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Wisdom Matrix is expert in all aspects of Knowledge Management. Knowledge Management (KM) is a maturing discipline that has entered a new era. Join Gary Avánt in a brief high-level journey of past, present, and future - explore recent corporate KM experience including some lessons learned, the current state of KM affairs, and finally the future of KM.

Article Background



This article was originally written for Distance Educator (www.distance-educator.com) as an expert article.

The past - wide eyed KM

Beginning in 1999, I was formally mentored in KM while working for a Fortune 500 high technology research and development company. My mentor was the Chief Knowledge Officer (CKO) and an international KM guru. He had previously consulted with and saved an international Global 500 company \$700 million dollars and months of effort with successful KM systems. At that time, the KM industry was promising everyone who used KM principles, that they would experience easy and immediate success. KM was in its first pinnacle of success.

The company I worked for was applying KM internally and externally. Externally, we were implementing KM in client proposals and projects. Internally, we were to a very limited degree, implanting KM into internal knowledge systems, portals, and trainings. My top ten list of personal KM lessons was a result. Each one could be an article in itself.

Personal Top Ten KM Lessons

Lesson 1 - Those persons that have proven experience are the ones from which to learn. I sought after successful practitioners, not theoreticians. I realized the value of learning from KM gurus that had proven themselves with demonstrable success; not those that were self-proclaimed, touting mere theories. We began my tutelage by examining the classics such as, The Knowledge Creating Company (Nonaka and Takeuchi, 1995), and If Only We Knew What We Know (O'Dell and Grayson, 1998) among others.

Lesson 2 - Define what KM means in concrete operational terms. Knowledge is familiarity with and comprehension of useable information. Knowledge is not only information. KM is not simply using technology to organize information. There are many good definitions of KM. One useful definition is: Methods that make business faster, better, and less expensive - which capture and integrate knowledge into efficient useable formats by applying informational structures, electronic systems, and personnel processes.

Lesson 3 - Use models and tools that have been successful. I acquired models and tools that have a proven "track record" in several projects and across different industries. These include knowledge analysis and distillation tools, asset collection mechanisms, and process models - all of which have fulfilled the KM core productivity goal: "better, faster, less expensive"

Lesson 4 - Think critically to filter through the KM jargon and hype. I developed critique "cheat sheets" to assist in the critical thinking process. I asked difficult questions of clients, developers, vendors, and "experts" - queries that quickly separated the truth from folly.

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Lesson 5 - Choose carefully where and with whom to implement KM. It is essential to select clients, teams, and stakeholders that understand the value of KM immediately, or could be educated quickly. Some people simply will not get it - approximately one third, will not understand the value and application of KM. From personal experience, research, and literature, I developed a profile of the person or organization that would not grasp KM: old school, non-visionary, minimal planning skills, concrete (non-abstract) thinking, minimal business experience, and minimal exposure to multiple industries.

Lesson 6 - Understand the foundational basics, or KM will not be successful. KM basics and primary concepts are foundational building blocks. Many KM charlatans try to apply KM principles without a thorough understanding of the field.

Lesson 7 - KM is a constantly evolving discipline and not a static template solution. Each proposal, client, and internal project has different needs and parameters. If we attempt to apply one solution, one software, or one paradigm to all scenarios, most will end in failure. However, some projects have similarities and we are able to tailor standardized tools to each need.

Lesson 8 - A protectionist company culture does not facilitate knowledge sharing. The culture of a company can determine the success or failure of KM. The company I worked for was based on a competitive entrepreneurial model. Each business unit competed against all others for internal and external projects. Implicitly this necessitates protecting instead of sharing knowledge.

Lesson 9 - Individuals must take personal responsibility for knowledge. KM has historically been initiated and controlled by organizations, not individuals. The focus has been on how organizations benefit, and not individuals. Personal responsibility for knowledge has been overlooked, which has resulted in many KM failures.

Lesson 10 - Integrity is sporadic in the KM field, yet sadly is not essential to claim "expertise". The company I worked for was providing clients with KM solutions, yet internally they were doing a very poor job of implementing KM principles. I often thought of the saying "Do as I say, not as I do." There were some successful corners of the company that were implementing a knowledge portal here or a community of practice there, but overall KM was not a successful practice in daily company life. In my own company (Avant Consulting), we actively apply KM principles and examine the success regularly. The result is very efficient projects and we provide KM consulting with integrity, because we live it.

