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EVOLUTION

Knowledge has long been recognised as an important asset. Management writer Peter Drucker coined the term 'knowledge worker' in the 1960s and Fortune editor Tom Stewart highlighted the importance of 'brainpower' in the early 1990s. It was in 1995, that knowledge management truly captured widespread management attention. This saw the publication of the seminal book The Knowledge-Creating Business by Nonaka and Takeuchi and the conference Knowledge for Strategic Advantage organized by Arthur Andersen and APQC. We can trace the evolution of knowledge management through several overlapping phases:

**BK - Before Knowledge Management (BC - 1995AD)** - we did it (sometimes) anyway but didn't call it KM. A stone age person showing a colleague how to hunt, Icelandic sagas and organizations such as the Royal Society were all examples of sharing knowledge for a purpose

**Awakening and Emergence (circa 1995-1997).** Knowledge management becomes explicit. It was featured at conferences and gained attention on management agendas. The end of this period saw a wave of many new books on the subject. In reality, only a small number of companies had formal programmes, mostly just in one or a few divisions. These tended to be organizations in sectors that are heavily knowledge-based and/or globally dispersed: oil, chemicals, pharmaceutical, and high technology. The geographic bias was clearly North America and Northern Europe.

**Bandwagon and and Relabelling (1997-1999).** Knowledge management was actively promoted as strategic, particularly by the large management consultancies, which used their own internal KM programmes as exemplars. As a consequence, it was 'hijacked' by IT departments, and many software and service suppliers relabeled their products and services as 'KM solutions'. A growing number of large companies created formal KM posts, such as Chief Knowledge Officers, created new knowledge initiatives and brought several existing programmes (originally designated under other labels, such as 'business transformation' or 'the learning organization') under the KM umbrella.

**Growth, Segmentation and Consolidation (1998-2005).** KM is increasingly pervasive - across functions, all sizes of organization. all sectors and all geographies. It's a combination of KM with everything: KM and risk, KM and marketing, KM and innovation, KM and quality etc. It is also recognized as a distinct academic discipline, stimulating several new university courses at Masters level). However, its overall status varied from being an important high-level initiative to just another project. Some companies dispersed their central KM teams into business units, while in other organizations KM initiatives faltered.

**Re-evaluation and Redefinition (2001-2005).** Many companies embark on formal KM programmes for the first time, while others disbanded their central KM units. There is increased questioning as to KM's distinctive essence. After all, knowledge underpins many other enterprise initiatives - such as innovation, ecommerce and customer relationship management. Significantly, many providers of 'KM solutions' have relabelled their products (again) as content management, portal or enterprise information solutions!

**In Search of New Identity (2004 onwards).** As web-based and content management technology becomes more mature, IT-enabled KM solutions become more commonplace. There is also a renewed interest in the 'human' side of KM, again helped by the uptake of social technologies such as blogs (grass-roots KM), wikis (evolving knowledge) and Facebook-like 'Yellow Pages' (know-who). KM projects tend to have a more targetted business focus, e.g. risk avoidance. But is it KM?

HISTORY

The history of knowledge management is brief because it is a relatively new discipline, starting around the 1970s. Knowledge management came about in the 1970s because of papers published by management theorists and practitioners like Peter Drucker and Paul Strassman. These papers focus around how information and knowledge could be used as valuable organizational resources. Another management expert, “Dorothy Leonard-Barton of Harvard Business School contributed significantly to the development of the theory of knowledge management and the growth of its practice by examining in their various works and publications the many facets of managing knowledge”. In fact, in 1995, Leonard-Burton documented, via a case study, the effectiveness of the Chaparral Steel Company knowledge management strategy which had been in place since the 1970s.

In the late 1970s, Everett Rogers at Stanford and Thomas Allen at MIT, pioneered studies on information and technology transfer that led to a better understanding of the many facets of organizational knowledge and the usage of computer technology to store this knowledge. One knowledge management system (KMS) that was introduced in 1978 by Doug Engelbert was named Augment, an early hypertext/groupware application system that interfaced with other applications and systems. Another KMS introduced by Rob Acksyn and Don McCraken, in the 1970s and before the world wide web, was called the Knowledge Management System.

The 1980s brought about an increased understanding of the how knowledge served as a competitive organizational asset. However, many organizations had not modified their organizational strategies to incorporate the knowledge concepts and how to effectively manage organizational knowledge. Additionally, theorists like Peter Drucker, Matsuda and Sveiby wrote a lot about the knowledge worker, resulting in the concepts of knowledge acquisition, knowledge engineering, and knowledge-based systems. Furthermore, the building of these concepts resulted in the usages of systems for managing knowledge and publishing of many knowledge management related journal articles.

Knowledge management in the 1990s grew to become a major focus in many local and global companies. Initially, there was not a great deal of interest in knowledge management amongst business executives, however after the publishing of the book by Nonaka and Hirotaka Takeuchi titled The Knowledge Creating Company: How Japanese Companies Create the Dynamics of Innovation, knowledge management was given more attention. In fact, by the mid-1990s, many companies began to realize a competitive edge due to increased company knowledge assets. The end of the 1990s saw the phasing out of the total quality management (TQM) and business process re-engineering initiatives and the implementation of knowledge management solutions.