

Who killed the knowledge analysts? A short history of Knowledge Working (KW) in a public sector agency.

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Introduction

The paper is one of a series by the authors that seeks to explain conflicts and contradictions in knowledge management discourse in organisations. The paper presents a study of knowledge networking within a public sector agency (PSA), where a number of knowledge management initiatives have been introduced since the inception of the UK 'Modernising government' programme of 1999. The study involves an observant participant (Czarniawska, 2001), as one of the authors has worked in the organisation as a Knowledge Analyst ('KA'). The case is an interesting one as it explicates the social and material consequences of a number of utopian KM visions that inspired senior managers in the organisation. For seven years (1999-2006), PSA maintained a knowledge network (the 'Knowledge Working' (KW) initiative) across its 12 local subsidiary companies – the network was unstable, both a source and an outcome of discursive contests. Our study explores the life and death of this discourse formation, and its associated subject, the KA. A comparable study of a public agency was undertaken by Carter and Scarborough in 2001, one of several that constitute a research agenda based on the work of Foucault (e.g. 1975) in Information Systems Research recently reviewed by Willcocks (2006). Following Schulze and Stabell, (2004), we identified five main discourse elements: 'value', 'psychology', 'object', 'practice' and 'structure'. These elements have been used to analyse field data gathered in the past 3 years.

The KW initiative: a synopsis

We start the story in April 1999, when PSA approved a 'Knowledge Web' project. Initially this was a business re-engineering project, which later became a fully-fledged business transformation (BT) project, firstly addressing culture and behaviour and how knowledge is shared, learned, applied and interpreted, and secondly, processes and technology. One workstream in this project mentioned the recruitment of 'Special-K People' who would have specialist skills to manage a core knowledge system; provide professional support, advice and training in managing knowledge; and finally, monitor and maintain best practice in KM. At this stage, the K-discourses at work were primarily the 'psychology' and 'object' discourses. An example of our mapping of knowledge working principles and proposed activities to discourse views can be seen in Table 1:

this is based on in-house documentation part of which was analysed as a data 'snapshot' for the 3-month period October to December 2002.

In June 2000 the role of 'Knowledge Analyst' was invented, and in July 2002 'Special-K People' or 'Knowledge Working Specialists' as they became known, were recruited into a new Knowledge Working (KW) team within the KM directorate. Structural tensions were present from the start. Whilst the KW HQ team was responsible for developing and implementing tools and techniques ('object' discourse) for KW, the KAs were responsible for identifying and interpreting the knowledge needs of staff ('psychology' discourse). Utilising a participation framework called the 'Knowledge Needs Route Map' (developed with the help of an IBM consultant between June and November 2003) and the KW toolkit, KAs were to recommend and implement appropriate KW tools and solutions, such as communities of practice and an intranet - 'practice', 'object' and 'psychology discourses converge here.

Towards the end of 2003 the KW team, KAs, their line managers, and other interested parties were taken through a two-day workshop and emerged as a trans-subsiary 'CoP', a further structural complication. As a KW CoP, the KW team and KA's were to operate both vertically (within HQ and subsidiary) and horizontally (across geographical boundaries). The KW CoP members were geographically distributed and operated in a virtual manner using technologies such as the intranet, telephone, and discussion groups. However, the CoP was not a purely 'virtual' entity as some members were co-located; others met on occasion and all members met twice a year.

Because of the fluid nature of the KA job it was virtually impossible for KAs to identify a schedule of work, and hence, articulate the potential benefit the organisation can derive from their interventions. Consequently, it was very difficult to attribute any direct value to KW perceived as a 'pink and fluffy' concept by adherents of the 'value' discourse. In August 2003, ten months after the KAs were first introduced, a Change and Communications (C&C) Manager was brought in to provide strategic direction for the KA role. In a misguided attempt to paint a rosy picture to ensure that subsidiaries devote more time to KW, he classified all the work the KAs did as KA work which led to resource tensions. In April 2005 the new CEO confirmed at a staff away day that the structure of the organisation would be reviewed. Details of this were not released till August 2006; there was no mention of the KAs, and to date (September, 2006), the KAs do not know whether the KA role is redundant.

The Knowledge Analyst as Foucauldian subject

The construction of the 'subject' of the Knowledge Analyst can be mapped in parallel with the tracking of different K-discourses. Just as the discourse of the clinic produces the figure or subject of the patient whose treatment is contested in a dialogic process that sustains the domain (Hall, 2001), the discourse of KM in PSA has produced the figure of the KA, whose role is sustained in a dialogic contest between HQ and subsidiaries that, paradoxically, sustains the KM programme in the organization. KAs are the constant focus of managerial attention, a site where the five discourse elements converge. As they are subject to continuous demands to start over, they fail to perform, and become keystones of a culture of non-delivery that is sustained over a surprisingly long period. In such a culture (what Thrift (2005) describes as late modernist 'soft' capitalism) blame circulates, and it is difficult to establish accountability, and to answer the question of our title.

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Table 1. The HQ view of the Future of Knowledge Working: A preliminary mapping to discourse views

Principles	Contribution (i.e. How?)	Implications for a future design phase	Discourse Views - Examples
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<p>g</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We will ensure people have the skills to be an effective knowledge worker - We will share knowledge not hoard it, and apply the lessons learned from both success and failure - We will recognise and reward knowledge working 	<p>Portal Values and Brand (Complete) Living the values Performance management and recognition General recruitment and retention</p>	<p>Develop and clearly communicate knowledge vision, strategy and benefits Design and communicate new ways of working & embed in management practices Ensure balanced scorecard communications further knowledge working agenda Build clear link with HR to ensure HR levers support knowledge working</p>	<p>Psychology discourse – e.g. shaping behaviour; provide required skills to workers Object discourse – e.g. storing/hoarding Value discourse – e.g. manage through balanced scorecard communications</p>
<p>g al</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - We will empower communities of practice and other organisational groups to improve collaboration, - We will design organisational structure to ensure improved flow of knowledge to where it is needed in order to make high impact connections 	<p>Communities of Practice Project</p>	<p>Ensure detail of new operational model is aligned with the knowledge vision for group working and collaboration Ensure community consistency with organizational design Collaborative Tools – Understand how people should use them, how they fit together and skill requirements</p>	<p>Object discourse – e.g. knowledge will flow, and structure can be created to facilitate that flow Psychology discourse – e.g. forming quasi-informal communities Practice – e.g. knowledge working through CoPs</p>
<p>g</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> - Our expertise, ideas and information will be the main value which we provide to customers; - We will facilitate knowledge sharing and the building of productive relationships 	<p>Portal will give access to knowledge Knowledge packs & products Knowledge Exchange Clusters & Business Networking</p>	<p>Ensure the knowledge is in place to support self-service approach to volume market Address issues of customers who want our money rather than our knowledge Identify implications of CR strategy and portal for org. design and headcount</p>	<p>Object discourse – ensure the knowledge is available for customers to ‘take away’ Psychology discourse – e.g. facilitating relationship building for knowledge sharing Structure discourse – e.g. new formal (& possibly informal) networks through clusters</p>