The present - cautious KM practitioner

KM has developed and changed dramatically in the past three years - true KM successes and false KM hype are both prospering. A current perusal of the KM landscape brings several trends into focus:

- Original KM is passé; a new KM paradigm has shifted in two different directions.
- Web and taxonomy technologies appear to be the current industry priority.
- KM certification entities are attempting standardization and push their agenda.
- Several KM features have become mainstream.
- KM hype is not supported by solid research data and is questionable.

The original KM paradigm is passé; a new paradigm shift has developed. Beginning four years ago due to poor performance, many KM initiatives have been scrapped, and specialized KM projects fallen by the wayside. A KM paradigm shift has gone in two different directions: 1) developing KM technologies, particularly taxonomy software and web portals and 2) developing KM organizational processes and KM methods. Each has

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the potential of getting lost in its own singular agenda and under-utilizing the other (1). Clients and vendors are confusing KM with information technologies. This leads to the proliferation of one-dimensional "knowledge technologies" instead of multi-dimensional knowledge solutions.

Priority - web and taxonomy technologies. The knowledge technology paradigm has introduced products that pose interesting solutions to organizing information.

Regardless of the vendor hype and quotes from "satisfied customers", the jury is still out on their success since the medium to long term advantages have not yet been determined. The following is a list of key KM technology categories with a few examples that deserve careful attention. There are a myriad of vendors and web sites in each category.

"Taxonomy Software (e.g. Semio Corporation Tagger (2)) - content categorization and indexing (taxonomy) engine designed to handle thousands of digital documents. The software includes variations of predefined categorizations for certain business functions (human resources, sales, etc.) and templates for certain industries (government, health care, etc.).

- Custom taxonomy developers / content owners - organizing content according to the specific business and knowledge needs of their organization. An eclectic approach may include taxonomy software, legacy systems, and other custom or proprietary tools. Since the organization controls the rights to the content, they may become the provider-developers of the future.
- Web portal technologies using an Application Service Provider (ASP) model (e.g. Plum Tree (3) and Epicentric (4)) - information and applications that businesses utilize every day. Each company has a unique extensible portal platform that organizes links to different types of corporate documents in a Web directory.
- Forums, Web Logs (Blogs), and collaborative communication technologies (e.g. Groove, and Lotus) (5) - collaborative web tools for teams and web environments that collect discussions and information presented by users. Advanced features may include synchronous / asynchronous user options, formal facilitators, user value ranking of information, automated value ranking of information using multiple variables, discussion threads using multiple variables, and archived information based on value rankings.

Content owners and providers are partnering with vendors - these alignments will determine the top contenders' survival and future direction of KM. The client list for each major vendor is extensive and reputable. Some content providers use a combination of vendor products. For example, LexisNexis uses Semio and PlumTree software to create their LexisNexis Customized eSolutions suite of products, which includes the LexisNexis Web Portal.

KM certification. There are now multiple KM certification entities positioning themselves as either the final KM authority or as a KM niche authority. It is a confusing array of boards, organizations, and certifications - but if nothing else they provide a list of acronyms that are a humorous alphabetic stew: GKEC, AKM, KMCB, KMCI, and KMPro to name a few (6). Though the certification entities advocate that certification is more valuable than air, the industry has not agreed, and certifications are not yet required as a standard. Additionally, there are not an abundance of jobs where KM practitioners have the sole responsibility of "managing knowledge". Consequently, it is arguable whether KM certification will benefit the industry as much as they will benefit the certification entities.

KM features are mainstream. Three years ago, my KM mentor predicted that certain KM characteristics would

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become seamlessly integrated into many industries. He was correct. Meta-data, Communities of Practice (CoP), and knowledge taxonomies are now mainstream fixtures.

Professionals across every strata now utilize these mechanisms in some way or another - students, developers / programmers, vendors, managers, and executives.

Sales Hype. KM "enterprise solutions" continue to be enveloped in excessive hype. Many companies that are building and marketing KM integrated enterprise systems advertise their product rhetorically will 'save the world'. Products are advertised to do virtually everything for an organization. The products supposedly integrate some mixture of e-Learning, human resources functions, project management, business processes, and KM for every user and every type of organization. Will companies believe it and buy it? Yes. Will it work? To some degree maybe, but probably not to the extent it is advertised. There is no ROI or ROE data or business success to support these claims. We saw many idealistic attempts at this type of model during the dot-com bust of 2001. As recent KM history has indicated, KM is not for every organization, and is not a cookie cutter solution. KM is a dynamically developing discipline that must be planned and customized as needed.

