

## Viewpoint

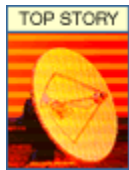
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### State of the Notion

*The collective experience of practitioners in KM and related fields point to key lessons to keep in mind for successful application of KM to business problems.*

by [Steve Barth](#)

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*Note: A few months ago, Coemergence asked for a quick summary of how KM practices and technologies have been evolving and where they need to go. My comments are adapted here with their permission--SB*

It has been 20 years since Megatrends author John Naisbitt's warned that "We are drowning in information but starved for knowledge," And yet, the water is still rising.

It's becoming increasingly obvious that, by itself, an abundance of information provides little advantage in the Information Age. But the agility that comes from making sense of that information and then converting insights to action faster than the competition has equally proven to be the most enduring advantage in business today. Many fields have emerged to capture this advantage, but at their core is knowledge management.

Unfortunately, knowledge management remains a nebulous term, even for those who identify with the field. The notion that the combined information, experience and expertise of many people can be aggregated into a whole that is greater than the sum of the parts has proven to be an elusive quest that depends on anthropology as much as technology. There is little agreement even about how the parts of KM itself fit together. Clearly, successful knowledge management must have elements of rational strategy, integrated technology and affective behaviors, but in what proportions?

Philosophically, KM is the management of intellectual assets for maximum return through increased innovation and efficiency, more effective decision-making, and improved products and services that are more responsive to customer needs. Those assets include everything from experience, expertise and relationships to documents and aggregated data. No single approach is enough to capitalize on such a disparate collection of assets.

Practically speaking, KM often comes down to the ability to deliver the right information to the right knowledge worker at the right time. KM technology offers ways to accelerate the identification and conversion of information to actionable customer knowledge, and distribute it back to employees who need it in a filtered, useful way. But while technology can enable knowledge-sharing, it is not the answer to overcoming the frequent behavioral barriers. That is a cultural issue.

One of the persistent failings of enterprise-wide KM projects, whether based on technological or sociological principles, has been that over-focusing on the economies of scale of organizational knowledge often yields a solution that is useless to any individual member of the organization. Knowledge cannot be managed the way information can be managed. Nor can knowledge workers be managed in

the way that manual labor has traditionally been directed and supervised. Too many KM applications are designed for managers rather than workers. Looking at knowledge management from the perspective of the knowledge worker rather than the knowledge manager makes it clear that the productivity of knowledge is more important than the amount of knowledge stored in the repository.

At the same time, the persistent misunderstanding that knowledge management is primarily a matter of information technology has not only undermined appreciation for the field, but also undermines appreciation of the real contributions that can be made by technology in the service of organizational goals, objectives and needs.

More and more studies indicate that most of the world's biggest companies are pursuing knowledge management in some way. But KM experts admit that, too often, KM initiatives fail to be completely deployed, fail to ease information overload, fail to create knowledge-sharing communities or fail to increase the efficiency of knowledge work.

The collective experience of practitioners in KM and related fields point to some key lessons to keep in mind for successful application of KM to business problems. Identifying some of the main lessons are obvious. But other issues are more elusive.

### **Anthropology before Technology**

Hoping for a reconciliation between polarized extremes, the "organic" school of knowledge management starts with anthropology rather than either sociology or technology: careful assessments of knowledge needs within existing business processes and of the readiness of the organizational culture.

Where tools are called for, managers must look for tools that are adaptable to the needs of workers, rather than finding workers who are adaptable to the tools.

### **Communities of Practice**

The center of gravity in knowledge management has shifted from document-centered knowledge repositories to people-centered communities of practice. Recognizing that the most valuable, tacit knowledge is rarely made explicit, the emphasis is on connection rather than collection and on conversation rather than conservation.

This has made groupware and collaboration technologies central in any KM implementation, with other tools playing supporting roles. Expertise profiling tools identify/locate specialists while instant messaging keeps people talking.

### **Making KM Personal**

Looking closely at the needs of individual knowledge workers does not contradict the emphasis on social knowledge if you consider the extent to which communities and networks are consequence of individual decisions, behaviors and motivations. The output of teams and corporations is often still a roll-up of individual value creation.

Enabling the productivity of individual knowledge workers means making available the tools and information they need to do their jobs. This starts with an understanding that the information and contacts with the most context--and therefore the most utility--spirals out from personal documents to team folders to corporate and community repositories and only then to the World Wide Web at large.

### **Context**

If knowledge is information in context, it is placed in context when new information is added to existing knowledge in mental maps and models.

New context-sensitive categorization and search tools improve the relevance of document retrieval. Information visualization tools help to recognize patterns and relationships in data, information and document collections.

## **Content**

Vendors and systems integrators have been focusing on "content management," attempting to claim the momentum from document management.

