

Another 10 Myths about KM

If you believe that locating, centralizing, abstracting, classifying, and integrating foundational knowledge resources are the **first** requirements of managing organizational knowledge, then the following assertions about knowledge management can be seen as “myths,” either in whole or in part.

MYTH #1: KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT IS ABOUT COLLABORATION.

What brings you closer to **doing** — collaboration or creating sharable knowledge resources? Collaboration is not the goal; in fact, you really need to eliminate the need for collaboration as much as possible.

- Collaboration is great, but we act only one person at a time, do only one thing at a time. Teams don't act. (And team meetings are notorious black holes for productivity.) Only individuals act.
- Collaboration itself quickly reaches the point of diminishing returns. Collaboration is often necessary, and it may provide an abrupt, rapid improvement. But it does not provide a lasting foundation.
- It's coordination that makes the difference. Air traffic controllers coordinate take-off and landing activities. Pilots cooperate with the coordinators. Pilots themselves cannot achieve highly efficient coordination of these activities by interacting with each other. And only the pilots can land the planes.
- Most group knowledge activities are distributed and asynchronous. When you work as a group, you have to start the process by defining what the problem is. You have to end it by recording what you've done in a way that is precise, easily sharable, and integrated with other business activities. Collaboration itself doesn't save the value created by collaboration and collaboration itself does not make the results of collaboration accessible.
- If you don't share what you know before and after collaboration, you experience the same old loss of knowledge assets, except that responsibility is often avoided. Sometimes collaboration means never having to say you're sorry that you don't know what you're doing or what impact it has on the outcome.
- In some ways, collaboration embraces hoarding, because it does an end-run around making knowledge explicit.

- Collaboration may take many forms, including informal “communities of practice.” But it seems that nobody asks the question, “Why do such informal communities exist?” Answer: They exist because formal management practices, formal communities, formal resources, and formal tools for communicating knowledge are inadequate. Probably grossly inadequate. We’ll always need (and have) informal communities of practice, because business opportunities and needs are changing, fragmenting, and re-forming faster than formal models of organization and management can handle. But does this mean that we should treat informal communities of practice as a new, desirable business model? Hardly. As a society we benefit in some small way because children and impoverished adults collect recyclable containers and turn them in for cash. That doesn’t make gleaning roadside trash a desirable employment model.

MYTH #2: YOU HAVE TO CHANGE THE WAY YOU WORK.

Do you really want to change the way everyone in your organization works in order to leverage organizational knowledge? (OK, if your company is a horrible failure in every aspect, the answer is Yes. But that’s not usually true.) And how can you possibly design a strategy for “cultural change” without first defining precisely the “what” of the organization — the business objectives of the company, as well as the connections between the specific needs of its market and the products and services provided by the organization?

This is definitely a cart-before-the-horse approach. Customer-support systems designed to serve the specific knowledge management requirements of improving response time and increasing customer satisfaction may require dramatic cultural changes and new work processes in the customer support department. But a knowledge management initiative aimed at leveraging the core knowledge of an organization must be as un-intrusive as possible. Would you deliberately make accounting intrusive? Would you re-make the organization around principles of accounting?

Of course not. Like accounting, knowledge management is one means to reach a business objective, not the goal itself. Similarly, “the agile corporation” is not the goal itself. The “three-ring binder knowledge” of an organization — the core of knowledge that is useful to a wide range of people in the organization — is infrastructure, first and foremost, not an objective in itself.

In any case, the need for cultural change in a knowledge management implementation is minimized when the objectives, techniques, tools, and methods (and their effects) are known to all. If you break knowledge management problems down into fine-grained, concrete elements, and

relationships, the retraining and cultural issues should largely go away — or at least become far less difficult.

MYTH #3: “RELUCTANCE TO SHARE KNOWLEDGE” IS A MAJOR IMPEDIMENT.

From a recent article, a typical reference to reluctance to share knowledge:

“There remains, however, the delicate question of how to get the know-how out of employees’ heads and desks and into a computer network. There is a natural tendency to hoard knowledge because of its power. The recent enthusiasm for collaboration among employees goes against the grain. Knowledge management can facilitate collaboration, but the reluctance to share knowledge must be overcome.”

