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# Knowledge Management: Fad or Enduring Organizational Concept?

Dariusz Jemielniak, *Kozminski University*  
Jerzy Kociatkiewicz



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HANDBOOK OF RESEARCH ON

# KNOWLEDGE- INTENSIVE ORGANIZATIONS



Dariusz Jemielniak & Jerzy Kociatkiewicz

# Handbook of Research on Knowledge-Intensive Organizations

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## Chapter XXXIII

# Knowledge Management: Fad or Enduring Organizational Concept?

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### ABSTRACT

*Knowledge management and knowledge-intensive work are two of today's hot buzzwords, though both already have a history of managerial usage. While some authors claim that knowledge is the most important organizational asset in contemporary society, others retort that much of knowledge management literature and practical solutions are just perfunctory and propagandist and many, if not most, managerial policies rely on manipulation of emotions and identity creation. This chapter aims to capitalize on this fascinating and timely research area. We want to present the current business fad of knowledge-management in terms of excess and forgetful repetition of ideas. We look at knowledge management as an idea of highly suspect utility, and search for explanations for and possible counterbalances to its ubiquity.*

### INTRODUCTION

The concepts of knowledge management and knowledge-intensive work have been developing for quite a while. Some authors claim that knowledge is the most important organizational asset in contemporary society, and that as a result, knowledge workers are crucial for a company's

success (e.g. Stewart, 1997). Others claim that much of the knowledge management literature and practical solutions are just perfunctory and propagandist (Styhre & Sundgren, 2005). Many managerial policies rely on the manipulation of emotions and identity creation (Kärreman & Alvesson, 2004).

Another interesting issue is that knowledge-workers are perceived and presented as the most valued members of an organization, leading and defining it; at the same time they are manipulated, “engineered,” overworked until they burn out, and deprived of family life (Perlow, 1997). The conflict between the worker and manager is often more obvious than in other settings (Roscigno & Hodson, 2004). These and other paradoxes mark knowledge work and knowledge-intensive companies as a particularly worthwhile object of study.

This short chapter, which concludes this book, capitalizes on this fascinating and timely research area. We want to present the current business fad of knowledge-management in terms of excess and forgetful repetition of ideas, dating back not only to Mallet (1975), but also perhaps to Plato. We believe that the praise for excessive consumption has also been taken to the world of ideas, and that knowledge management is a conspicuous example of the overproduction of notions, old crumbs of wisdom infinitely regurgitated into a pop-culture pulp – all done in the name of promoting knowledge-intensive organizations.

## **KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AS PULP FICTION**

One of the most disingenuous characteristics of knowledge management literature is the fact that its content can be often reduced to a truism: knowledge is good, so make people share it.

Alexander Styhre and Mats Sundgren (2005) describe this phenomenon, characteristic of the pop-management literature on creativity and knowledge in organizations, by merciless exposure of arbitrary references, wishful thinking, methodological ridicule, and obtrusive didacticism of William C. Miller’s *Flash of Brilliance* (1999). Indeed, all too many knowledge management books resemble children’s storybooks: they are full of colorful images and diagrams, they are

written in a simplified language (do the authors of books on knowledge management really think that their readers are so stupid?), and include simplistic advice that is little different from what is found in the bestselling Chicken Soup series (Canfield & Hansen, 1993).

This has been confirmed by our short, and mostly anecdotal, research experiment at the 2008 Standing Conference for Management and Organization Inquiry (SCMOI) meeting in Philadelphia. We looked up “knowledge” and “knowledge management” in [books.google.com](http://books.google.com). From the eight top books in both categories we chose one sentence with the word “knowledge” (not “knowledge management”). We distributed the sentences among SCMOI participants and asked them to try to determine whether or not the quotation had been taken from the knowledge management literature. The examples included such obvious sentences as:

- “knowledge evolves as our purposes change in creative response to our environment” (Alle, 1997, p. 19)
- “‘maps’ to knowledge experts are useless if these experts cannot be reached at the moment when knowledge is needed” (Malhotra, 2000, p. 124)
- “the knowledge transfer process involves the transmission of knowledge from the initial location to where it is needed and is applied” (Easterby-Smith & Lyles, 2003, p. 110).

We contrasted these with statements like:

- “the boundaries of distinct disciplines became a more entrenched feature of the production of knowledge, embodied in the constitution of university” (Goliński, 1998, p. 67),
- “the behavioral account of knowledge has considerable plausibility with respect to third-person epistemic judgments” (Kornblith, 2002, p. 91)

- “perceptual knowledge cannot be reconstructed in terms of inductive reasons” (Pollock & Cruz, 1999, p. 43).

