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Is KM finished?

Jerry Ash and
David Snowden debate

CASE STUDIES

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NEWS UPDATE

ISKO UK established...
Fast acquires RetrievalWare...
plus the latest events...

THE KNOWLEDGE

Jerry Bowles gives five reasons why CEOs simply should not blog.

Case report

Is KM finished?

Some prominent figures are questioning whether the knowledge management agenda has moved on.

By Jerry Ash

This is a case report about two KMs: KM the brand and KM the practice. During its first two decades, KM the brand has had no shortage of soothsayers – naysayers, really – eager to declare the concept ill-conceived, failing or stone-dead. Since there has never been a consensus on what exactly knowledge management is, the evaluations of its health have been as unclear as KM itself and likely based on what each prophet *thinks* it is. We assume they mean technology-driven KM and, in that case, we hope it's true. But who knows?

More often than not the prophet has a purpose, which is also variable. Occasionally, an analyst will declare that 'KM is on the comeback', even though others were not aware that it had even gone away. For these and other reasons, the most rabid champions of knowledge management have tended to dismiss these claims as suspect at worst and uninformed at best.

That's been my position.

"As long as knowledge matters – and it does – we will try to manage it,"

I've said repeatedly (mostly to reassure myself). Ignoring the doomsday crowd has always worked for me and I've always gone about my business unhindered.

However, during the last two weeks of February I decided to appoint myself as a guest moderator of the Association of Knowledgework's STAR Series Dialogue and ask the expert members – KM thought leaders and practitioners – what they thought. Since it was to be a kind of 'survey', I gave it a neutral theme: "KM' is Dead, Long



greater) – was long dead and now the *real* KM could move on unhindered.

But while there was plenty of support on my side I discovered that there were solid KM citizens who argued that KM was finished and, since

I discovered there were solid KM citizens who agreed that KM was finished and, since they were also on our side, I assumed they did know what they were talking about.

Live KM. My hypothesis was that the hijacked version – the software sales gimmick (which I often refer to as 'km', in lower case, to emphasise that it is a cynical derivative of something much

they were also on our side, I assumed they really *did* know what they were talking about, too. It shocked me so completely that I listened carefully. You will want to as well.



Calm before the storm

At first, the reports were reassuring. Alex Bennet, a former knowledge leader at the US Department of Navy and now the owner of a knowledge management think-tank in West Virginia, called attention to her recently completed PhD dissertation for which she interviewed 34 KM thought leaders and came up with these results:

- 33 per cent placed KM at a very early point of evolution;
- 17 per cent somewhere in the middle;
- 20 per cent saw a rebirth;
- 10 per cent said KM has always existed.

David Snowden was one of the respondents: “People who get into KM

A recent study by CIO magazine in the US found that half of CIOs are focused on two initiatives: creating growth and enabling innovation – innovation as in using acquired knowledge and collaboration to drive change and creativity.

are passionate about it . . . it matters to them. You get a lot of people in KM. We went through the first cycle and we got the arrogant guys and the power brokers and the people who seize on each big management trend and ride it, then abandon it and move on to the next one, and you can see lots of those around.

“But as they went through, they attracted to them those who really cared about the subject and those people carried on after they moved on, and gradually we had the period where people know that technology doesn’t deliver.”

Carl Frappaolo, executive vice president of Delphi, a Perot Systems company based in Boston, Massachusetts, reported that a recent study by *CIO* magazine in the US found that half of CIOs are focused on two initiatives: creating growth and enabling innovation – innovation as in using acquired knowledge and collaboration to drive change and creativity. In the next 18 months to two years, that figure is expected to reach nearly 80 per cent the report said. “Sounds like KM thrives to me,” Frappaolo concluded.

There were many other fine reports, but within the bounds of this space, let’s skip along from what we’ve often heard from our quarter to the real shockers.

