8-2010

Practical Relevance of Knowledge Management and Intellectual Capital Scholarly Research: Books as Knowledge Translation Agents

Alexander Serenko
Lakehead University, aserenko@lakeheadu.ca

Nick Bontis
McMaster University, nbontis@mcmaster.ca

Emily Hull
Lakehead University, ehull@lakeheadu.ca

Follow this and additional works at: http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2010

Recommended Citation
Serenko, Alexander; Bontis, Nick; and Hull, Emily, "Practical Relevance of Knowledge Management and Intellectual Capital Scholarly Research: Books as Knowledge Translation Agents" (2010). AMCIS 2010 Proceedings. 43.
http://aisel.aisnet.org/amcis2010/43

This material is brought to you by the Americas Conference on Information Systems (AMCIS) at AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). It has been accepted for inclusion in AMCIS 2010 Proceedings by an authorized administrator of AIS Electronic Library (AISeL). For more information, please contact elibrary@aisnet.org.
Practical Relevance of Knowledge Management and Intellectual Capital Scholarly Research: Books as Knowledge Translation Agents

Alexander Serenko  
Lakehead University  
aserenko@lakeheadu.ca

Nick Bontis  
McMaster University  
nbontis@mcmaster.ca

Emily Hull  
Lakehead University  
ehull@lakeheadu.ca

ABSTRACT
To enhance our understanding of the relevance of knowledge management/intellectual capital (KM/IC) academic research, this study explores what sources authors utilize to develop their book content. Ten prominent KM/IC book authors were interviewed to identify if and how KM/IC academic literature is being disseminated through books. It was found that the body of knowledge existing in peer-reviewed journals is utilized in the development of book/textbook content. Books serve as knowledge translation agents through which academic literature is summarized, aggregated and transformed into the format that may be easily comprehended by non-academics. In addition to peer-reviewed journals, KM/IC book authors utilize other sources, including personal research, experts’ opinions, experience, practitioner magazines, conferences, books, and informal discussions with academics. The model, which was developed within this study, demonstrates that the book’s target audience and author’s motivation serve as a pure moderator of the relationship between the available content sources and actual book content.

Keywords  
Knowledge management, intellectual capital, relevance, books, knowledge translation agent

INTRODUCTION
Knowledge management and intellectual capital (KM/IC) is a burgeoning field appealing to both academics and professionals. Practitioners work in an environment of rapid market fluctuations and information bombardment, which increases the need for knowledge in substitute of disparate information and data (Dickson, Chiu, & Cheung, 2002; Malafsky, 2003). Consistent with the necessary changes in practice, scholars focus their attention towards identifying and improving KM practices and capitalizing on the IC within an organization. Traditionally, researchers have been creating knowledge that mostly appears in peer-reviewed publications. However, in the recent years, the practical relevance of research produced by KM/IC business academics has been questioned (Andriessen, 2004; Ferguson, 2005). For example, there are claims that scholarly publications are outdated, narrow in scope, difficult to interpret and impossible to implement. At the same time, Booker et al. (2008) conducted a series of interviews with KM/IC professionals and concluded that such views are fully not warranted. Instead, the KM/IC practitioners perceive KM/IC academic research output of high value. Instead, it is knowledge distribution channels that impede the transformation of scholarly research findings to practical implementations. In other words, academics deliver useful and relevant knowledge on the knowledge market, but it needs to be transferred to practitioners in the most effective and efficient form.

There are two ways by which KM/IC research output reaches practitioners (Booker et al., 2008). Based on the direct knowledge transfer method, industry professionals are supposed to educate themselves by attending academic conferences and reading academic papers. According to the indirect knowledge transfer approach, knowledge appearing in peer-reviewed sources is transformed into the format that may be easily comprehended by busy practitioners. For example, consultants utilize academic knowledge in reports which are delivered to their clients, think tanks and policy research centers make use
of academic findings, new knowledge gets incorporated into curricula, workshops and textbooks, academics directly interact with practitioners during consulting projects, and word-of-mouth discussions take place among practitioners. The key question in terms of the relevance of KM/IC academic research is not whether academic findings are being disseminated to practitioners but how this process occurs.

