

# Chapter 32

## Formal and Emergent Standards in KM

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### INTRODUCTION

A natural consequence of the advance of human knowledge is an increase in the complexity of business, government and social organisations, supported and integrated by technological systems. It is now impossible to operate in this environment without a web of standards, sometimes expressed as laws and regulations, and sometimes as best practice guidelines, benchmarks or course content of educational programs. Standards can emerge through converging practice, through the

dominance of one player in the market or through the work of an official Standards Development Organisation (SDO). There is no shortage of work for SDOs, which exist within most countries and at the international level. In addition to formal standards there exist myriads of frameworks, models, sets of guidelines or taxonomies that are used to influence and direct practice particularly on developing topics or where formal standards are inappropriate. Such informal emergent standards can be anything from a simple diagram to a comprehensive documentation of best practice, a generalised model or a taxonomy resulting from extensive research.

Knowledge Management (KM) is an important but developing topic which cries out for consensus on its definition, guidance on its practice and insight into how it will mature as a discipline in

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the future (Handzic & Hasan 2003). The achievability of formal KM Standards is contentious, but some formal or informal agreement on the constitution of KM could greatly benefit the area. The effort to meet this challenge is exemplified in the formal Australian KM Standard, the only one of its kind yet produced and released in 2005. Since then, little more has been done with formal standards although KM theory and practice have advanced through the acceptance of a less formal range of frameworks and guidelines. This article describes these developments in order to present a picture of the current state of standardisation and consensus in the field of KM.

## **BACKGROUND**

Historically the production and implementation of standards for products and processes has been the key to advances in industrial production and a central feature of economic life. Many centuries ago devices, such as marine insurance laws, were fundamental to the development of mercantilist economies and to capitalism in general. These emerged slowly from the 15th century onwards but were not developed into a form we would recognise before the second half of the 18<sup>th</sup> century. Since then, the demand for standardisation has increased, driven by motives that include:

- the requirement to control or limit the degree of variation in the system,
- the improvements in efficiency that can be derived by constructing routines based around standards, or
- the knowledge that greater benefit can be derived for all, rather than for a few.

Some standards we can't live without, such as those for computer-based networks, because they allow us to communicate easily without thinking of how to make the physical connections work. Others, such as the accountancy standards grew

organically out of what were proven to be good practices for businesses of all kinds. All standards both constrain and enable so that there are some generally universal characteristics of standards that hold true even with the current variety in areas of standardisation. Bowker and Star (1996) note that there is no natural law that says that the best standard will be agreed upon but that, once determined, standards, no matter how they arise, have inertia and are difficult to change.

The politics of arriving at formal standards can often be the result of negotiation and conflict. The rapid rate of change driven by technological advances in the current global market place contrasts with the slow process of achieving agreement on standardised practices that enable all to work efficiently and effectively. In recent times the scope, pace and success rate of the formal standardisation processes has changed drastically, providing both uncertainty and new opportunities. This is particularly the case as the variety of standards expands into areas of organisational management and high-end business processes where standards and frameworks tend to be more descriptive than prescriptive. This is an importance issue for the field of KM where less formal standards may be more appropriate in the same way that some industries develop self-regulatory sets of guidelines for the ethical conduct of their business.

### **The Need for KM Standards, Definitive Frameworks and Benchmark Qualifications**

The diversity of KM in research, practice and training reflects its range of origins (IT/IS, HR, IM, etc), its dependence on context and the varying levels of KM maturity in any given context. There has been a broad consensus of the need for some consistency in KM probably since the turn of the millennium, although there is much contention on both the form that it should take and the process by which it can be created.

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