Claims coming from our own

Peter Marshall, a global practice leader at Helix Commerce, was the first to burst the bubble: “I have to respond to what I see as the increasingly self-congratulatory and even delusional tone of most of the posts here on KM’s

once and future state.” He went on to unleash a litany of critical claims that left the moderator almost speechless. “Humph,” was all I could say.

David Snowden called the *CIO* report a red herring. “You may want to ‘humph’ about it, Jerry,” Snowden wrote. “But I think Peter has done a good job of saying that the Emperor has no clothes. The *CIO* survey is a complete red herring. It talks about innovation, not KM. Now I agree KM is about innovation, but so are half a dozen other management disciplines.

“The reality is that while KM continues in many companies, in the market as a whole it is at the end of its lifecycle. The objectives of good KM (improved decision making, innovation and so on) continue, but under different labels. KM as a language these days means the IT department using collaboration tools.

“KM is not dead *per se*, but the agenda has moved on. It was special while it lasted; the first movement to force us (in part) to take humans into account. With hindsight I think we will see it as breaking the mechanical metaphor. However, it’s over guys; live with it”.

Responding to my protests, Snowden added: “The main issue I think you have to come to terms with is that ideas and approaches have a lifecycle just like products. At the start, there are many possibilities (remember the early days of KM?) but as the approach matures, the options become more limited. KM now means, in the vast majority of cases, an IT-led approach to collaboration of some type.

The strategic agenda (decision making, innovation and so on) has moved on”.

Snowden makes no apologies for this view and directs people to his blog for further detail on the future of KM and ‘Hubert’s Error’ (see below).

Hubert Saint-Onge, the 25-year veteran of KM, was at least ready to find a better platform: “I find this

“I could not care less if the label survives or metamorphoses. I do believe in systemic-knowledge work in organisations as a way of building collaboration and accelerating capability development. My sense is that there is a good possibility that collaboration and knowledge will at one point start to merge. I also have a problem with the

Buckman Laboratories, hoped the term ‘KM’ was, indeed, finally dead and took the opportunity to remind everyone that he had never called it KM, even though he has been a fixture on the KM conference circuit for a long time.

“I never did try and manage knowledge,” he said. “What I really tried to manage and nurture was a culture that would encourage and expand the *flow* of knowledge. It was because economic value could only be obtained in our environment when knowledge moved across the organisation in response to a need.”

“In my view,” I contradicted, “you did *indeed* manage the knowledge. No, not in the command-and-control way of archaic management (of the industrial era), but in the new way of management, which is all about enabling.

“You see, I have no problem with the dreaded term ‘management’, as long as we understand that management is not the past, but the present and the future. Of course, you managed knowledge, Bob. You saw it as a valuable asset and you set about making it work for you. What else could you call it? When are we going to get past the fictional stigma of managing? To say you didn’t manage knowledge is like

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David Snowden, Cognitive Edge.

question quite interesting but somewhat frustrating,” he said “I must say that I have developed somewhat of an aversion to what I call KM ‘fashionistas’ – ‘This is the absolute answer to KM,’ they claim, and any derogation is condemned with great fury (not seeing that this behaviour is, in itself, anathema to what knowledge work stands for).

“At the other end of the spectrum, I find myself working in organisations where the reputation of KM is so bad that the mere mention of the word ‘knowledge’ sends them flying. In those cases, I go into my material and do a ‘replace all’, switching from ‘knowledge management’ to ‘content/collaboration.’”

But for all KM’s liabilities, Saint-Onge didn’t pile on with the many others who came to bury KM as it is. “As usual,” Saint-Onge said, “I find the opinions expressed by my friend David [Snowden] to be most interesting. In fact, I find that we agree on most things about KM with the odd quibble here and there. But David has seen the error of his ways in the past and self-corrects with all the emotive skills of a systems thinker. The trigger this time is his pronouncement about KM. I find the need to offer a more nuanced perspective than to just declare that KM is dead.

description of the cycles of knowledge management where it is said that the first wave did this and the second wave did that. The fact of the matter, many good practitioners did exactly what is now described as the third or fourth wave way back in the first years of so-called KM.”

