

ACCSYS Knowledge Management Newsletter

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Setting a Context

One of the problems with Knowledge Management as a discipline, methodology, or process is that it is very hard to define. Knowledge management has no universally accepted definitions or standards. Groups like Gartner, Anderson, Price-Waterhouse-Coopers, and Deloitte & Touche are creating so-called best practices. Each of these groups has a definition for knowledge management. Likewise, the knowledge management leaders like Sveiby, Steward, and Prusak each have their own way of thinking about knowledge management. With all of this information, and no singly accepted approach or knowledge source, where should we start? It is best to begin with a common understanding of what we will be discussing.

If I use the phrase knowledge management and you use the phrase knowledge management, then this term should mean roughly the same thing to both of us. To accomplish this we need to agree on some definitions. Of course adopting definitions is risky. Once you adopt a definition you constrain what the term can mean thus limiting the applicability of the phrase. Also, making a definition leaves one open to criticism - constructive or otherwise. However, we need to start somewhere so that we begin to have a common language. What better place to start then by defining the subject of these newsletters - knowledge management.

Let's consider what knowledge management means by considering its parts. Let's start with the definition for management.

Management is the process of controlling, organizing, and arranging some set of resources, entities, or components to achieve some specified goal. In project management for, for example, a project is the structure in which we define a goal. This structure contains people and other resources. Managing the project involves controlling, organizing, and arranging these resources to achieve the goal of the project.

As another example of management, consider financial or money management. The goal in this scenario is usually some financial criteria - like we want to accumulate \$1,000,000 in the next two years or we want our company to grow by 32% in the next year. Resources controlled might be dollars or some dollar-equivalent like stocks or mutual funds. Financial management might also be achieved by managing the people involved, as is the case with personal financial management.

Moving on to the tougher part of this definition, let's consider a definition for knowledge. Whereas management is a word that involves some set of specified activities, knowledge is not as clear cut. If I suggest some characteristics of knowledge they may not apply to your notion. In fact, defining what knowledge is happens to be a rather old problem.

Sometimes, in these circumstances it is best to consider the meaning of a word like knowledge in terms of what would be most useful - a so-called pragmatic definition. From my own standpoint, knowledge is what enables people to do things. Perhaps the best phrase I can think of is "know-how." This is not a formal definition, but remember we are not trying for formal - we are trying to be practical. This definition may be applied to individuals and organizations alike. That is to say knowledge enables organizations and businesses to do the things they need to achieve the goals of the business. Davenport and Prusak in their book "Working Knowledge" make the same point about defining knowledge and choose to take a pragmatic approach. According to Davenport and Prusak, knowledge is defined as,

"... a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information."

This definition gives rise to other definitional conundrums. For example, how do we define experience or insight? We have a sense of what these terms mean, just as we all have a sense of what knowledge is about.

Now let's put the individual definitions together to come up with our definition for knowledge management.

Remember we said that management was the process of controlling, organizing and arranging resources to achieve a goal. As knowledge is that which enables people to do things, then knowledge management is the controlling, organizing, and arranging of that which enables people or organizations to do things to achieve a goal.

The proof of any definition is how useful it is. If we can put this definition to use then we have achieved our goal of providing a workable definition of knowledge management.

From this definition we can think of collecting knowledge which enables people to do things. For example, I might want to collect knowledge about how to create a new product. I might want to organize this knowledge so that others in my organization can use it to create products. Although we have not said how to collect the knowledge or how to transfer it you can certainly see how the definition applies.

If you think about this newsletter, I've just lectured you for the while it has taken you to read this. But when it comes to learning, it is important to make sure you understand the concepts. Here are some questions to consider. Please feel free to email me at rkaplan@accsys-corp.com if you have any comments about these questions or would like to share your answers or other questions.

1. Can you identify 10 examples of your own personal knowledge?
2. Can you identify 10 examples of organizational knowledge?
3. Using two or more examples of organizational knowledge, can you suggest how this knowledge might be managed?

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Stay tuned for next week's issue: "Knowledge Management Issues."

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