: What is the status of Knowledge Management (KM)?

by Dan Power

In 1997, Rebecca Barclay and Philip Murray at Knowledge Praxis posted an article titled "What is knowledge management?". The article is still on the Web, but much has happened since then related to KM. They defined KM as "a business activity with two primary aspects: 1) Treating the knowledge component of business activities as an explicit concern of business reflected in strategy, policy, and practice at all levels of the organization; 2) Making a direct connection between an organization's intellectual assets, both explicit and tacit [personal know-how], and positive business results." Knowledge Praxis and @Knowledge are apparently no longer operating.

Barclay and Murray quoted extensively from a pre-publication version of Karl Wiig's article "Knowledge Management: Where Did It Come From, and Where Will It Go?" Wiig noted "By 1990, a number of management consulting firms had begun in-house knowledge management programs, and several well known U.S., European, and Japanese firms had instituted focused knowledge management programs. Knowledge management was introduced in the popular press in 1991, when Tom Stewart published "Brainpower" in Fortune magazine. Perhaps the most widely read work to date is Ikujiro Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi's book The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation (1995). By the mid-1990s, knowledge management initiatives were flourishing, thanks in part to the Internet." Wiig worked with applied Artificial Intelligence at Arthur D. Little and was a management consulting partner with Coopers & Lybrand. Wiig is still active with the Knowledge Research Institute (krii.com) that he and his wife operate.

Barclay and Murray noted "Knowledge management draws from a wide range of disciplines and technologies." They even mentioned DSS Research Resources. They concluded that Decision Support Systems "sounds a lot like knowledge management, but in practice the emphasis has been on quantitative analysis rather than qualitative analysis, and on tools for managers rather than everyone in the organization." They misconstrued some of what was happening in DSS in 1997, but they were correct that the target audience for KM was much larger than what had been the goal of DSS developers. The scope of KM was and is very broad and they identify two "tracks" of knowledge management: 1) "Management of Information. To researchers in this track, according

to Sveiby, 'knowledge = objects that can be identified and handled in information systems.'" 2) "Management of People. For researchers and practitioners in this field, knowledge consists of 'processes, a complex set of dynamic skills, know-how, etc., that is constantly changing.'" Find out more about Karl-Erik Sveiby's ideas at Sveiby Knowledge Associates (sveiby.com).

The IBM Systems Journal, Vol. 40, No. 4, from 2001 focuses on Knowledge Management. The special issue had 12 articles ranging from Prusak "Where did knowledge management come from?" to Gongla and Rizzuto "Evolving communities of practice: IBM Global Services experience". If you want a broad view, all of the articles in IBM Systems Journal are free and on the Web. Larry Prusak noted "Knowledge management seems likely to follow one of two future paths. The better one is the direction taken by the quality movement. ... A less appealing path would be similar to the one taken by re-engineering."

By 2002 some of the "bloom" had died on the Knowledge Management flower. T.D. Wilson, a retired Information Systems Professor at University of Sheffield, published an article titled "The nonsense of 'knowledge management'" in his Web-based, e-journal Information Research. He concluded "'knowledge management' is an umbrella term for a variety of organizational activities, none of which are concerned with the management of knowledge. Those activities that are not concerned with the management of information are concerned with the management of work practices, in the expectation that changes in such areas as communication practice will enable information sharing." Wilson makes many good points, but he misses the contributions of the knowledge management movement as well. In my Ask Dan! column of July 1, 2001, I discussed "What is the difference between knowledge management and decision support?". Certainly I was a skeptic about KM and still am. KM is and was "fuzzy" with too much "hype" and inadequate agreement on substance. BUT Knowledge Management encouraged firms to experiment with groupware, company Intranets, expert systems, web-based directories and various decision support systems. I noted "'knowledge management technologies' are an important delivery component in what I am calling document-driven DSS." My conclusion was "Decision support is a much more modest and much less grandiose concept that knowledge management."

Well, what about Knowledge Management today? I rarely monitor the KM blogs and I focus primarily on the IT/DSS related KM articles so my

perspective is biased toward an explicit knowledge, technology supported view of knowledge management. Also, I still receive an occasional KM e-newsletter.

As far as research, the empirical KM literature is weak. Few studies have really examined the KM social phenomenon and KM activities are hard to measure. In general, KM activities, especially those supported by IT seem to have been successful in many companies over the past 10 years. Some managers perceived and reported initial performance gains, but the KM activities were rapidly imitated and it appears many KM technology supported activities are now basic business requirements needed to operate effectively across a broad spectrum of industries. The days of gaining competitive advantage from KM may have passed for all but a few companies in more traditional manufacturing industries. Culture, leadership, organization structure and technology are enablers of KM processes.

As far as practice, let's turn to the blogs. Start with Knowledge Jolt (http://blog.jackvinson.com/) with Jack Vinson. Jack has a Ph.D. in Chemical Engineering and worked as a knowledge manager for the biotechnology unit at Pharmacia/Pfizer. He started his own KM consulting business in 2004. In a recent post, Jack mentions a software product MindManager for tapping into corporate knowledge (mindjet.com). His most recent entry is on "Knowledge Loss in Organizations" and social network analysis. The Human Resources people have been telling us about this major problem my entire academic career.