Saint-Onge acknowledged the disappearance of short-lived chief knowledge officers, blaming them for promising too much and

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Bob Buckman, Buckman Laboratories.

delivering too little. Consequently, it is in those companies where the word ‘knowledge’ is shunned and Saint-Onge has to use his ‘search-and-replace’ tactic.

Bob Buckman, the KM legend behind specialty chemicals company

saying you didn’t manage money! You did! And you did it well!”

Newbies, KM and the Peter principle

The final commentary came from Doug Macnamara, president of Banff Executive Leadership. “I must

Organisational strategic thinking and strategy development/implementation will always need to consider the knowledge capabilities and capacities of the employees within the formal organisation and those in the network around it.

Doug Macnamara, Banff Executive Leadership.

say,” Macnamara said, “Peter Marshall’s observations mirror my own. There are *so* many organisations completely dysfunctional in their knowledge processes.

“I have never personally been all that enamoured with the KM label, though I tolerated the description. Like any popular management concept, it has a shelf life,” said Macnamara. ‘Quality improvement’, ‘business-process re-engineering’ and so on have all suffered the same fate, he added, yet quality improvement and business process re-engineering remain very much in demand.

“Organisational strategic thinking and strategy development/implementation will always need to consider the knowledge capabilities and capacities of the employees within the formal organisation and those in the network around it. Indeed, this will

perhaps become even more critical as our social, business and political networks continue to overlap, intertwine and become ever more complex.

“I’m not so sure that it is KM that is dead, or whether it is that the new generation of leaders taking the helm of organisations are once again living the Peter Principle,” says Macnamara. That is to say, they have been promoted beyond their capacities and are finding that the way of thinking, the information about their surroundings and the behaviour they learned from their mentors, is woefully inadequate for today’s leadership challenges.

“So many of the ‘A-Team’ of leaders have left their organisations and become consultants and the ‘B-Teams’ left behind have both competency and capacity problems when it comes to systems/network thinking. KM the label may well be dead (thankfully, perhaps),

but the need for those of us engaged in this work continues. We need to find ways to apply the principles in new, more meaningful ways, with language that may better connect to the new senior and middle manager levels. This is complicated by the fact that the new senior leaders (still largely from the boomer generation) are very different in their thinking to that of the generation X middle managers/professionals and the ‘echo generation’ [the children of the 1960s ‘baby boomers’] new-entrant talent.” ■

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The big debate

Dead or alive?

In the first of this two-part debate, **Jerry Ash** argues that KM is not just alive, well and prospering, but is still in its infancy.



This article has been brewing for more than 12 years. That's how long I've been a devoted champion of knowledge management (KM), focusing exclusively on the positive, searching for the good in the negative, avoiding the slings and arrows that have been ever present on the periphery – my occasional critique hopeful. And so it is now.

Dismissing the occasional pessimistic prophet has been easy enough, but the voices quoted in my feature this month cannot go ignored. There's a little bit of devilishness in Dave Snowden, as always, but by and large he has been one of the most sincere (and yes, controversial) knowledge-sharers KM has had. On multiple list-serves and conference stages there is the ubiquitous Dave Snowden, teaching, debating, probing, needling, critiquing and promoting his version of KM. Some may denigrate his energy as self-promotional, but no one can seriously say he's been selfish. He is a champion and what he says (right or wrong) matters.

So when he said: "KM... is over guys; live with it," I had to take the bait. I found myself disagreeing with him point for point, but countering quietly

with my own long-buried criticisms and concerns, even of KM itself.

The brand

People talk of 'KM' the brand as though it were something different from KM the practice. That is to say, KM is not dead, but KM the brand (the software product) is. The practice will move on under other flags because KM as a label has outlived its usefulness.