As part of a multi-phased project which investigates a number of vehicles of KM/IC academic knowledge transformation, this study explores the indirect knowledge distribution channel. Particularly, it investigates whether academic knowledge appearing in peer-reviewed publications is utilized in the content of books and textbooks which in turn are delivered to the end knowledge consumers. Book authors typically target one of three primary audiences: 1) other academics (e.g., monographs), 2) students (e.g., textbooks), and 3) practitioners (e.g., how-to books). In this project, ten prominent authors of KM/IC books were selected and interviewed in order to unravel the issue of how KM/IC academic research is translated to practice by means of books and textbooks.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Knowledge translation is a dynamic and interactive process that includes the synthesis, dissemination, exchange and ethically sound application of scholarly output (Strauss, Tetroe, & Graham, 2009). Knowledge may be transferred from person to person (Levin & Cross, 2004), during consultations (Song, Almeida, & Wu, 2003) or through mediums, such as article databases (Garavelli, Gorgoglione, & Scozzi, 2002) and books (Kilgour, 1998). Ideally, these mechanisms would suffice in providing practitioners with adequate information containing the most recent and relevant research findings (Armstrong, Waters, Roberts, & Oliver, 2006). In reality, this is not the case and practitioners are rarely exposed to up-to-date academic material (Pearson, Pearson, & Shim, 2005).

Dating back to the mid-19th century, a term referred to as Evidence-Based Medicine was coined. It is defined as the conscientious, explicit and judicious use of current best evidence in making decisions about the care of individual patients (Sackett, 2009). As an extension of this theory, Jeffrey Pfeffer and Robert Sutton at the University of Stanford invented the term Evidence-Based Management (Pfeffer & Sutton, 2006). Evidence-Based Management suggests if managers make decisions based on evidence, their companies will trump the competition. This may seem intuitive; managers, however, often rely on intuition, past practices or unreliable information sources despite novel and contradictory findings that are often discovered by academics. The nature of this concept fuels debates about the relevance of academic knowledge in practice. A better understanding of how research is disseminated to its intended users will allow us to enhance such channels and increase the flow of knowledge from academia to practice.

The issue of academic relevance has a long-standing tradition in scientific circles (Ruback & Innes, 1988). There are views that there is a crisis in the field of organizational science and the principal symptom of which is that as our research methods and techniques have become more sophisticated, they have also become increasingly less useful for solving the practical problems that members of organizations face (Susman & Evered, 1978). There is evidence that executives typically do not turn to academics or scholarly findings in developing management strategies and practices (Mowday, 1996). Similarly, researchers rarely turn to practitioners for inspiration in setting their research questions (Rynes, Bartunek, & Daft, 2001). The relevance of research in the KM/IC domain has been challenged by this apparent trend of incestuous circles among academics and among practitioners. The gap can be found in nearly all fields in which there are both researchers and practitioners. An illustrative example of this gap is the fact that it took nearly 200 years from the time a clear and convincing cure for scurvy was found to the time it was widely adopted by the British navy (Mosteller, 1981).

Even though over one hundred scholarly papers have been devoted to the problem of academic research relevance, only a handful of researchers have studied the relevance problem empirically. Overall, those who investigated the issue found a large discrepancy between academic findings and related practices (Ankers & Brennan, 2002; Duncan, 1974). At the same time, Baldridge et al. (2005) demonstrated that there is a positive relationship between the academic quality and practical relevance of academic publications. It follows that high quality academic research may have a positive impact on management practices, but it gets lost somewhere along the way. There have been a number of speculations offered as to why academic findings in KM/IC are not reaching the intended practitioner audience, some of which are: 1) attributes of academic publications such as its length and language complexity; 2) the motivation of researchers to be recognized by their academic peers at the expense of producing practically relevant research; 3) academic outlets, such as peer-reviewed journals, often demand fundamental changes to papers making them highly theoretical; and 4) the context, in which the research is conducted, is often inconsistent with that of the practitioner’s environment (Booker et al., 2008). Practically relevant academic literature should also address timely topics, offer implementable ideas, synthesize complex phenomena, and
stimulate critical thinking (Benbasat & Zmud, 1999). A major argument is that the direct academic knowledge distribution approach has completely failed.

In order to bridge the gap between academic research and practice, it is critical to explore the indirect scholarly knowledge distribution channels to identify the vehicles by which research can be translated and transmitted to practice. Academic institutions rarely reward their faculty for publishing in professional journals or trade magazines; as a result, few academics write for the professional audience (Kelemen & Bansal, 2002). It is unarguable that there needs to be an effective knowledge translation mechanism, bringing academic KM/IC research to practice. Most previous attempts to investigate the translation of scholarly knowledge have mostly focused on conventional research processes by directly analyzing publications in academic journals (i.e., the direct knowledge dissemination approach). However, while knowledge may be disseminated via these methods, they have little impact on practice or policy (Grunfeld & al., 2004). For this reason, it is important to investigate other means through which knowledge can be translated to practitioners so that it can be quickly employed in decision-making.