Organizations that continue to struggle with poorly implemented KM are the government, military, and internally competitive companies (small and large). Ironically, they may have visible KM entities (e.g. www.km.gov) but are not using them successfully. Many variables contribute to poor KM implementation in these organizations including self-defeating business cultures, poor personal knowledge responsibility, bureaucratic barriers, and ineffective personnel knowledge networks.

The future - KM integrity seer

"KM is dead, long live KM." With the abandonment of the old KM models and the normalization of some foundational KM principles, KM continues to transform our reality. KM practitioners will need to adjust and fulfill certain logical needs and avoid failures. I am a cautious optimist, and I see opportunities for wise, strategic, and successful steps forward.

Some key dangers to KM success are hype, empty promises, and self-serving solutions. This seems to be part of the human condition and an evil in any industry; however, as KM professionals we can mitigate this. Proven business practices that KM professionals should consider are integrity, solid knowledge of the topic, and wise forward planning. These practices operate like seeds in fertile, watered soil - they automatically produce healthy results.

Clients and vendors must be educated that information technology is not synonymous with KM. The correct view is technology is a KM tool. To accomplish this re-education, there must be a focus on techniques and tools that enable personal knowledge management. Most professionals recognize they are increasingly overwhelmed with technology, information, and knowledge. In the same way that individuals improve their education by understanding their best personal learning style, individuals must understand how to manage personal knowledge in their environment.

Cogent research would help confirm the successful use of current taxonomy models. Scaleable ROI and ROE measurements will be needed to measure company, business unit, and individual employee productivity. Like many first generation "enterprise solutions", the current taxonomy models will probably have moderate problems and need adjustments. If the current market leaders do not excessively hype their products and keep service as a high priority, then these leaders will probably be able to adjust to the necessary changes.

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The KM web portal ASP model probably has a 50% chance of success long term. This model has had sporadic success in other business sectors, so there is reason to believe it will also struggle in KM. The ASP model is based on security, scalability, service, and confidence in the vendor. If any of these are compromised with a few major vendors, a domino effect may take place industry wide - leading to the decline of the ASP model.

Customized and affordable KM solutions are needed for non-profit, micro, small, and medium sized companies who cannot purchase expensive consultants, taxonomy software, and web portals. There is also hope for the government and military. KM principles can be provided to them integrated with other disciplines that are symbiotic; these might include education (e-Learning, distance education) and new generation mainframe database technologies (emergency, health, and homeland security initiatives).

The value of KM certification must be clarified and organized, or simply disregarded. An analysis is needed of the various certification entities and how their certification correlates to KM job descriptions, industries, and business processes. A correlation matrix proffered by a neutral organization would help professionals, vendors, and clients identify which certifications should be considered for their particular need.

We are in a new KM era - it is lucrative and challenging. Professionals in the KM field must learn from the past and apply healthy business principles to the future. I see wise practitioners developing innovative variations of KM and finding ways to use it more effectively. Long live KM!

References

- (1) See <http://www.sveiby.com.au/KnowledgeManagement.html> for a discussion of the two KM tracks.
- (2) Semio web site: <http://www.semio.com> (Semio Tagger Software)
- (3) PlumTree web site: <http://www.plumtree.com> (PlumTree web portal solution)
- (4) Epicentric web site: <http://www.epicentric.com> (Epicentric web portal solution)
- (5) Forums, Blogs, Collaborative tools
 - a. <http://www.knowledgeboard.com/>
 - b. <http://www.intelligentkm.com/>
 - c. Groove web site: <http://www.groove.net/> (Groove collaboration software)
 - d. Lotus web site: <http://www.lotus.com/> (Lotus business collaboration software)
- (6) Certification links (some examples)
 - a. <http://www.gkec.org/kmcertification.htm>
 - b. <http://kmcertification.org/>
 - c. <http://www.kmpro.org/>

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- d. <http://www.kmforsecurity.org/>
 - e. <http://www.kmci.org/Institute/CertificationHome.htm>

(7) KM resource links - recommended

- a. <http://www.brint.com/>
- b. <http://www.kmworld.com/>
- c. http://www.kmadvantage.com/km_links.htm

The Author

Gary Avánt is a contributing writer for Distance Educator.com. He is President and Lead Consultant of Wisdom Matrix, a firm based in San Diego, California. Mr. Avánt is an experienced knowledge management practitioner, business consultant, project manager, web architect, and e-Learning designer. He has led and successfully implemented complex business solutions in a variety of environments, including his own company. Mr. Avánt has been a sought after content expert and speaker, and had articles published by several organizations. He has been on Executive Boards and Committees, helping lead organizations forward.

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