

# THINK YOU KNOW

# KNOWLEDGE

What's the first thing you think of when you hear "knowledge management"? Does it involve writing things down? Does it involve conversations? Are there pictures? Is it something the IT guys do? Knowledge management expert **Judy Payne** looks to demystify knowledge.

**T**here's a lot of confusion about knowledge management (KM) and a lot of conflicting information about what it means. This is because KM has developed in stages, each adding its own flavour of KM and its own set of assumptions, beliefs, strategies and tools.

Add to this the varying speeds of adoption of new KM approaches and the tendency of organisations new to KM to start with the older, simpler methods – and it starts to become clear why there is so much conflicting information out there about what KM actually is.

Sometime around 1990, we started thinking of knowledge as an asset that should be managed. The term 'knowledge management' appeared and centuries-old knowledge creation and sharing practices became part of modern KM.

The difference between knowledge and traditional assets – such as plant, labour and capital – is that knowledge isn't a tangible thing that can be managed directly, but this is exactly what many early KM practitioners tried to do.

## KM IN THE 1990S

KM in the early 1990s was mostly about capturing, disseminating and using knowledge – usually writing things down for other people to read and apply. This flavour of KM includes best practice programmes, lessons learned databases

and document management systems. It is based on the assumptions that knowledge can be captured in the first place, people will go and find it, people will understand it, people will use it, and it will work.

Technology vendors jumped on the KM bandwagon and started to offer 'complete KM solutions', which were no more than electronic information (usually document) management systems.

In the mid 1990s, people started to realise that these assumptions didn't always hold true. In any case, it wasn't the whole knowledge story.

Focusing on knowledge that could be captured meant managing explicit knowledge – the things people know that can be readily articulated and codified into words, pictures and numbers.

Managing captured knowledge is essentially information management, which is important but doesn't tap into deeper, tacit knowledge – the things we find difficult to express, such as valuable personal insights and know-how. Tapping into tacit knowledge requires conversations, trust and time.

A new flavour of KM, based on connecting people to other people, started to emerge. This is typified by early communities of practice, social network analysis and 'yellow pages' to help employees find the people they needed to talk to. The big assumption was if people were left to their own devices, they would use their networks to find



the knowledge they needed.

The old 'information management' flavour of KM didn't go away. Neither did the technology vendors and their 'complete KM solutions'. The information management flavour of KM was still valuable, but it was no longer the only mainstream flavour on the KM menu.

## 'KNOWLEDGE-SHARING CULTURE'

Knowledge sharing had become everyone's job and suddenly organisational culture became very important. It wasn't enough to stick a manual under someone's nose – they had to want to learn and others had to want to share. The elusive 'knowledge-sharing culture' became the holy grail of KM.

By the late 1990s, two distinct flavours of KM had emerged. The first was concerned with explicit knowledge and involved connecting people to information – often using IT systems. The second was concerned with tacit knowledge and experience, and involved connecting people to other people.

During the 2000s, people realised that relying on informal networks for knowledge sharing wasn't enough. We had swung from creating and sharing knowledge in hierarchies – the information management flavour – to creating and sharing knowledge in networks – the communities of practice flavour. We realised that we needed touch points between the hierarchies and the networks. Yet another flavour of KM emerged – one where communities were given objectives rather than left to their own devices.

As social networking – Facebook, LinkedIn and Twitter – exploded into our lives, any notion of control over knowledge sharing went out of the window. As did the idea that knowledge is produced and owned by a few experts, to be used by the masses. Some KM professionals, me included, embraced social networking as part of KM. Others started to proclaim KM 'dead'.

KM, if it isn't dead, continues to develop in several different directions – creating yet more flavours. These include ideas management, collective sense making, crowdsourcing, and analysing data using knowledge algorithms to work out what people know. None of these are new, but they have started to become mainstream.

Today, KM can mean anything from a document management system,



through crowdsourcing, to knowledge algorithms.

#### PICK A CARD

A few years ago someone gave me a pack of KM method cards – one card for each of 80 KM approaches, methods and tools.