But managing knowledge never has been a brand. KM was not invented by a single guru, programmer or consulting group. If it had a father, it was the seemingly sudden appearance of the internet and the worldwide web that made the internet usable and exciting. Managing knowledge is simply a natural response to the organic change in knowledge flow and human empowerment that technology has brought.

The need for individuals, groups or organisations to manage knowledge is obvious. Savvy business leaders and change-minded organisations have understood the immediate political, social and economic impact and have begun factoring that into strategies and practice.

Knowledge management is a generic term with as many interpretations as

those who use it, yet always meaning, somehow, the same thing – the management of knowledge. Only the 'how' has differed.

The fad

For the same reasons KM is not a fad. If it were, then it would very quickly have reached the status of the other fads it has been compared to – quality management and business-process re-engineering (BPR).

A fad is a fashion that is taken up with great enthusiasm for a brief period of time. It's a craze. The business community, by and large, hasn't gone crazy about KM. Ironically, the fad claim came first from those *without* enthusiasm who branded KM a fad as a means of resistance – 'this one shall pass, too', was the underlying message.

Compared to quality management and BPR, there has been only a relatively small, scattered community of KM enthusiasts – largely solo practitioners – carrying KM's water. They have talked mostly to each other and prospective clients who are often sceptical because KM hasn't, in fact, *been* a fad. Actual practice of KM is still in its infancy and confined to a relatively small number of organisations compared to the number who are *not* yet engaged.



The lifecycle

Generic responses to organic changes brought about by radical innovation as chaotic as the web can't possibly have a faddish lifecycle – certainly not as short as 20 years. The potential for gain and failure is so great that managing knowledge can't be ignored any time in the foreseeable future. It is far more critical than fads such as quality management and BPR, which were contrived tactics dealing with the world as it had been, not as it has become. Sure, quality and restructuring are still important – but now in the context of managing knowledge.

I think those within KM who eagerly agree that it is finished have blinkers on. They are only seeing what's in front of them. Yes, the KM they are familiar with seems to be in a redundant period and they are frustrated with the current lack of progress. They want to move on to a more promising field. Understandable; but, what about those who have not yet begun the lifecycle?

At the end of our recent Association of Knowledgework (AOK) debate, Jack Ring, an independent KM consultant in the US, noted the US Federal Bureau of Investigation (FBI) has just announced the creation of a

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new position – chief knowledge officer. He ridiculed, “Now the FBI is no longer 30 years behind the times, only ten!”

Jack was among those who came to bury KM, but he made my point. When so much of the world has not yet taken the first step to manage knowledge, how can KM's lifecycle be over?

The spread

Compared to the quality-management movement, KM's spread is very small, limited primarily to Fortune 500 companies. I've constantly searched among the not-so-Fortunates for a small or medium-sized company as a case report for *IK*, but with no success. Yet 20 years ago I worked for a 200-bed hospital in West Virginia that was feverish about quality management. If enthusiasm marks a fad, then quality management had it.

The quality movement was explicit and organised. Everyone wanted to earn the European Quality Award or the Baldrige Award in the US. By contrast, KM has no core. Although KM has been researched and practiced for at least 15 years, it has no single body of knowledge or standards of practice. It has no unifying organisation or single voice. Each of KM's advocates is carrying a lonely cause, one prospect at a time. The world is still largely in the dark about the means of managing knowledge.

KM has not yet even earned its legitimacy.

The prophecy

No. KM is not finished. It hasn't even made a good start. How can KM fold up its tent and wander off in multiple new directions to sink further into mystery? What sense is there in further fragmenting a strategy that can only work as a whole, not as disconnected parts? But maybe Snowden is right. Maybe KM has outlived its usefulness if it is not ready to extend itself beyond limited theory and practice.

Several threads run through an AOK dialogue. Before the KM-is-over spin-off, I attempted to get some discussion going on the need for the unification of the KM community so that it could go beyond 'talking' to 'doing' – to take on the responsibility of developing a creditable body of knowledge, agreed-upon standards of practice, and raising the profile and understanding of KM everywhere.