It was not surprising that about 75% of the conference participants were correct in their guesses. While the results of this quick poll do not prove anything, they may indicate that the knowledge management literature uses the word “knowledge” in contexts that are very different, and perhaps significantly simpler, than does the literature of other fields.

Some authors interpret this guilelessness as yet another managerial fad (Fotache, 2005; Klinec-wicz, 2004). Indeed, management is a field that has a constant demand for new ideas and notions, cycling as often as every 5-10 years (Abrahamson, 1991). The proposed concepts cannot be overly sophisticated, as they have to resonate well with the mass audience. In fact, they need to be repetitive and rephrase the general truths. In this sense, knowledge management can be perceived as totally separate from organizational reality, being more like a well propagated mem than anything more serious (Ponzi & Michael, 2002).

There is nothing new in the need to handle information and encourage employees’ collaboration. The Egyptians invented papyrus, and the Chinese invented paper for the purpose of storing data. They did not have Peter Drucker to call them knowledge workers (after elegantly borrowing the idea from Fritz Machlup), but they did employ methods that were contemporaneously associated with knowledge management (Cortada, 1998).

Another argument in favor of treating knowledge management as just a literary fashion is the fact that the notion of “knowledge management” is used arbitrarily. It functions in many contexts and has a plethora of meanings (Wilson, 2002). This may suggest that, while knowledge management is a bestselling brand, there is no grounded meaning behind the slogan: it can be used conveniently to mean almost anything.

Finally, the knowledge element in knowledge management is often dubious. In this part of KM literature, which tries to approach the subject more scientifically, the inconsistencies and lack of common methodological ground accumulate (Alvesson, Kärreman, & Swan, 2002; Styhre, 2003). So do the discrepancies with information theory, from which KM eagerly draws. Thus, knowledge management is a rhetorically attractive term, one that is neither related to knowledge nor to management per se.

That said, we believe that knowledge management is more than just a fad. We will try to explain the potential usefulness of this concept over and above its status as a platitude.

While it is possible to scour historical records for evidence of precedents of contemporary social arrangements, such an activity is both entertaining and pointless. Robert Merton’s (1965) magisterial *On The Shoulders of Giants*, an erudite search of the origin of the titular phrase, is perhaps the most accomplished illustration of both qualities. Few, if any, social institutions appear out of nowhere, but their significance and prevalence varies by context. Through a combination of factors such as the growing complexity and dominance of technoscience (Haraway, 2008), the development of widespread global communication and large-scale network forms of organization (Castells, 1996), and, at least in the West, a shift away from manufacturing, (certifiable and certified) knowledge has become the prime characteristic and requirement of valued, and well paid, work. While the present period has also seen massive growth in unskilled service desk and call center McJobs, these carry low prestige and remuneration and, as such, much more rarely capture public, not to mention managerial imagination. It is the professional, knowledge-based work that defines the current epoch. Knowledge management is therefore of both practical and academic interest, both as a practice and as a discourse.

## **KNOWLEDGE AS A FUZZY BLOB**

At the heart of any discussion of knowledge management lie assumptions about knowledge and its place in organizations. As we have already noted, there is a number of distinct, partial conceptualizations of the idea, usually vaguely rooted in information theory. A common typology follows Michael Polanyi (1967) in distinguishing explicit from tacit knowledge, with the former characterized as easily codified and transferable, and the latter portrayed as vague, context-bound, and often tied to physical activities. Elaborate schemes have been devised to explain and facilitate learning, creating, and transformation of one type of knowledge into another--Nonaka and Takeuchi's (1995) Socialization, Externalization, Combination, Internalization (SECI) model is among the most popular. But, as Brown and Duguid (2000) ironically comment, there is little inherent difference between the two types, and knowledge is defined as "sticky" (tacit) or tied to its context, whenever the managerial intent is to facilitate its dissemination and "leaky" (explicit), or decontextualized, when the aim is to stem the spread of valuable knowledge. They argue that the confusion has, at its root, the failure to identify patterns of social interaction among professionals who tend to communicate each other through the frequently trans-organizational, informal Communities of Practice rather than through formal organizational channels. Furthermore, defining knowledge as tacit or explicit might have more to do with power relations and workplace asymmetry, than with its inherent features. After all, the right to recognize knowledge as such is an important managerial privilege, a useful weapon against the new experts (Brint, 1994), who admittedly are carriers of knowledge, but need to be supervised and controlled to allow knowledge transformations.

