

Overview

Readers prepared to add a powerful new tool to their arsenal of competitive business strategies may be surprised to discover that Knowledge Management (KM) has more to do with ancient civilizations than with some recent innovation in information technology (IT). Consider that, since antiquity, organized business has sought a competitive advantage that would allow it to serve customers as efficiently as possible, maximize profits, develop a loyal customer following, and keep the competition at bay, regardless of whether the product is rugs, spices, or semiconductors. Beginning about 15,000 years ago, this advantage was writing down the selected knowledge of merchants, artisans, physicians, and government administrators for future reference. Writing was used to create enduring records of the society's rules, regulations, and cumulative knowledge, including who owed and paid money to the largest enterprise of the time—the government.

In Mesopotamia about 5,000 years ago, people began to lose track of the thousands of baked-clay tablets used to record legal contracts, tax assessments, sales, and law. The solution was the start of the first institution dedicated to Knowledge Management, the library. In libraries, located in the center of town, the collection of tablets was attended to by professional knowledge managers. An unfortunate side effect of this concentration of information was that libraries made convenient targets for military conquest.

Even though war had the effect of spreading writings and drawings to new cultures, access to the information they contained was largely