There was not one response, and 'moving on' became the new thread. Disheartening, but not final. KM is not just a neat idea; it is a necessity. The demand side of the equation will sustain it. The question is, are we up to providing the leadership? ■

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The big debate

Moving on

David Snowden responds to Jerry Ash's defence of knowledge management, arguing that while KM is far from dead, it is coming to the end of its natural lifecycle and that we should prepare to move on.

Jerry Ash's Association of Knowledgework (AOK) forum went through an interesting period recently. It is not a standard e-mail list-serve; instead of an open flow of topics, a series of 'stars' hold forth for a couple of weeks and the group as a whole gets involved. Some support the star, some are critical, some controversial.

Historically, Jerry has been the moderator, but in the most recent exchanges he moved from facilitator to centrestage and took on the role of advocate of a particular perspective of knowledge management (KM). This produced some interesting dynamics, and, thanks to Jerry's good grace, he moved aside from the role of moderator and engaged in the cut-and-thrust on the same terms as everyone else.

Jerry opened the topic with a passionate advocacy of the value of KM, seeking the support of the group for KM as a strategic goal. I commented early on, referencing a blog I had recently written on the subject, but that was not picked up by the group. The debate was mixed, but towards the end Jerry was robustly challenged by another member who suggested that his view of KM was idealistic at best and naïve at worst.

I supported the challenge and the debate raged for an additional week.

Now the discussion was interesting, but good tempered. There were advocates on both sides. Bob Buckman, for example, argued that the death of KM would be a good thing. I was surprised, as a result, to see Jerry's article fail to

report on the wider debate. Instead, he took a single quote from one of my posts – out of context, I felt – to position me as a pessimistic self-promoting prophet advocating the death of KM.

Lifecycle management

I think this is an important debate. My view is that KM is coming to the end of its lifecycle in management theory. But this does not mean that the objectives of KM will cease to be important, nor that KM activities will cease. We managed knowledge before KM, just as we paid attention to quality before quality management.

What a movement does is to create a focus on something that we may have taken for granted or simply not done well. There is a natural process of focus and renewal that is important to making progress. Of course, taken to excess it can be nonsense. However, the three main movements of recent years – total quality management (TQM), business process re-engineering (BPR) and KM – all persisted for the best part of a decade in high focus and had (or will have) a 'long tail'. I still expect to be doing KM work in ten years' time.

That said, I think that KM is now in that tail. The strategic aspect of KM has shifted, I think, to the general topic of sense-making. I define sense-making as how we make sense of the world so we can act in it. Many readers, I'm sure, will recognise this as similar to a lot of the better KM definitions that were action orientated. The innovative use of collaborative technology, which was also a driver of KM, is now firmly

labeled as social computing and most of the leaders of that movement avoid the KM label. Narrative, which was originally a part of KM, is now a discipline in its own right. In effect, KM is now *fragmented* in terms of novelty and *business as usual* in terms of its standard practices.

I suspect such comments may offend many with 'KM' in their job title. Jerry, who has observed and reported on KM extensively, is obviously concerned. However, I think we have to accept that KM as a subject is now inextricably bound up with IT. If you look at the US and UK conferences they have all been combined with technology events in order to attract in the sponsors.

Most of the academic literature I review deals with the technology aspects of KM. Yes, the name will persist. Yes, interesting work will continue under that name but it is no longer strategic in the marketplace as a whole. The 'fad cycle' moves on and that may be no bad thing as it creates novelty. It also gives those of us who always disliked Hirotaka Takeuchi and Ichijo Nonaka's SECI model, and argued for the ambiguity and brilliance of human knowledge and interaction, a chance to move our thinking back onto the strategic agenda.

That said, it's worth reflecting on KM, too. It's not yet dead. We are not at the wake, but we are in affectionate preparation for that event. Remember that in the Celtic tradition a wake is a celebration, a moving on. So I offer these thoughts, in that spirit.

