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## Leadership Roles for Information Professionals

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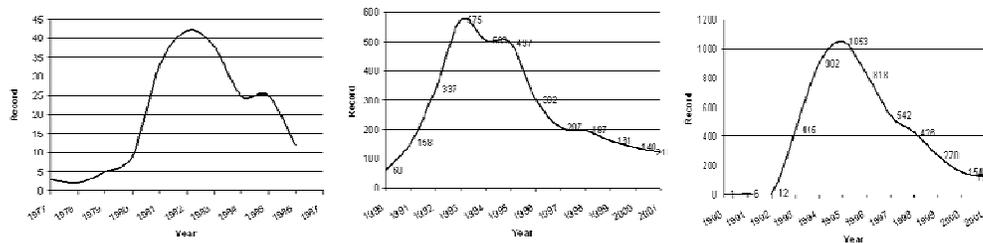
The salient feature for the analysis of leadership roles for information professionals is the emergence and more importantly the **permanence** of KM, Knowledge Management.

### Why is KM so Important?

Because it is all about information (and knowledge), & because it is so different from previous business ‘fads’. It has “legs” – it looks to be permanent.

#### *First: KM is Here to Stay*

As justification for the emphasis here upon KM let us point out and demonstrate that KM is not just another business fad or enthusiasm. Four years ago, Ponzi and Koenig (2002), building on previous work by Abrahamson (1996) and Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999), demonstrated that KM was behaving quite unlike other management “fads”. Previous management fads (as measured by the number of articles in the business literature on the topic) show a consistent pattern of boom and bust over a roughly 10 year cycle, with 5 years of explosive logarithmic growth followed by an only slightly longer period of almost equally dramatic decline. The graphs for “Quality Circles”, “Total Quality Management”, and “Business Process Reengineering” are shown in Figure 1. The similarity of pattern is striking.



The Lifecycle of Quality Circles, 1977-1986 Total Quality Management, 1990-2001 Business Process Reengineering, 1990-2001

**Figure 1. No. of articles on *Quality Circles*, *Total Quality Management*, and *Business Process Reengineering* (Source: Abrahamson 1996)**

The profile of KM however is dramatically different (see Figure 2). Ponzi and Koenig argued in 2002 that KM was at the very least an unusually broad shouldered management fad, and that the pattern could well reflect not just a lengthy fad, but the beginning of something rather more, “a permanent new component of management attention”. With four years more data, the latter looks increasingly to be the case. KM is now in the domain of stable mature growth with no indication of decline, a very different profile in comparison to other business fads. See Koenig (2005) for more information and comparative data on this topic of how differently KM appears and is acting in comparison with other recent business enthusiasms.

Even exercising proper academic caution, I believe that it is now safe to state that: *KM is here to stay*.

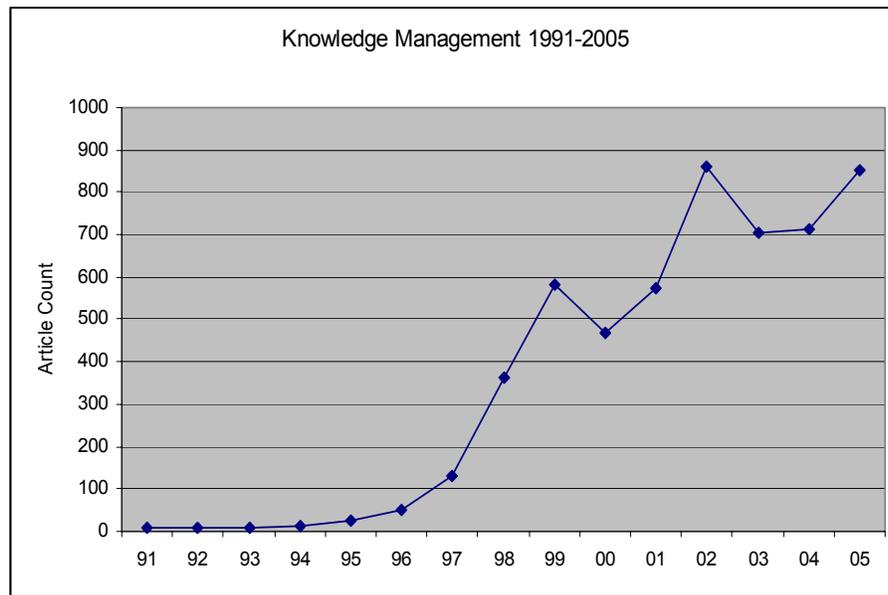


Figure 2. Number of articles on KM

***Second: The Trees (Managing Information and IT Topics) and the Forest***

KM is yet much more than just a very long lived, permanent business enthusiasm. It is in a very real sense the forest for the trees of a succession of information and IT related business enthusiasms.