Among the main vehicles equipped with the potential to disseminate research findings, books and textbooks play a pivotal role. They are read by industry professionals and used as a learning tool in business schools; therefore, books have the potential to showcase current research findings and educate future managers about the contemporary academic literature. In this study, it is suggested that books used in classrooms to teach future managers and those read by practitioners are a mechanism equipped with the potential to translate knowledge from academia to practice.

Books are a starting point for intercultural and intracultural communication (Davidson, 1988). Writing and printing were invented to extend the capacity of narrative to store information (Bruns, 1980). Founded in 427 AD in North East India, and existing until 1197 AD, Nalanda was one of the first universities in recorded history. It had a nine-story library where monks meticulously copied books so that scholars could have their own collections (Garten, 2006). At first, books were written by hand, one at a time. With the rise of universities in the 13th century, the Manuscript Culture led to an increased demand on books, and a new system for copying books appeared (Kilgour, 1998). Since the availability of books increased, books became a common medium through which knowledge was disseminated. On the one hand, literacy has had dramatic effects on language, culture and society. On the other, these effects are not clearly formulated, poorly understood and rarely empirically examined (Olson, Torrance, & Hildyard, 1985). At the same time, scholars advocate that the introduction of the written word has had an impact on the direction in which the entire civilization has been developing. For example, it facilitated social, psychological and cognitive improvements, enhanced the ability to inflict social change, and heightened moral awareness (Clammer, 1976). Intellectually, books have generated knowledge transfer and provided people with a greater access to knowledge; this process has been accelerating in the current electronic era. Information technologies have dramatically altered how written and visual language is created, processed and used (Snyder, 1998).

As such, books and textbooks have become a critical mechanism in preserving and disseminating knowledge. At the same time, it is not unknown what role they currently play in translating pure academic knowledge existing in peer-reviewed journals into the format targeted to non-academic, practice-oriented audiences. The present project attempts to fill this void.

**METHODOLOGY**

In order to investigate the use of academic research in KM/IC books, ten prominent authors in the field of KM/IC were interviewed. These authors are highly involved in KM/IC research and practice, and they maintain roles as professors, consultants, directors, and CEOs of organizations of varying sizes directly dealing with KM/IC issues. Some of them are often referred to as the founders of the entire KM/IC field. Nine semi-structured telephone interviews were conducted over a period of two months, all of which were tape-recorded and subsequently transcribed. Each interview lasted approximately one hour. One interview was conducted over email.

The interview questions were designed to investigate three relevant issues: the motivation of authors, content selection process and target audience. The term motivation is often used to analyze decisions and behaviors that cannot be explained by ability alone. Motivation is concerned with the direction, arousal, amplitude, and persistence of an individual’s behavior (Campbell & Pritchard, 1976). Career motivation is considered a multidimensional construct. Components consist of individual characteristics (career identity, career insight, and career resilience domains), corresponding career decisions and actual behaviors (London, 1983). Based on the multidimensionality of the construct, it is very difficult to address the breadth of motivation as potential influencers. It is however conceivable that career motivation may influence the decision of the author to write the book, and what topics to cover. A number of interview questions were therefore constructed to identify a potential link between motivation and use of academic literature.
The content selected by authors determines the material presented to readers. It is therefore worthwhile to investigate why and how authors select the content for their books. We also asked the authors what target audience they had in mind when they wrote their book. All questions pertained to only one, either the latest or most influential, book. All interviews were subjected to qualitative data analysis techniques (Miles & Snow, 1978) by two coders who have expertise in the areas of KM/IC and academic research relevance.

FINDINGS

Framework

The subjects represented a sample of respected KM/IC academics and professionals encompassing a wide demographic. They hold a range of positions in academia, industry and public sector. Some of them have published up to seven books on KM/IC and related topics. On average, they read 178 peer-reviewed and professional articles per year, and publish five articles in academic and professional journals per year. Most attend various conferences, serve on editorial boards, and perform reviews for scholarly journals.

