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Panel: Knowledge Management: Hype, Fiction and Reality

Jacky Swan

Warwick Business School, irobjs@wbs.warwick.ac.uk

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Panel: Knowledge Management: Hype, Fiction and Reality.

Chair: Jacky Swan,
Warwick Business School
University of Warwick, UK.
Email: irobjs@wbs.warwick.ac.uk

I. INTRODUCTION

Interest in Knowledge Management (herein KM) has seen exponential growth over the last 2-3 years, with articles quadrupling in numbers during this period (Scarborough et al., 1999). KM is broadly defined as any process or practice that involves 'acquiring, creating, capturing, storing, sharing and using knowledge to enhance organizational performance' (Bassi, 1997). Whilst this definition suggests a variety of practices and processes, research and practice in KM have been dominated by a focus on using Information and Communications Technologies (ICTs) to store (data warehouses), search (data mining) and transfer (intranets, groupware) knowledge within and across organizations (Scarborough et al, 1999). Behind much of this work lies a 'cognitive' model of knowledge as something that exists inside peoples' heads, which can be extracted, codified, and made available more widely. Great claims (hype) are made then as to the performance improvements that can be achieved through the use of sophisticated IT-based tools for knowledge capture, storage and sharing. The assumption underpinning these claims is that IT can improve the stocks and flows of knowledge within a firm.

On the other hand, others note that these claims typically overestimate the utility of new ITs for delivering organizational performance improvements (fiction), with evidence suggesting no direct correlation between IT investment and business performance (Malhotra, 1998; Strassmann, 1998). This panel will explore and explain the hype, fiction and reality that shrouds KM. The panel will suggest, not that IT or IT professionals have no role to play, but that this role needs to be developed through a more reflective and contingent approach that makes it possible to align the use of IT-based KM tools with social and organizational structures and processes.

II. PANEL MEMBERS

Jacky Swan is a Reader in Organizational Behaviour at Warwick Business School. She will look at what and who is driving the KM bandwagon. This gives some clues as to direction in which this bandwagon is heading and the potential pitfalls that KM may face if it continues blindly down this route. She will argue that, paradoxically part of the secret to KM's success as a management fashion has been its focus on tangible tools and technology and its de-stressing of complex, often intangible behavioural and organizational issues. However, if the KM bandwagon continues on this path then the hype may have a limited chance of becoming reality, with KM instead becoming just the next fad to forget people.

Maxine Robertson, senior lecturer in Organizational Behaviour at Coventry Business School, will follow the

opening presentation. She will expose some of the hype and fiction surrounding KM practice by questioning the simple equivalence between the use of KM information technologies and innovation. Drawing on the example of two knowledge intensive firms that stay in business only through their capacity to innovate, she notes a conscious absence of IT tools and argues instead for increased recognition of the relationship between social conditions and innovation - the reality of KM, then, is in developing social communities of practice.

Carsten Sorensen, lecturer in Information Systems at London School of Economics will follow. His contribution acknowledges that there may well be different approaches to KM, caricatured as the 'cognitive' or 'community' models. However, each brings with it its own distinctive problems in terms of human beings' capacity to deal with information and relationships. In the real world of human beings, as opposed to cyborgs, the use of IT may actually fortify rather than relieve these problems.

Karl Kautz is an Associate Professor in Information Systems at Copenhagen Business School. His contribution develops a more optimistic view of the role of IT for KM, presenting evidence that improvements can happen in practice if IT is put in its appropriate place. A case study of a Danish software enterprise is presented where IT was embedded in to the daily activities of employees and was used to support and facilitate learning rather than to dictate, regulate or even worse obstruct the process.

Sue Newell is Professor of Innovation and Organizational Analysis at Nottingham Business School, Nottingham Trent University. Weighing up these debates, she will conclude that the problem of choosing an approach to KM that has more chance of working in practice really hinges, not on which approach works best, but rather on what are we trying to manage knowledge for. She concludes, then with a summary of a more contingent perspective on KM that begins to align KM approaches with their particular purposes and context. These final two contributions outline approaches that could help to turn KM hype and fiction into reality.

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