At first glance, this would seem to run counter to the heightened attention paid to context, but intranet, extranet and Intranet servers are bulging with digital content from data to documents to multimedia files that must be tamed. The key is to manage content and context equally.

## **Privacy, Security and Trust**

If knowledge has value to be shared, then that value is worth protecting, preventing it from being shared with the wrong people. Keeping sensitive research notes, product designs, marketing plans and customer information safe requires an awareness of vulnerability in both cyberspace and the real world.

At the same time, even as managers look for better incentives to stimulate contributions, experience emphasizes the voluntary nature of knowledge sharing. Though fragile, trust becomes the very foundation of knowledge management. Promising and protecting employee and customer privacy—even on proprietary corporate networks—is the first step towards earning trust. So is creating an atmosphere of psychological safety, wherein no one fears reprisal for expressing his or her opinions.

## **Mobile, Wireless Knowledge**

With more and more knowledge workers traveling and telecommuting—and yet, still collaborating and communicating more than ever with colleagues—all of the above principles must be portable for anytime, anywhere knowledge management.

Secure access via the Web and wireless networks needs to be available through laptops, PDAs and mobile phones. There is currently a convergence of portable information devices, even as there is a divergence of information access choices. Software vendors and application service providers (ASPs) are scrambling to add mobile access to information and functionality through Java, XML and many other standards.

## **Targeted Solutions**

Knowledge management is based on the ultimate economy of scale, but the truth is that KM doesn't scale well. One of the unfortunate phenomena in KM has been the success of pilot projects that raise expectations only to meet with disillusionment after global rollouts. Too often, the application of knowledge management in the pilot is much more specific, and therefore more effective. The returns on enterprise-wide projects are often less than the investment.

So knowledge managers are sticking to smaller projects and "low hanging fruit," solving one particular problem at a time, particularly where processes are well defined and the payoffs are dramatic. In time, these quick wins demonstrate the value of KM and build momentum for more ambitious projects.

## **MISSING PIECES**

The above principles are already being built into knowledge management initiatives. But there is still a long way to go. To be valuable, KM must be more useful in the everyday exercise of enterprise knowledge. Several additional avenues are just beginning to be explored.

### **Acceptance**

Rather than being promoted as some kind of unified field theory absorbing every form of intellectual capital management in the New Economy, KM must be offered as an adaptable infrastructure available to connect and support all the disparate paths to improving efficiency, effectiveness and profitability. Deep connections need to be cultivated with other fields that leverage information, intelligence and experience.

In terms of technologies, acceptance as infrastructure means that KM applications must be based on open standards allowing the exchange of data and information between diverse groups and their existing systems.

### **Anticipation**

KM still spends too much time looking backward. Deriving customer insights by mining transaction data and replicating best practices throughout a global organization are examples of the bottom line results of knowledge management. However, competitive advantage more often comes from seeing more clearly emerging futures and the analyzing the best path ahead.

### **Activation**

Much more needs to be understood about both the barriers and triggers to learning, sharing and acting on critical information and knowledge. Technology has little role to play in this. Neither does rational analysis.

In the old days of rigid hierarchies, employees needed little motivation to guide their interactions besides fear and greed. In today's workplace, characterized more by distributed decision-making, ad hoc teams and networks, and multiple modes of interaction throughout the day, social, political and emotional competencies are critical.

These factors have a huge impact on the ways in which managers and workers communicate. Until the dynamics of these "soft" issues are better understood in organizations, there is no way to know how much hard-dollar growth they might yield.

### **Absorption**

There is more reason than ever to expect that KM will become pervasive and porous. KM is an ethic that must be embedded in processes, in tools, in disciplines, in values, in the very culture of the corporation. All of the above understanding must be turned into techniques and tools. KM functions need to be embedded in existing business processes and, therefore, in the tool sets used to accomplish them. And then, once mastered, those techniques need to be forgotten-become subconscious.

### **Articulation**

Making tacit knowledge explicit in a way that makes it easy to internalize as tacit again by someone else is often about recording the context with the content. Perhaps this is why there is so much interest in storytelling as a method of knowledge transfer.

However, managing context along with the content in KM applications still has a lot of room for improvement. Too often, the two are managed separately. But more than any other advance, context management would help turn knowledge management into meaning management.

Comprehending customer needs, bringing innovations to market, managing resources and monitoring the competitive landscape are just a few of the functions that need to be accelerated by new strategies and new technologies. Acceleration is about looking forward rather than backward, assembling images not of the historical past or even the real-time present, but of the emerging future.

The raw material for the necessary insights is both inside and outside the company. It exists in both structured and unstructured form and needs to be refined from disparate bits and bytes of aggregated data, incomplete information and unarticulated human knowledge.

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