It was found that the authors utilized various sources to develop book content, such as peer-reviewed journals, personal research, field experts’ opinions, personal experience, practitioner and trade magazines, ideas from conference proceedings and presentations, other books, and informal discussions with academics. The process of content source selection was affected by two major factors: target audience and motivation. It was observed that target audience and motivation influence the extent to which the authors utilize these content sources. Based on the findings, a framework explicating this relationship emerged. The framework describes how target audience and author motivation function as a moderating variable which changes the strength of the link between academic sources and their use in book content (see Figure 1). This variable is a pure moderator, consistent with the framework proposed by Sharma et al. (1981).

Content Sources:
- Academic Journals
- Personal Research
- Field Experts
- Personal Experience
- Practitioner Magazines
- Conferences
- Other Books/Textbooks
- Discussions with Academics

Influencing Factors:
- Target Audience
  - academia
  - practice
- Author’s Motivation
  - contribution to theory
  - bringing theory into practice
  - personal interests
  - publisher’s request

Figure 1. The Suggested Framework

Content Sources

It was found that academic journals were the most frequently utilized source for ideas, evidence and examples presented in books:
“I’m looking at the reference list here, I would say that half of them are [academic] journal articles, if not more.”

Academic journals were followed by personal research, formal and informal discussions with practitioners, personal industry experience, and professional publications:

“We drew on a lot of material to help found the book, the [academic] references served as a departure point, and then we drew upon our own experiences.”

In some rare cases, content was obtained during academic and practitioner conferences, found in other books, or emerged during discussions with KM/IC academics.

Influencing Factors

There are two major factors that affect the authors’ content selection decisions, such as the book’s target audience and the author’s motivation to write the book. Two distinct target audiences were identified: professionals, for example, industry experts, and academics, including researchers, instructors and students:

“I write to help other practitioners.”

“I write for the people that are thinking about carrying out acquisitions, people that are concerned with growth of the organization. They can be the strategists, they can be the people who then carry it out…”

“I was writing for students and academics.”

“I wrote the book to be used in my own courses.”

Whereas some authors wrote for a specific target audience only (i.e., either for practitioners or academics), others targeted both groups:

“The target audience, for me, was all knowledge management practitioners… as well as academics.”

The target audience had a moderating effect on the content sources – actual book content relationship. Academic journals were utilized to a lesser extent in books targeted to industry professionals, whereas they were a predominant content source in books aimed at academia. For example, if the authors were writing a book for use in academic settings, they reported having used academic journals and other books more often than those writing for practitioners, who relied on trade magazines and personal industry experience to a larger extent.

The authors were motivated by several factors. The most common was to fill the gap in existing literature or to correct commonly held misunderstandings in an effort to create a comprehensive understanding of the field. Perhaps, due to the immaturity of the field, this should be expected:

“My intention is to fill a gap in literature and in the practice about how to manage the dynamics of knowledge assets and intellectual capital. Most of the attention, when looking at the literature, has been focused on the assessment of IC and KM. I believe there is now a need to bridge a gap between the knowledge management and the assessment of intellectual capital looking at the dynamics of intellectual capital.”

“There was, at the time, so much confusion about what is intellectual capital and knowledge management… I wanted to bring together all the different perspectives because I got hugely frustrated going to conferences and hearing people [using] different terminology… I tried to bring it all together, and say ‘how’s the whole field evolved, and how can we convert this into one integrated theme basically?’”

The second most commonly stated reason for writing a book was to teach others and bring theory into practice. These authors felt it was important to pass onto others what they know and to bridge the gap between findings made by academics and practices being carried out by practitioners:

“I wanted to identify and inform others about what we have to understand and know to be good KM professionals.”

“I love to learn and help others grow in life – life is too short, and I desire to leave a legacy. Words live on, people don’t.”

Some books were written because of personal interests. The authors believed that if they are interested in some topics, so might be the reader. The books were also written upon the request from the publisher:
“I got this book contract because this book series had been established and the book then kind of acquired its own sort of life that in a way moved away from the traditional knowledge management base.”

It was observed that the book writing process was similar to that of teaching when the authors taught not only their students, but also other scholars and professionals. Motivational factors also moderated the content sources – actual book content link. Those, who attempted to contribute to theory development, relied more on academic information sources. A positive correlation between motivation and target audience was observed; those who were motivated by purely academic issues were more likely to target an academic audience. For instance, the author who wanted to contribute to theory with academic readers in mind stated:

“[I use] mostly academic stuff…it would be primarily academic and my own approach to kind of integrate sources.”

In contrast, those who tried to bring theory to practice in order to teach industry professionals, developed content based on their personal experience and non-academic publications. For example:

“Forty percent of the material in the book came from reports of my own personal practical experience.”