The last quarter of the 20<sup>th</sup> century was characterized by a succession of management topics. Management fads and enthusiasms might also be a descriptive phrase for these topics, but it has negative overtones as to their validity, while however in all cases the topics are valid, even if in some cases over-hyped and over-subscribed to for a period.

What is noteworthy is that such a high proportion of those topics, to some considerable degree, have to do with the management of information or the management of the technology (IT) or the processes to manage information.

Below is a list of those management topics, shall we call them, of the last quarter century, that have a significant information or IT or knowledge component.

**“Information Based Management”: The Trees in the Forest (Most Recent First)**

- Enterprise Content Management (ECM)
- Supply Chain Management
- Customer Relationship Management (CRM)
- E-business
- Enterprise Resource Planning (ERP)
- Knowledge Management (KM)
- Intellectual Capital (IC)
- Data Warehousing / Data Mining
- Core Competencies
- Business Process Re-Engineering
- Hierarchies to Markets
- Competitive Intelligence
- Total Quality Management (TQM) and Benchmarking
- I.T. and Organizational Structure
- Information Resource Management (IRM)
- Enterprise-Wide Information Analysis
- Management information Systems (MIS) to Decision Support Systems (DSS) and External Information
- I.T. as Competitive Advantage

- Managing the Archipelago (of Information services)
- Information Systems Stage Hypotheses (Nolan, Rockart, Koenig, and others)
- Decision Analysis
- Data Driven Systems Design (the basis of Structured Programming)
- Information technology (IT) and Productivity
- Minimization of Unallocated Cost

(Note that most of these topics are discussed in some detail in Koenig (1998))

The basic thesis presented here is that the topics above are the trees in a forest whose scope and importance we are still coming to recognize. A good descriptive name for that forest might be “Information Based Management”. That phrase, be warned, has yet to gain currency however.

A corollary thesis is that KM, Knowledge Management represents a preliminary and incomplete, but very important realization of the existence of the forest, but that at this point, KM as the term is used in practice, still recognizes and incorporates only a portion of the trees in that forest.

It should be mentioned in passing at this point that in the business community the seminal recognition of the existence of the forest, even if by present standards only dimly perceived, was the trilogy of “Archipelago of Information Services” articles by McFarland and company in the Harvard Business Review in the early 1980s (see McFarlan and McKenny in the references).

What is also striking is that after a quarter of a century of business fads (1975 to 2000) there have been no new significant business fads in the last few years (with the possible exception of ECM, electronic content management, but that is clearly a procedural and tactical subset of KM). The combination of this with the phenomenon of KM looking so unlike those previous fads - is perhaps not proof, but it is certainly consistent with the hypothesis that there is a forest and a trees phenomenon and that KM is the de facto name of the forest.

The conventional explanation, by the way, attributed for the cessation of that parade of business fads is that the dot-com bust created a period of skepticism and a climate unreceptive to new enthusiasms. The explanation favored here is that of the forest and the trees, that we have begun to realize that the important phenomenon to recognize is that of the forest, and that the trees in the forest, while individually quite important, are not themselves of overriding importance, and are part of the larger forest. As new trees are observed, they will be recognized as part of the forest, and will be far less likely to be touted as the newest greatest thing that will solve all problems.

The combination of 1) the quarter century long parade of business fads and its rather abrupt end plus 2) the striking proportion of those fads that are about information or knowledge and the management and deployment thereof, and 3) the appearance of KM toward the end of that quarter century, and the subsequent continuity and permanence of KM in comparison to other business fads, indicates a major sea change in the importance, the role, and the recognition of information and knowledge.

### **The Sea Change**

That sea change in turn must be the basis for thinking about leadership roles for information professionals.

The salient point to observe is that leadership roles for information professionals is a logical consequence of this sea change, and secondarily that education for information professionals and KM is a logical and necessary fit.

Clearly as KM continues and grows in importance, there will be much greater opportunities for information professionals.