Mopsos, the Knowledge Management blog of Martin Dugage (blog.mopsos.com) has more news and views. "Yahoo just launched a blogging service for small businesses." The "Les Blogs 2.0 conference" and the "Ark Conference" occurred recently. An especially interesting post is dated December 1, 2005 titled "KM programs are dead. Long live KM!" Dugage attended and presented at the Ark Group conference (ark-group.com). Ark Group focuses on improving information management. Let me quote from Dugage's post:

"If I were to give the main lesson learned for me, I would say that the days of big corporate KM programs are gone. There is no more money for corporate KM programs, which are by and large considered by top managers as 'nice to have' but not essential. Today, knowledge

management has been delegated to line managers. Corporate support to KM initiatives has shifted from developing and deploying large IT infrastructures and collaborative portals to management education, consulting and much simpler and focused collaborative IT systems."

"Business models for KM are changing. We are moving away from monolithic enterprise systems and towards a collection of smart, simple and focused social applications that interact with one another. As Beat Knechtli, Knowledge manager of ABB sees it, we should no longer be talking about knowledge management, but much more simply about good management and thus educate managers to the power of knowledge sharing in the 21st century."

Martin Dugage works with KM for Schneider Electric, a global enterprise in automation and electricity management with 85,000 employees and revenues of more than 10 billion euros. Schneider Electric defines Knowledge Management as "A systematic approach towards learning and intelligence so as to leverage the collective knowledge of the entire company to better serve each and every customer."

For more KM blogs check Colabria (kmblogs.com) or Knowledge-at-work (denham.typepad.com/km). Also check http://www.knowledgeboard.com and kmworld.com. Also, there is some buzz on CoP 2.0. Communities of practice seem here to stay and the technologies for supporting CoP are improving. How to get a CoP set up, funded and maintained is still a problem. Our DSSResources.com community of practice is still growing despite meager resources. Our bulletin board has not however really worked since spammers started posting viagra and pornography links. Email questions and suggestions keep me in the loop about what's happening.

So where are KM and DSS headed in 2006? First, we need to better understand how knowledge management activities and decision support systems can impact individual, group and enterprise performance. I manage knowledge at DSSResources.com every day and it is not easy. Organizing knowledge and information so another person can retrieve it is a long standing challenge. Writers, librarians and professors have faced the difficulty and somewhat overcome it. The growing amounts of information make the challenge that much greater.

Alavi and Leidner (2001) note "management reporting systems, decision support systems, and executive support systems have all focused on the collection and dissemination" of codified, explicit organizational knowledge (p. 115). "Groupware enables organizations to create intraorganizational memory in the form of both structured and unstructured information and to share this memory across time and space (p. 119)." We need to improve upon and better understand the use of these technologies.

Finally, we need to understand when it is most appropriate and cost/effective to use Information Technology to help identify people who have knowledge that is needed, when to share knowledge electronically, when to store structured knowledge in expert systems that make decisions and when to keep people as decision makers and build knowledge-driven DSS, and when to build model, data and document-driven DSS.

So it seems the status of KM at the start of 2006 is tempered acceptance, but not the mindless "hype" and "band wagon" of the past. Knowledge Management is following the path of Quality Management. According to Prusak (2001), the key ideas of Quality Management "became so deeply embedded in practices and organizational routines that they became more-or-less invisible. The quality movement can boast considerable success, saving several firms and industries from being replaced by more quality-conscious competitors and contributing valuable and sustainable concepts, vocabularies, and work processes to the pursuit of organizational effectiveness. Some commentators have assumed that the absence of quality from center stage in management discussion suggests its failure; in fact, the opposite is true. People do not talk about it much because it is a given, an integral element of organizational effectiveness. Knowledge management may similarly be so thoroughly adopted¡Xso much a natural part of how people organize work¡Xthat it eventually becomes invisible."

DSS and KM have had many successes, but there remains much to be done!

References

Alavi, M. and D. E. Leidner, "Knowledge Management and Knowledge Management Systems: Conceptual Foundations and Research Issues," MIS Quarterly, Vol. 25, no. 1, March 2001, pp. 107-136.

Barclay, R. O. and P. C. Murray, "What is knowledge management?", Knowledge Praxis, 1997, URL http://www.media-access.com/whatis.html accessed 1/1/2006.

Dugage, M., "KM programs are dead. Long live KM!," Mopsos, URL http://blog.mopsos.com .

IBM Systems Journal special issue on Knowledge Management, Vol. 40, No. 4, 2001 at URL http://www.research.ibm.com/journal/sj40-4.html .

Nonaka, I. and H. Takeuchi. The Knowledge-Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation. New York: Oxford University Press, 1995.

Power, D., "What is the difference between knowledge management and decision support?", DSS News,Vol. 2, No. 14, July 1, 2001.

Prusak, L. "Where did knowledge management come from?", IBM Systems Journal, 40(4), 2001, 1002-1007. Available at http://www.research.ibm.com/journal/sj/404/prusak.html .

Wiig, K., "Knowledge Management: Where Did It Come from, and Where Will It Go?" in Journal of Expert Systems with Applications, 1997, 13, No. 1, pp. 1-14.

Wilson, T.D., "The nonsense of 'knowledge management'" Information Research, 8(1), paper no. 144, 2002, Available at http://InformationR.net/ir/8-1/paper144.html

from Power, D., "What is the status of Knowledge Management (KM)?" DSS News, Vol. 7, No. 1, January 1, 2006.

Author: Daniel Power
Last update: 2006-08-01 15:05