Source: Nancy Ferris, “Knowledge Is Power. Really.” GovExec.com, June 1, 1999. (<http://www.govexec.com/tech/articles/0699mantech.htm>)

I’m always baffled by this assertion. In my experience, it’s simply not true. Sure, there are people who hoard knowledge. But everywhere I have worked, the vast majority of people love to share knowledge, and they often take time under the worst possible circumstances to share it with you. They write hundreds of emails in order to tell others what they know. Some even post long treatises on your intranet or start discussion groups.

And there’s “blogging” (creating Web logs) and “klogging” (knowledge logs) — the ultimate in voluntary sharing and a rapidly growing trend that directly defies the assertion that people are reluctant to share. Blogs are becoming part of more and more internal KM activities.

We should put some qualifications on the assertion that reluctance to share knowledge is a myth: People do hate stupid and/or repetitive questions and, as Nancy Dixon notes in *Common Knowledge: How companies thrive by sharing what they know*, workers resist being forced into formal processes for sharing — for example, writing a document about a topic when they really want to be writing code or making a sales call. If line workers see knowledge management as yet another top-down mandate to do more than they’re already doing, then you can guess the consequences in most cases.

A corollary of the “reluctance to share” myth is the assertion or implication that management has to drag workers kicking and screaming into sharing their knowledge. Look closely. You’ll find the opposite is often true.

MYTH #4: MANY KM FAILURES CAN BE ATTRIBUTED TO OVEREMPHASIS ON TECHNOLOGY.

Almost since knowledge management became a popular topic in the mid 1990s, technology has been a whipping boy for perceived “failures” of knowledge management initiatives.

- Have we been the victims of bad knowledge management technology? Almost certainly. One ex-Lotus manager recently claimed that in 1997 there 90 million Lotus Notes seats, but of those, 88 million were using Notes solely for email. (!)
- Have some vendors provided software that solved the wrong problems? A sure bet.
- Is good KM technology applied poorly? Seems very likely.
- Do you believe the goal of knowledge management is to spark creativity or create a “learning organization”? Then technology may not be the heart of the solution.

But the solutions for many knowledge management problems are in collecting, managing, and communicating information. So, as Aw Kong Koy of Multicentric Technologies observes, “Without technology, I don’t think there is anything new in the way we have managed knowledge for a long time.”

And I ask, “Who do you think knows more about the problems of leveraging knowledge resources — (1) theorists and business management consultants, or (2) technologists who have studied specific knowledge management problems and designed solutions to solve those problems?”

You have three chances to guess my answer.

MYTH #5: KM IS ABOUT INTERNALIZING KNOWLEDGE.

Do we always have to “internalize” information (through action, practice, whatever) in order to make it actionable (usable) knowledge or *tacit knowledge*? (*Tacit knowledge* is defined as personal knowledge rooted in individual experience and involving personal belief, perspective, and values. [See Michael Polyani, *The Tacit Dimension*, Garden City, NY: Anchor Books, 1967.]) Is the rate of internalization of information the key business problem?

No. That’s ridiculous. Sometimes just reading about a topic **does** create knowledge. What went on in Einstein’s mind??!! He certainly did not test or experience most of his abstractions. Are mathematical proofs validation of the internalization of knowledge?

Some ideas do have the power of revelation. Something just clicks.

If we think of tacit knowledge as “acting on autopilot,” then this kind of knowledge clearly has a key role in many work activities. A Grand Prix driver doesn’t want to be looking up information on driving situations as he enters a hairpin turn. Nor does a surgeon want to be reading a book while in the middle of a time-sensitive operation. And in almost every profession, there are some common, underlying skills that make all other actions more efficient if those core skills are thoroughly internalized.

The boundary between tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge is often very fuzzy and may vary from one person to the next. For example, you may be a great cook, but you probably don’t remember the precise ingredients of all your recipes. So you check your cookbooks. The difference between internalization and use of a recipe doesn’t matter a whit. Your guests (or your customers) only care about the result.

In practice, our work is increasingly characterized by extensive use of explicit knowledge — information that can be transferred readily and with a reasonable degree of completeness — among people. And the amount of tacit knowledge (relative to explicit knowledge) tends to decrease if the members of the organization are engaged in a wide range of continuously changing, information-intensive tasks.