The cards cover great practices including concept mapping, rich pictures and graphic facilitation – but then I found a card called 'Project KM'. My heart sank. The card makers had made a big mistake. Whether they intended it or not, they had given people permission to think that KM in project environments was something different from KM anywhere else.

Just in case you're about to go out and buy a pack of KM method cards, expecting a set of recipes that will produce perfect KM, a word of caution.

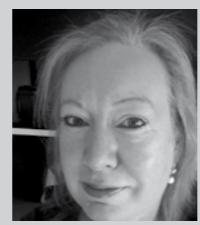
It is generally accepted that knowledge isn't a thing that can be managed. What can be managed is the environment in which knowledge is created and shared, and the processes and tools available to do this. KM methods basically connect people to information and to other people – sometimes in interesting, fun and creative ways.

Mainstream project KM is stuck in the 1990s. A few years ago, when I was researching project KM, most of my literature searches turned up articles about lessons learned databases and document management systems – the information management flavour of KM. The few articles I found that acknowledged the later flavours of KM concluded that project KM focuses on collecting information rather than connecting people to people.

The authors of these more serious articles listed many factors that make KM difficult in project environments. They wrote about the uniqueness and transience of projects, the controlled, hierarchical and time-pressured nature of projects, and the difficulties of sharing knowledge between project team members from different disciplines.

I don't buy this. The world of work has become more complex,

# NAVIGATING YOUR WAY THROUGH KM



Judy Payne thrives on "herding cats and plaiting smoke". She works as a practitioner and consultant in knowledge management, collaborative working and learning. Judy chairs the APM Knowledge SIG and is a member of the SIG steering group.

- Be aware that KM can mean many different things. Decide which flavours of KM you need for your project, your business and your sector.
- Think about what you're trying to achieve with KM. Are you trying to create new knowledge or share existing knowledge? How complex is the knowledge you're trying to create or share? How context-specific is it? The more complex and context-specific it is, the more you need conversations rather than documents.
- Even if you are simply trying to avoid repetition of mistakes, don't put all your KM efforts into codifying what people know. Make sure you connect people to other people as well – or else you'll be missing out on sharing valuable ideas, insights and experience.
- Remember that the environment for KM is just as important as the processes you put in place. Don't expect people to seek out and share knowledge without giving them time to do it.
- Try looking at your projects through a knowledge lens. Projects are all about combining and integrating the knowledge of team members. If you can't do this, can your projects succeed?
- Remember that most KM methods are just ways connecting people to information or connecting people to other people. The methods themselves don't matter. Build on good knowledge-sharing practices that already exist in and between your projects. Good KM includes not reinventing the wheel. If you've already got some wheels, use them.
- If you're not sure what KM methods will work best, experiment. Pick a few methods, try them out. Continue to support the ones that work.
- If you're not convinced that KM is important, think about what you do every time you pitch to be involved in a project. Where does knowledge and experience fit in?
- If you're still not convinced that KM is important, imagine a world in which you weren't allowed to talk and listen to your project team members. How would anyone know what to do?
- Don't believe everything you read about KM. Look at when it was written. It might have been written before the latest flavours of KM emerged – or by someone who wasn't aware that there are different flavours of KM.

workers have become more mobile and the difficulties of managing knowledge exist in all environments. Increased project working and the professionalisation of project management is itself a response to this. The development of new KM flavours is another. But somewhere along the way the two responses seem to have parted company. What I think is happening is that we tend to see project management as something quite separate and different from any other kind of management. This 'difference'

argument is reinforced by project management training and professional associations – and makes it difficult for project management professionals and project-based organisations to learn from the rest of the world.

Of course it isn't this simple. Some organisations excel in both project management and KM. But many project managers still think of KM as lessons learned databases. Even the enlightened KM method card makers are reinforcing the 'difference' argument.

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The Knowledge SIG has just started a benchmarking project that is looking at KM beliefs and practices in project-based organisations. If you are interested in taking part in the project, contact Judy at [judy@hemdean.co.uk](mailto:judy@hemdean.co.uk)