What Might the Curriculum in Knowledge Management Programs Tell us About the Future of the Field?

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Abstract: Knowledge management is a young discipline that has been evolving since its emergence in the late 1990s and exactly what KM is has been a consistent source of discussion throughout the life of the discipline. Today, KM generally is considered a distinct discipline at the intersection of overlapping interests such as management and information science. Unlike other professional fields of study, it is not subject to the specific curricular requirements of an external agency or accreditor. With no formal body overseeing KM academic programs, there is no guarantee there is a consistent body of knowledge being taught to students in KM programs. In the current study, the curriculum of selected knowledge management programs at universities in the United States, Europe, Australia, and Asia have been analysed within current and historical contexts to understand the scope and nature of the requirements in knowledge management programs. By comparing the results from programs, a baseline understanding of overall requirements has been developed, which may provide benefits for the profession. This baseline provides a clearer understanding of the skills and knowledge elements that are present, or absent, in current academic programs. In addition to better informing the KM community of what graduates of these programs may know, this information can provide a basis for academic program improvement and, ultimately, better use of KM in professional practice.

Keywords: knowledge management academic programs, knowledge management curriculum, postgraduate and masters level academic programs, postgraduate curriculum administration

1. Introduction

Knowledge management as a discipline is only slightly more than 20 years old. Still a relatively young discipline, change in the discipline has been a constant theme throughout its lifetime. As an emerging discipline, questions related to exactly what knowledge management entails, or even if it is a discipline at all (Wilson, 2002) have been a regular theme. Emerging from efforts to make document management systems more responsive to human and organizational needs (Prusak, 2001), the field has attempted to bridge the sociological and technical gaps related to information within organizations. However, even today after more than 20 years, there is still no consistent agreement on what the term or discipline encompasses.

Although broadly encompassing the same overarching theme, early theorists and practitioners approached the field from different perspectives. This is demonstrated in the conceptual model of Wiig (1993) to more specific permutations of the domain of KM, such as:

- the generation and protection of organizational knowledge (Hedlund, 1994),

- the development and exploitation of knowledge assets to further the organization's objectives model (Davenport and Prusak, 1998),

- the management of tacit and explicit information assets within communities, (Snowden, 1998), to

- a strategic approach to transformation of organizational intellectual goods into higher productivity, new values, and increase competitiveness (Murray, 2001).

Even with this lack of clarity and agreement on exactly what the discipline of knowledge management is, most academic institutions where knowledge management is taught generally construct it as a distinct and separate discipline unto itself. Unlike many other professional fields, such as library science or public health, it is not subject to the specific curricular requirements of a discipline-specific external agency or accreditor. While the colleges where these programs exist may have specialized accreditation, there is no discipline specific accreditation for KM. With no formal body overseeing programs in knowledge management and the on-going debate related to what knowledge management even is, a valid question is "What is being taught in these programs?"

The implications of this question have potentially significant consequences for the future of the field. The most obvious issue is that students from these programs will likely be the future leaders of KM in practice. As such, it is important we understand what base of knowledge they have when they successfully complete a program as