What's so special about KM?

There is no question that there is something special about KM practitioners. They are passionate people, they care about informing people. What is so special? I see three main factors:

1. *KM did not have a single origin*
If you look at BPR, the 'learning organisation' and 'blue ocean strategy', then they all originate from a single author, a single book – and linked consultancy practice. KM has multiple origins. Bob Buckman pioneered the use of collaborative computing; Larry Prusak and Tom Davenport moved into the space from information management; Tom Stewart and Leif Edvinsson explored intellectual capital management and so on. However, as a whole, they created something that has been largely self sustaining for more than a decade;
2. *KM is people focused*
The other movements were mainly top down. A significant amount of KM activity was bottom up. Most of the early experiments in community consisted of people just using the tools to make things happen. As the tools have got easier to use, that bottom up approach has persisted and developed into social computing. Indeed, most of the other movements attract followers, KM attracted original and often controversial thinkers;
3. *KM was important in releasing technology from the corporate straitjacket*
Most people forget that when KM started, the internet was in its early stages. The first collaboration software in Lotus Notes was a part of the creation of KM as a discipline and many of the early applications were written in it. It was also user-friendly enough that people could start to build their own workflow and collaboration systems. Websites, HTML and so on all blossomed around this time, but they co-evolved

I think we have to accept that KM as a subject is now inextricably bound up with IT.

with KM to create the collaborative and information-rich environment in which we now live. The last decade has seen technology move from centralised and privileged control to distributed free access and use. KM was a part of that.

So what went wrong?

Well not a lot. Death is part of the natural cycle of life and KM has (to use a British expression) had a 'good innings'. However, some things were wrong. Here is my partial list:

1. Takeuchi and Nonaka's SECI model was a great way of explaining a particular aspect of Japanese industry, but a very bad general model of KM. It led people to believe that you could make tacit knowledge explicit and then make it tacit again simply by reading material;
2. We got too obsessed with the IT. People read about Buckman's use of technology and forgot all the work he did getting people engaged. The big consultancies built 'KM systems' for people who spent their life writing reports and then tried to move those systems sideways into very different organisations. We then got into semantic technologies and a wave of belief that artificial intelligence could interpret and create knowledge. That led to the failed attempt to replace the pattern basis of human intelligence with rule based systems and KM became the domain of the technology companies;
3. More recently, people have tried to create standards and certify competence in the subject. Most of the people who did this (and are still doing it) have little actual pedigree in the subject – they are professional trainers. We still get attempts to control or dominate the space and

regrettably some good people are getting caught up in the hope that a professional body could perpetuate the life of KM. It's not going to happen. The subject is too diverse.

So, where are we going? Well, I think the future is bright. With the benefit of hindsight we can see that KM was the first discipline that challenged the mechanical metaphor of BPR and the top-down-driven values of the 'learning organisation' movement. It made possible the wider integration of science with management and with learning from the humanities; sense-making and social computing are its natural inheritors and both are stronger for the last ten year's journey.

Hopefully, the name will stay around for some years yet, but the strategic focus is now elsewhere.

Jerry concludes by saying that he wants to move KM from 'talking to doing' and to unify the KM movement, creating a body of knowledge. I find this ironic. Those of us who opposed Jerry's position have over the last decade and more been active in the practice of KM as well as writing (and talking) about it. We have not been reporters of other people's activities but have sought to change things through action. We will continue to 'do' KM, but we will also move on and do new things. If Jerry wants to rally people to his banner then I wish him luck, but ask him to have the decency to do it without stereotyping or misrepresenting the motivations of those who disagree with him. ■

*David Snowden is founder of Cognitive Edge and can be contacted via his website, www.cognitive-edge.com. Snowden's debut book, *Cognitive Edge: Making Sense of Complexity* is in preparation and a publication date is expected later in the year.*