### ***We information professionals are, for the most part, not going to assume the role of CIO (Chief Information Officer).***

We must, to be candid, recognize that despite the burgeoning recognition of the importance of information / knowledge / intellectual capital, the chief information officer in most organizations is most typically likely to come from line management, not from the ranks of information professionals. The reason for this is because of the importance of the domain, not in spite of it. The organization will want to assign it to someone who is a member of the club, someone who has come up through line management, someone who has the credibility and the reputation to have clout with the other senior managers, someone who has the trust of other senior managers because he or she clearly knows what the organization is about, and has done what the organization is about.

What does that mean for leadership roles for information professionals? The most obvious corollary is that the CIO will need senior lieutenants, and those people will for the most part be, or should be, information professionals. KM is a broad and complex domain, where information technology must be understood to a degree well beyond that of the typical line manager, where the capabilities of KM tools must be understood, where information architecture must be understood, and where understanding of the human aspects of KM such as corporate culture, human relations dynamics, and HCI, human computer interaction, are even more important. The CIO can be the front person, the face of KM, the proselytizer, the 'closer' as they would say in marketing parlance, but he or she must be supported by well trained and educated information professionals.

A secondary corollary is that information professionals should endeavor, whenever possible to get line management experience within the organization. This is not yet a common occurrence in most developed societies. Interestingly Prusak and Matarazzo (1992) point out that a reverse phenomenon, line managers doing a tour in information management is a not an uncommon feature in Japanese corporations. There will in short be a larger phenomenon of more overlap and a more porous boundary between line management and information management or KM.

That raises interesting questions about how and where we should educate and train information professionals, in information and KM programs, or in business schools. There probably is no clearly defined answer, and the organizational momentum of educational institutions is that we will continue to do both, with increasing overlap between programs in both types of institution. Information science and KM programs will need to incorporate more basic business expertise, and MBA programs will need to incorporate more KM material and concepts. What is likely to happen is a growth of post masters programs, in KM for the MBA or line manager, and in business information for the information professional.

### ***The Importance of Context***

Another way to view this confluence of line management and knowledge management is to look at the development of KM. Previously it has been pointed out that there have been three stages of KM.

A quick recapitulation of the previous three stages is:

#### STAGE I : "by the Internet out of Intellectual Capital"

Information Technology

Intellectual Capital

The Internet (including intranets, extranets, etc.)

Key Phrases: "***best practices***", later replaced by the more politic "***lessons learned***"

#### STAGE II: Human and cultural dimensions, the HR, Human Relations, stage

Communities of Practice

Organizational Culture

The Learning Organization (Senge), and

Tacit Knowledge (Nonaka) incorporated into KM

Key Phrase: "***communities of practice***"

#### Stage III: Content and Retrievability

Structuring content and assigning descriptors (index terms)

Library Science 101

Key Phrases: ***content management, meta data, and taxonomies***

(Note, these stages are elaborated upon in Koenig 2004)

Now it can be argued that we are entering a fourth stage - the **Context Stage**.

What is emerging now as part of that certain maturity in KM indicated by its growth pattern, is the increasing awareness that KM is embedded in context, that one size does not fit all, and that the presentation and understanding of context is vital.

One clear aspect of this emphasis upon context is the recognition that KM extends to knowledge beyond and outside the organization. KM traditionally almost entirely emphasized just an organization's internal knowledge. Two of the most cited definitions of KM make this point. The Gartner Group (Duhon, 1998) defined KM as "a discipline that promotes an integrated approach to identifying, capturing, evaluating, retrieving, and sharing all of an enterprise's information assets. These assets may include databases, documents, policies, procedures, and previously uncaptured

expertise and experience in individual workers" That same year Ruggles (1998) stated that "knowledge management is a newly emerging, interdisciplinary business model dealing with all aspects of knowledge within the context of the firm, including knowledge creation, codification sharing, learning, and innovation. Some aspects of this process are facilitated with information technologies, but knowledge management is to a greater degree, about organizational culture and practices"

The phrases "within the context of the firm" and "an enterprise's information assets" illustrate this point that the 'traditional' emphasis of KM has been within the firm. The classic one-line illustration of what is addressed by KM has been the mantra of "if only Texas Instruments knew what Texas Instruments knew" (O'Dell & Grayson, 1998); the fourth stage adds "and a lot more besides", and that additional scope is very much the domain of the information professional.

Another dimension of this emphasis is the realization of the necessity to understand the context of the user and the potential user. A major component of that is the recognition that for the user to have confidence in the information or knowledge provided, the user must also be made aware of the context of the source of the information.