MYTH #6: KM IS A BIG-COMPANY PROBLEM.

Most of the buzz about knowledge management concerns its impact on large companies and government agencies. That’s not really surprising. Most consultants would like a big contract with a big company. Most managers want to manage big budgets. Hard to fault that logic.

However, most of my recent work has been in small companies. And I can assure you that failure to share knowledge is a big problem even in very small companies. Managing knowledge resources is even more vital in a small company, because small companies don’t have inertia working for them.

And the knowledge-transfer dynamics in departments within large companies are often similar to those of small companies.

MYTH #7: CLASSIFYING KNOWLEDGE AT A GRANULAR LEVEL (INDEXING) IS TOO HARD.

A young man recently told me it took him a year to develop a taxonomy for his startup. He was obviously doing something horribly wrong. You don’t need a

complete or nearly complete “taxonomy” in order to start reaping the savings of sharing knowledge and re-using effectively. If getting a useful start takes longer than two months, you’re doing something wrong.

BTW, never assemble the experts and ask them to help you build a taxonomy/classification system. All of them will have an opinion; few will have useful input into how to construct an effective taxonomy. Their feedback on specific items, however, is vital.

We recommend: Use the open techniques and tools developed by the Knowledge Management Connection to jump start your knowledge management effort. (If Nike didn’t own the phrase, I’d advise you to “Just do it!” This is one starting point that won’t paint you into a corner.)

MYTH #8: KM IS ABOUT CHANGING BUSINESS PROCESSES.

No, you first have to **disconnect** knowledge from processes.

Managing organizational knowledge can be about many things, but it must first be about capturing, representing, managing, and communicating knowledge in the organization. The “what” of the organization, the “three-ring binder” type of knowledge, is orthogonal to business processes, should precede integration of specific knowledge with processes, and persists as processes change.

You can rearrange or reshape processes all you want, but you still have to know how to perform individual tasks successfully, one at a time, and you still have to have your facts straight in order to actually achieve goals with some degree of efficiency. Tasks cannot be shared efficiently unless they are specified precisely.

Creating and sharing knowledge is fundamentally orthogonal to business processes.

And, in general, while processes assume a known objective, we don’t know in advance what the “outputs” of our use of shared knowledge will be.

MYTH #9: PEOPLE DON’T UNDERSTAND THE NEED FOR MANAGING KNOWLEDGE.

Actually, this is partially true, because in most cases managers don’t understand the need for managing knowledge. Natural enough. They’re concerned with managing, not doing.

But people have been bombarded with the term knowledge management daily for about eight years now, and they've seen various implementations in their work — everything from simple FAQ resources to complex customer support systems. More importantly, they really do understand that huge amounts of time are wasted and opportunities are lost because knowledge is not shared. It's so obvious that it stares you right in the eyes. Of course, if your eyes are shut, you don't notice.

In my most recent assignment, a wide range of people — including one of the founders of the company, a head of customer support, the chief technical officer, the head of QA, and a product manager — separately volunteered their desire for a shared corporate knowledge resource. The need was obvious to them. One had even started a very limited intranet resource. Others had been saving hundreds of old emails — a typical act of desperation.

The real problem is not failure to understand the need for shared knowledge resources but lack of willingness to make a commitment. This hesitation is natural, because it's hard to point to a set of standard practices and technologies and connect them directly with increased productivity. (At the Knowledge Management Connection, we're trying to change that.)

MYTH #10: COMPLEXITY AND VOLUME OF INFORMATION IS THE CORE PROBLEM OF KM.

The world of business seems enormously complex. The pace of change is exhausting. And there are, indeed, millions of new pages on the Web every week. But does that mean complexity and proliferation of new information are the KM problem?

Not directly. Combining simple things into new things and abuses of naming cause much of the problem. Old things renamed lead the list, followed by “new” things constructed almost completely out of smaller “old things.” The actual amount of information that has high value to a large number of people in the organization is substantially less than you might think. However, finding it and eliminating the duplication **is** a problem.

Finding the simple things, eliminating duplicate information, and locating persistent connections leads to understanding and simplicity. And it makes re-use possible.

Precision and accessibility **are** real problems. But with the right model, they are problems that can be solved.