## **FIRE AND FORGET**

That said, most of the attention in the knowledge management literature focuses on the acquisition and (internal) sharing of knowledge, where management of the latter appears largely equivalent to hoarding: organizations are expected to gather, create, and combine knowledge, building systems that are conducive to quick and easy access to this treasure trove of competitive advantage. Several scholars, however, argue that an equally, if not more, crucial aspect of organizational life is organizational forgetting, the loss of institutional knowledge. While the traditional approach (Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2000) laments organizational amnesia (referred to interchangeably as a "phenomenon" and as a "problem") for squandering a precious resource, de Hollan and Philips (2004) note that purging of knowledge is a vital activity, enabling organizations to forget, to adapt to changing circumstances by shedding assumptions, procedures, and rituals that have ceased to be useful for current performance. Without forgetting, no change is possible (Lewin, 1951). Losing knowledge seems to be as important as acquiring it, although knowledge management mainstream literature does not seem to have recognized this yet. Although knowledge creation is clearly serendipitous and contingent (Barber & Fox, 1958), in management it still is depicted as a rational, systematic and planned process, which can be easily controlled if certain rules are followed.

Geoffrey Bowker (1997) distinguishes processes of clearance (creation of time barriers to retention of knowledge) from erasure (eradication of current knowledge). The former, allowing for the creation of a blank slate and for preempting attacks on the present based on the logic of the past, is a hallmark of radical change. The latter, used to edit out narratively inconvenient details, perpetuates the current order. Both, although time- and resource-intensive, are common in the



organizational world. In 1969, Karl Weick raised this issue:

*Has an organization ever failed to survive because it forgot something important? More likely is the possibility that organizations fail because they remember too much too long and persist too often doing too many things the way they've always done them. (1969, p. 224)*

Taking the logical next step in knowledge management repertoire, John Landry (1999) looks for ways to design forgetting into technological systems for data storage and retrieval. Since the sites of knowledge are important for knowledge management, they are rarely barred from reappropriation into the domain of management.

## TOTAL CONTROL

Knowledge and the attempts to control it have been found in many corners of contemporary organization by its numerous scholars (cf. Kostera, 2003 on the interplay between management and control) have targeted diverse aspects of organizational life. We have already proposed technological solutions as one nexus of organizational knowledge and control. Yet, as much of the research in Science and Technology Studies (Law, 1991) shows, technology is always open to reinterpretation by its local context, and especially by its users. Similarly, solutions rooted in organizational structure and procedures (Van Maanen, 1991), innovative spatial arrangements (Brown & Duguid, 2000), quality-assuring audits (Power, 1997) have all been found to be prone to subversion, misuse, and outright destruction at the hands of the human beings (and their non-human: economic discursive, and technological allies: cf. Latour, 1993) subjected to the regimes of knowledge management. On the one hand, the rise of flexible, geographically distributed forms of organizing (Castells, 1996, 2004) and general

dissolution of the seemingly immovable social structures (Bauman, 2007) have undermined the confidence in solutions bypassing the human element. On the other hand, management control over workers presents its own set of vicissitudes. Foucault (1976/2000) meticulously chronicled attempts to control and discipline human bodies lying at the heart of the modern project, and the shift towards the disciplined internalizing control mechanisms. The process is all the more pertinent as regards knowledge workers (people who work more with their brains and less with their hands). In case of knowledge management, external control makes little sense, as it is impossible to tell a hard-working employee from one who is slacking. The process of labor is a black box for any bystanders and thus the management needs to rely much more on the eagerness of the subordinates to work efficiently by themselves.

## KNOWLEDGE WORKERS

The link between knowledge and knowledge workers is particularly interesting and bears further exploration. The latter are usually presented as the bearers, if not necessarily the creators, of organizational knowledge, while at the same time they can be depicted as untrustworthy and liable to divulge organizational secrets to strangers while withholding vital information from coworkers. Consider the following passage, emblematic in its attitude towards knowledge workers:

*While there is no doubt that knowledge is the most important asset for modern firms, it cannot be denied that managing knowledge is the most formidable task they face.... While it is well recognized that social interactions are vital for real knowledge exchange, unfortunately most firms leave social interactions to their employees' informal, chance discussion with peers in their social networks (Mitra & Kumar, 2007: 156).*

Workers' autonomy has always troubled the managerialist project, though different forms of work engendered different foci of managerial oversight. Whether Frederick Taylor's behavioral supervision or Arlie Russell Hochschild's mandated emotional labor (1983) control over all assets of production has long been seen as the ultimate goal of management. Knowledge work is commonly framed as involving extensive formal and informal networking (e.g. Quinn, 1992; Sveiby, 2007) through which knowledge is acquired, developed, and shared. It is not surprising, then, to see managerialist prescriptions of exerting control over the totality of employees' social exchanges (the quoted passage comes from an article entitled "Managed Socialization"). At the same time, such attempts are often couched in the discourse of providing the workers with respite from unduly intrusive regulations. Indeed, as Boltanski and Chiapello (1996) argue, these new forms of control may well spring from the critique of earlier manifestations of managerial power. Yet, the results are seldom beneficial:

*Flexibility was oriented strongly to firms and to the needs of production because, via the 'accommodation' of workers, the boundaries between work and home time and space are collapsed. While this loosening of boundaries between home and work is cast as a perk of for workers, it also means that personal time and space are eclipsed (MacEachen et al., 2008: 1030)*

Thus, what the assembly line did to blue collar workers, knowledge management attempts to do to the rest (Braverman, 1974); knowledge management is the new version of scientific management, but for knowledge workers.