- Under what circumstances was the information created (i.e. how applicable is it going to be to me and my situation?)
- Who created the information, and has it been vetted by anyone? (i.e. how trustworthy is it?)

Finally, context also appears in another role - "it's the culture stupid." role. It's not a new point, but it continues, and for good reason, to be heavily emphasized that to be successful KM must be embedded into, baked into (Tom Davenport's phrase, Davenport & Glaser 1992), the culture and the procedures and processes of the organization.

There are two salient point here. The first is that this fourth stage is another aspect of the overlap between line management and KM, that information professionals must understand the context of their organization. The second point is that much of that contextual fit to the larger world is *an expertise best provided by information professionals.*

### ***Training and User Education***

A role for the information professional in the new information world that is still very much under-recognized and that will be very important, is that of user training and education. This is of course a logical extension of the "bibliographic instruction" that information professionals have long taken for granted as an important part of their domain, and an area in which the information professionals have training and expertise.

However in the KM world, the importance of user support and user education is an aspect that has still not been adequately recognized. In fact it needs far greater recognition, and it needs the expertise that information professionals can bring.

Fascinating and very compelling documentation in regard to the under-recognition of the importance of user training and education is provided by a classic KPMG (2000) study of more than 400 firms as to their status in implementing KM systems, perhaps the largest study of its type. KPMG reported that of the 161 firms that had KM systems in place there were 137 cases, 85%, where the benefits failed to meet expectations (note, the 85% rate for failure or partial failure must be extrapolated from the data – a company that peddles KM expertise does not want to highlight that figure). Their breakdown of why benefits failed to meet expectations is shown in Figure 3.

Their findings appear to demonstrate that no one reason for failure predominates.

However if the data is examined more closely, a very compelling and contrary finding emerges. Note that three of the reasons above: #1) lack of user uptake due to insufficient communication, #3) lack of time to learn/ system too complicated, and #4) lack of training, are all fundamentally the same reason - inadequate training and user education. Recognizing that essential identity, the table can be recast in a much more informative fashion as shown in Figure 4.

What is immediately striking is that inadequate training/user education is by far the most prominent reason that benefits failed to meet expectations, accounting for the majority of failures, exceeding all other reasons combined. There is one predominant factor. Note also that some components of reasons 2 & 5, "everyday use did not integrate into working practice" and "user could not see personal benefits" could also reflect inadequate training and user education.

