

Knowledge Management Has Many Facets

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By Karl M. Wiig - October, 2002.

The field of knowledge management (KM) is large, complex, and in constant development. KM includes management and operational practices and philosophies, technologies, strategies, and human behavioral traits just to name some the areas that are involved. Hence, both complexity and the many reasons for working with KM result in different ways in which to view the field. The different perspectives are also influenced by the situation at hand. When KM is discussed, considered for adoption by an enterprise, or viewed as a subject for education and training, parties coming from different premises tend to focus on dissimilar facets of KM. The result often is disagreement or confusion.

In our various pursuits of KM, to avoid confusion and disagreements, we must stand back and be clear about which particular KM facet is considered and which aspects are included in that facet. In particular, we suggest that there are at least four distinctly different KM facets: 1. KM as a Technology, 2. KM as a Discipline, 3. KM as a Management Practice and Philosophy, and 4. KM as a Societal and Enterprise Movement. Other facets, such as “KM as a profession” or “KM as a business,” might also need to be considered.

1. KM as a Technology¹

Knowledge management is often considered by practitioners to be a “*technology*”. As such, KM consists of a large number of practical methods, best practices, systems, and approaches to manage knowledge-related processes within organizations. As example of the breadth of KM as a technology approaches we find that KM approaches may be people-centric or based on IT. They may relate to safeguarding and creating intellectual capital (IC) assets. They may focus on organizational learning (OL) and knowledge sharing between communities of practice (CoPs). They may include technical support of human decision making by assisting to find pertinent information. They may include automation of routine or even non-routine decision making without human assistance.

KM as a technology also includes offerings, often IT-based, of well-defined and prepackaged approaches that are assumed to be sufficiently generic to justify such prescriptive “one-size-fits-all” approaches.

¹ **Technology:** **1 a :** the practical application of knowledge especially in a particular area : <medical *technology*> **b :** a capability given by the practical application of knowledge <a car's fuel-saving *technology*>

2 : a manner of accomplishing a task especially using technical processes, methods, or knowledge <new *technologies* for information storage>

3 : the specialized aspects of a particular field of endeavor <educational *technology*> (Merriam Webster's Collegiate Dictionary)

This facet is concrete and mainly focused on the application of “How-To” knowledge for various business and operational purposes. Attempts are made by some to create standards for KM as a technology.

2. KM as a Discipline²

Another facet of KM is as a “*discipline*” to provide a basis to perform research, provide educational curricula and training, or develop new and increasingly effective methodologies and approaches. This view is inherently integrative and multidisciplinary and draws upon many established fields ranging from psychology and cognitive sciences, learning theory, philosophy, management sciences and theories, economics, social sciences, information technology, and broad artificial intelligence (AI), to name a few. (Also see the KRI 2002 Short Note “The Domain of Knowledge Management”.)

This facet views KM from theoretical perspectives and is concerned with knowledge-related phenomena, underlying mechanisms, and processes that affect KM. KM as a discipline focuses answering queries in many different areas. Examples include: “What is involved in preparing for a career in KM?” “How can we ensure that KM practitioners have adequate backgrounds?” “What Is KM?” “How can KM be made more effective?” “How does KM affect other areas of business and society?”

3. KM as a Management Philosophy,³ Strategy⁴ and Practice⁵

A third facet of KM are the management “*philosophies*,” “*strategies*” and “*practices*” considered by enterprises who pursue KM to implement new business strategies or improve performance. Enterprise leaders form perspectives, expectations, plans and action steps based upon their beliefs and understandings of why and how KM will contribute to fulfillment of the organization’s goals and objectives – to desired business results. Based on their convictions, leaders incorporate within their philosophies, strategies and plans approaches for how to deal with stakeholders, culture, motivation, and obtaining the desired KM effectiveness.⁶

This facet focuses on the business perceptions for how to utilize and exploit KM. These views include how KM is affected by organizational culture and the culture-driving management philosophy and practices. The focus is also on needs to shape and support changes required to build the desired KM capabilities and effectiveness.

² **Discipline:** A field of study. (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*)

³ **Philosophy:** **3 a :** a system of philosophical concepts **b :** a theory underlying or regarding a sphere of activity (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

⁴ **Strategy:** **2 a :** a careful plan or method : a clever stratagem **b :** the art of devising or employing plans or stratagems toward a goal (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

⁵ **Practice:** **1 a :** CARRY OUT, APPLY <*practice* what you preach> **b :** to do or perform often, customarily, or habitually <*practice* politeness> **c :** to be professionally engaged in <*practice* medicine> (*Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary*).

⁶ See KRI 2002 Short Note “Example of Corporate Philosophy of a Modern and Proactive Enterprise” for an illustration of this important facet.

4. KM as a Societal and Enterprise Movement⁷

A final facet of KM is the view that globalization makes KM a necessary activity to maintain or improve competitive stance. This has produced a societal and enterprise KM “*movement*”. This movement is based on the belief that 21st Century globalization has led to the “Knowledge Era” where the fundamental competitive factor is intellectual capital (IC) when effectively utilized and applicable. The emphasis is not only on competition but on the endurance of quality of life, basic personal values, and broad global, societal, and enterprise responsibilities and values.

This facet focuses on strategies, policies, and allocation of resources to build required IC – short-term and long-term. It covers concepts as different as initiation of quick training programs to fill important societal knowledge gaps and creation of long-term IC capabilities by improving pre-school education of children or building research and technology infrastructure.

⁷ **Movement:** 2 a : TENDENCY, TREND <detected a *movement* toward fairer pricing> b : a series of organized activities working toward an objective; *also* : an organized effort to promote or attain an end <the civil rights *movement*> (Merriam Webster’s Collegiate Dictionary)