## CONCLUSION

As Stephen Barley and Gideon Kunda observed, management science has been experiencing surges

of rational and normative control (Barley & Kunda, 1992). Over at least the last half century we can observe a battle of conflicting paradigms: the so-called X and Y theory, as described by Douglas McGregor, one of the founding fathers of human relations approach (McGregor, 1960).

Theory X, epitomized in Frederick Taylor's work, relies on strict external control and standardization of behavior. Its contemporary representations include total quality management (TQM), reengineering, or just-in-time production, all requiring firm supervision of the worker.

Theory Y, often associated with the stream of human relations, relies on norms internalized by the worker. Instead of close observation (and punishment when instructions are not followed) it is based on the ability of workers to discipline themselves. It is loosely associated with organizational learning, as the authors interested in participative management and empowerment were also the ones who started the discussion on knowledge in organizations (Greenwood & Levin, 1998; Lewin, 1951). Contemporary literature on organizational learning draws heavily on the foundations of action research (Argyris, 1982; Schön, 1983).

The difference between the two is, however, entirely superficial. Both, as well as Theory Z proposed by Ouchi (1981), presuppose the managerial ability to define organizational reality. The goal of (and the right to) organizational despotism, benevolent or otherwise, is seen as part and parcel of managerial responsibilities.

Modern organizations follow the neo-Platonic rational principle, but, as Nils Brunsson convincingly shows, the practice of forcing rationalizations and repetitive reforms deepens, rather than diminishes the divide between the theory and practice of organizing (Brunsson, 2006). Failures in building rationalizing models lead, paradoxically, to the conclusion that the reality and practice are wrong (not corresponding with the model), not to the refutation of the theory itself. This leads to the non-learning cycle: organizations unlearn

from their mistakes, and plunge into absurdity. Knowledge management, as a prevailing organizational theory, fits this image well.

Naturally, the difference between official organizational rhetoric and common practice is certainly not new (Höpfl, 1995; Knights & Willmott, 1999), but in knowledge-intensive companies, in particular high-tech environments, the difference is extremely conspicuous.

This is because contemporary knowledge management is an attempt to combine the best of both worlds: it uses the language of industrial democracy and sells itself under the label of empowering the workers, but at the same time it focuses on providing functional tools to exert more control over the workers. All capitalists need to make the employees exceed their productivity (Marx, 1867/1992). This paradox was pointed out as early as the 1950s by Reinhard Bendix, who wrote that (1956/2001, p. 327)

*...in the words used to describe "two-way" communication, subordinates are expected to listen so they may learn, while managers merely receive information which they can use. (...) The fact is that Mayo's synthesis has been capable of making widely divergent managerial approaches sound alike, and this capacity is one of the tests of a successful ideology. His contribution may well be to have brought about a change of outlook among American managers as a whole, a possibility which is obscured by the appearance of hypocrisy which a mere use of his language implies. For it may not be inconsequential that even those who remain hostile to the human-relations approach adopt some of its language. In the long run, the use of a terminology may exert a cumulative pressure toward the acceptance of new practices which differ from those previously regarded as inviolate, even if they also differ from the words used to describe them.*

Half a century later, it is quite clear that the ideological change remained mostly rhetorical.

The pseudo-democratic discourse, visible in knowledge management and in the mainstream literature on knowledge-intensive organizations, has a very important role: by taking a stance that seemingly resembles the real industrial democracy and cooperatives theory (Greenwood, González Santos, & Cantón, 1991; Whyte & Whyte, 1991), it squeezes it out of the market. As silly as the knowledge management literature may sound, it still reinforces the managerial importance in organizations and the asymmetry of power. Apparently, knowledge management is sometimes much more than a rhetorical fad: it is a cover-up theory, used to prevent knowledge-intensive organizations from relying on the knowledge workers, and not on the managers.

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## **KEY TERMS**

**Knowledge Management:** The notion of a special managerial toolset applicable only in contemporary organizations, particularly those of the high-tech sector

**Knowledge Worker:** Employees whose most important organizational asset is their knowledge and their ability to manipulate it.

**Management Fad:** Management concept rising quickly to mainstream prominence, expected to equally quickly disappear into obscurity