **Utilization of knowledge** – The epistemology of practice/knowing (Cook and Brown 1999) is concurring and considered as complementary with knowledge possession. Specifically, individuals utilize (i.e., use/ practise/ apply) various forms of knowledge that they possess in different activities and actions to accomplish particular goals. However, the extent of knowledge utilization is not necessarily equivalent to (or somewhat less than) the extent of knowledge possession, which honors the notion that individuals know more than they can tell (Polanyi 1966). Related studies are found, though receiving scant attention, that knowledge is used, shared, and transferred among individuals and teams have positive impacts on organizational innovation and competitive stands (Johannessen et al. 1999, Szulanski 1996). Thus, understanding why and how the gap between knowledge possession and utilization exists can facilitate the best use of knowledge for the benefit of organizations.
- **Individual creativity** – Participants generally reveal that KM related technologies are useful but, overly emphasized which led to thwarted results such as systems being underutilized or resistance to adoption (opinion is consistent with findings of Higgins Jr. 2000, The Cranfield University 1998). They purport that human factors (e.g., KM roles played by individuals as recipients, seekers or creators, KM needs and stimulation with incentives and learning) are influential to KM effectiveness. Particularly, it is deemed that the inclinations of creativity and innovativeness that is prevalent in cognitive behaviors and problem solving studies (e.g., Puccio 1999) are substantially associated with KM works (applying knowledge for effective action and knowing). Therefore, organizations may reclaim non-technological practices (e.g., reward systems, discussion sessions) to facilitate knowledge sharing and motivate creativity among employees so as to construct a supportive KM environment.
- **KM practices** – Most participants agree that individual knowledge is leveraged, accumulated and created to form organizational knowledge (findings are in line with those of Lee and Kim 2001). Despite the formulation of KM practices in a more formal and rigorous way than before, organizations have yet to work out a well-accepted view of what exactly KM endeavors are, particularly the processes of sharing and creation. Therefore, comprehending the antecedents of KM practices discussed before (i.e. knowledge possession, knowledge utilization and individual creativity) and existing KM models (e.g., Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995), checklist for KM practices engendered formally or informally at the individual level could be instigated and applied in accordance with various organizational contexts. In so doing, organizations can evaluate the planned and realized KM in order to decide the appropriate KM goals to set or respective measures to deploy.

Figure 1. Conceptual Framework of KM



To make sense of the KM themes discussed before, a conceptual framework is proposed (Figure 1). Knowledge in various forms is inherent and primarily possessed by individuals, and utilized in actions and practices. The individual creativity styles, as moderator, act upon the interrelationship between knowledge possession and utilization. The interplay of these factors ultimately influences the KM practices.

In conclusion, this study departed from the epistemological-concerned of knowledge, it reveals and reports empirical insights from practitioners through a focus group research. It is expected that the preliminary findings, the KM themes and the proposed framework could provide a clearer understanding of what components there are in KM, and stimulate further studies of related notions or challenges concealed in the existing theoretical work (e.g., tacit-explicit knowledge taxonomy). Our future work will aim to advance theoretical grounds through accommodative exploration of KM issues along the findings induced in the prior discussion, and to bridge KM concepts and business needs through developing instruments of operationalization of constructs presented in the framework.

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