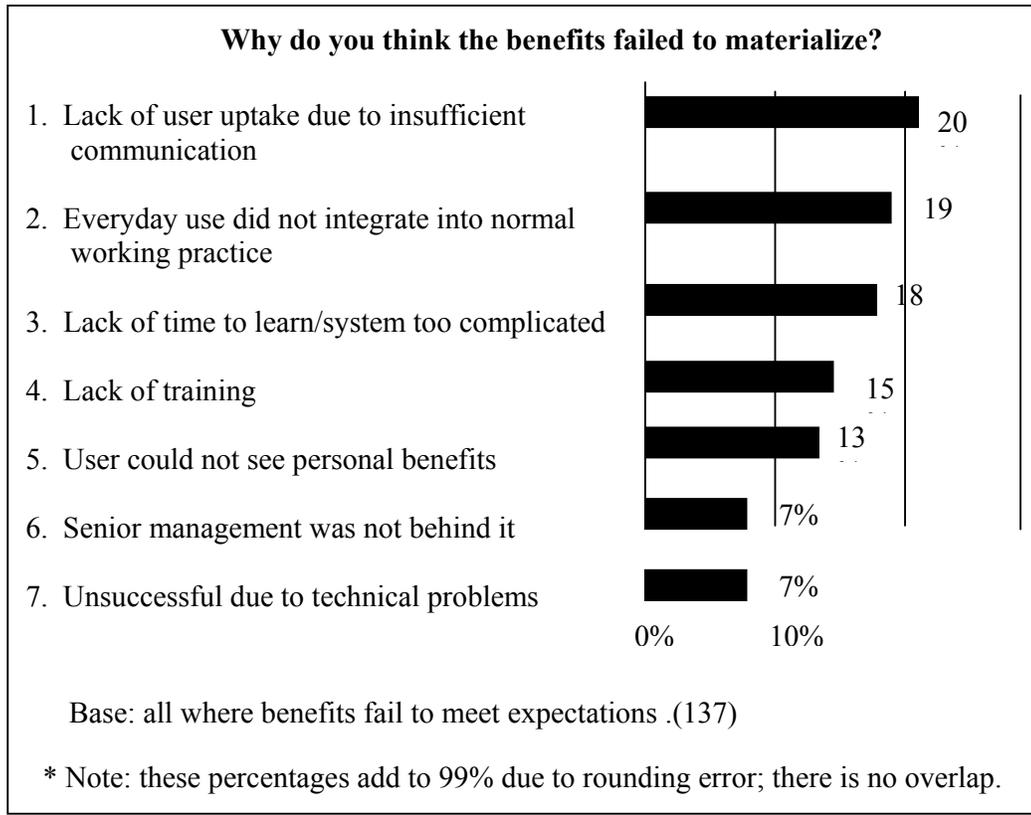


Figure 3. Why the benefits of KM systems fail to meet expectations

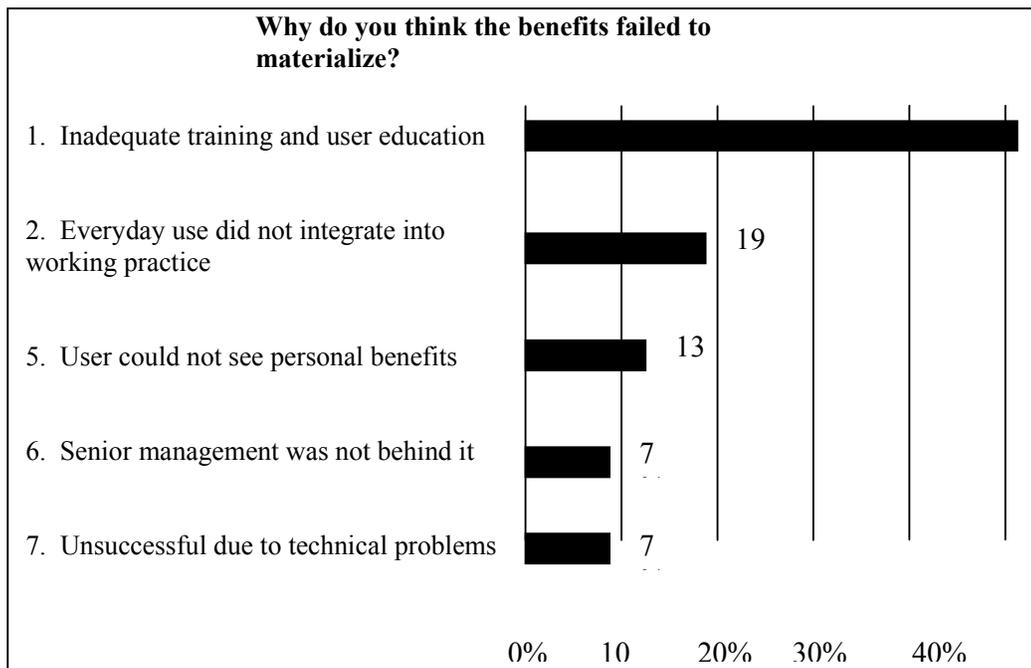


Figure 4. Why the benefits of KM systems fail to meet expectations

Perhaps even more striking, is that the KPMG report fails to pick up on this rather dramatic finding. What this illustrates is that the field in general is egregiously unaware of the importance of user training and education; even the professionals at KPMG missed this, and it was probably the most salient and dramatic conclusion to be drawn from their data. Things have gotten somewhat better since, but we still tend to greatly underestimate the importance of this most important aspect of KM implementation.

An interesting comparison is that in KPMG's data, the percent that reported that inadequate training & user education was the principal problem for failure was 53%, while the percent that reported that "senior management was not behind it" was the principal problem for failure was only 7%. Consider and contrast the proportion of the KM literature that emphasizes the key importance of getting senior management support, with the proportion of the KM literature that emphasizes the key importance of setting up adequate and extensive support for user education and training, and one immediately perceives the extent of this problem, a problem which we overlook at our risk.

There is a clear match here between KM's need and the capabilities of the information professional. The problem is that the field is still inadequately aware of the need, and the field is still less aware of the goodness of fit with the capabilities of information professionals.

## Summary

This is an exciting time for information professionals to anticipate larger and more challenging leadership roles. Stepping into those roles will require great attention to and immersion in the context of the organization:

- Immersion to gain the necessary knowledge of context.
- Immersion to communicate with the organization and to make it aware of the capabilities and contributions of the information professional.

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