Chapter I

Introduction

1.1 What Is this Book About?

If you want quick-fix solutions, this book is not for you. If you want to "dare to know" how to look at an organisation differently, harness the power of its knowledge, and create innovative and effective systems, then please read on!

Knowledge management has been one of the most hyped phrases over the first years of the twenty-first century, and it has been mooted as the way forward for organisations to be dynamic, flexible, competitive, and successful. Despite the hype, and despite some individual successes, western economies and organisations may not have been greatly affected by this 'all singing, all dancing' solution to organisations' problems. Has the impact of knowledge management been less than expected? If so, why? In order to address these questions, there are a number of others that must also be considered, such as: What is knowledge management? Why did it arise in the first place? Can it be simplified or categorised? Is it a fad? Is it theoretical? Is it practical? Why should I care about it? What can it do for my organisation? Does it provide a quick and easy solution?

In order to help address these questions, and many others, and to suggest ways forward, this book examines knowledge management in concept and in practice. Knowledge management is considered in conjunction with other major approaches to organisational activities and analyses, especially systems thinking. The consideration of overall systems (not just computer systems) plays a major role in the planning, running, and development, of organisations. This may be evidenced by a wealth of professional and learned publications and through organisations' own strategic plans, mission statements, and publicly available documents. Thus, if knowledge management is to succeed, it must either work with these other important areas, or it must supersede them entirely.

This introductory chapter outlines the nature of knowledge management, how and why it has arisen in recent years, some ways in which it may be classified, its potential benefits, and its potential pitfalls. The following chapters consider knowledge management in more depth, and in relation to the areas outlined above. Each chapter has a list of suggested further reading, and this includes websites as well as printed material. The penultimate chapter discusses a framework for knowledge management, and the final chapter provides a summary of the similarities and differences in theory and practice between the different areas linked with knowledge management.

1.2 What Is Knowledge Management?

Very simply, knowledge management (KM), in an organisational sense, is the management of all, or some part, of the knowledge process. Of course, this statement is about as helpful as the old reply to the question, "What do economists do?...They do economics!" It may therefore be helpful if some definition of KM is given early on in this book, but a dilemma arises in the order that work is presented. As the book is about knowledge management, as may be expected, there are substantial chapters that deal with KM. One of these is about the meaning of the term, how KM may be categorised, how it may be used, why it is important. If this chapter were presented first, before any overall introduction to the book, it would present a level of detail that would be inappropriate as a starting point, and it would be difficult for that detail to be placed in any context by the reader. However, without some brief explanation as to what is meant by knowledge management, this Introduction would refer

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