Those, who were motivated by several factors and appealed to both audiences, utilized all available resources:

“I’m referencing academic research such as journal articles, personal research, other scholarly books, any other conferences...”

The influencing factors are considered a pure moderator of the relationship between the content available at each author’s disposal and the content utilized in the book. A pure moderator is a variable that affects the strength and/or direction of the causal link between two factors, but it is totally independent on them (Bontis & Serenko, 2007; Sharma et al., 1981). In the present case, target audience and motivational factors were not related to book sources and the book content, but they dramatically influenced the author’s selection decisions.

**IMPLICATIONS**

The purpose of this study was to investigate whether KM/IC books serve as a medium of knowledge transfer from academic journals to knowledge consumers, such as scholars, students, and industry experts. For this, ten interviews with respected KM/IC book authors were conducted, and the data were subjected to qualitative data analysis techniques. Based on the findings, several important implications emerged:

*Implication #1: The body of knowledge existing in peer-reviewed journals is utilized in the development of book/textbook content.*

Throughout the past decade, many academics and practitioners have claimed that academic research appearing in peer-reviewed journals rarely reaches the final knowledge consumers, especially, practitioners. In contrast, it was observed that knowledge from peer-reviewed articles may indirectly reach its destination by means of books that are used by not only scholars, but also practitioners and students, most of whom will eventually join the non-academic sector.

This indirect route from academic research to practitioner consumption is understandable given that the initial genesis of the KM/IC field was precipitated by senior executives at banks and insurance companies. In fact, there was a delay of about five to ten years from the first reported evidence of KM/IC initiatives taking place to the publication of the first peer-reviewed journals in the field. Evidently, this delay still persists as the delayed cycle now continues from academic research to book/textbook content.

*Implication #2: Books serve as knowledge translation agents.*

Consistent with the findings by Booker et al. (2008), it was concluded that books serve as a knowledge conversion mechanism that allows to aggregate, summarize, contextualize, and convert academic knowledge into a format that may be easily comprehended by practitioners and students. All authors reported that they used peer-reviewed journals to design book content to some extent. This means that books are equipped with the potential to disseminate academic knowledge.

One main benefit that books bring to the knowledge translation process is their relative increased emphasis on application compared to academic journal articles. The typical final section of virtually all academic research papers is a small paragraph or two on application and practitioner implications. This of course is an after-thought and not the main purpose of journal
articles. Conversely, books have the opportunity to dive deeper into the translation process by providing more insight into how the theoretical and conceptual contribution of a research study can be translated into actual practical advice.

Implication #3: Book’s target audience and author’s motivation serve as a pure moderator of the relationship between the available content sources and actual book content.

Books targeted to practitioners and inspired by a desire to bring theory to practice are based on the author’s personal experience and contain many non-peer reviewed sources, for example, trade magazines. In contrast, books targeted to the academic readership have content that is mostly derived from peer-reviewed journals, books and author’s personal research. Ultimately, it is the target audience and author’s motivation that play a significant role in the nature of a book’s content. Furthermore, it is important to reiterate that whereas a journal article’s publication is often considered a measure for academic performance (i.e., towards tenure and promotion), a book’s publication also has a revenue generation parameter that alters the author’s motivation and size of target audience.

CONCLUSION

Authors are not generally motivated to write books for the purpose of reporting and interpreting academic literature. In fact, they often write books because there is a paucity of books on a specific topic. Authors usually select their book’s content based on the topics with which they are very familiar. Accordingly, content is selected in an effort to create a comprehensive discussion of the issue. While this research presents an optimistic understanding of books’ potential to disseminate academic knowledge to those who may put it to practical use, there is an assumption that business students and practitioners actually read the book, understand the material, and will eventually implement the practices which reflect the message in the book. For this reason, it is imperative to continue investigating the relevance of KM/IC academia in practice.

This study had several limitations. First, the sample size was relatively small. This, however, was addressed by interviewing the most prominent authors in the field. Second, the research relied on self-reported data. The findings, therefore, might be distorted by the presence of the social desirability bias. These limitations can be addressed in future research by increasing the sample size, and quantitatively verifying the extent to which authors use academic references, for example, by counting the types of references in their books. Future research should also measure the extent to which other potential knowledge translation agents, such as consultants or doctoral program graduates who went to industry upon graduation, disseminate knowledge to those that may benefit from its use.

REFERENCES


