

A Synopsis of Trends in Knowledge Management

An IISD Knowledge Communications Practice Note

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This paper briefly reviews seven trends that are influencing how organizations are approaching knowledge management (KM).

1. Convergence

Knowledge concepts and practices for international organizations have emerged out of a cross fertilization of management approaches in the private sector, innovation in the uses of information and communications technologies, and processes for addressing international development through more consultative approaches. Influencing sectors, disciplines and communities include:

- private sector information and knowledge management experiments;
- social science and popular culture influences, including social network analysis;
- technological evolution, including new approaches to collective ownership of intellectual property;
- lessons from the international development field on technology transfer, K4D and community capabilities;
- research sector (including academic, government, NGO, R&D departments in companies) on knowledge generation, research networks and policy influence;
- civil society engagement, networking and participation in decision-making; and
- multi-stakeholder processes as an emerging “sector”; new forms of governance through transnational, transectoral approaches.

Each of these communities is learning and adopting tools and approaches from the others. For example:

In the private sector: From its own experiments, its interest in concepts of social capital and social networks, and its exposure to the demands of citizens for accountability, the private sector is learning that knowledge management processes now need to include not only information and communications technology (ICT) tools, but also social management skills and an understanding of how to engage with citizens and communities.

In development assistance: The international development community is coming to understand that sustainable development involves mutual knowledge-sharing and mutual capacity development, that the capabilities of the South need to be acknowledged and built upon, and that this process may be fast tracked and scaled up through the harnessing of new communications technologies.

At the level of citizen engagement: Citizens are beginning to see a number of paradoxes in these convergences: they have increasing ability to choose their own communities of influence (moving from physical place to virtual place). At the same time, this may be leading to growing isolation from their physical community, which has implications for participation in local democratic processes.

2. Transition from the storage and retrieval of information to active engagement with the knowledge user

Knowledge management began with the creation of electronic systems to map and store the intellectual capital of an organization, with search and retrieval interfaces for users. However, as can be seen in the table of convergences, KM has moved well beyond the systematic collection, archiving and retrieval of information. Merged into KM are concepts of dialogue, relationship-building and adaptive learning through constant interaction with users, who have their own knowledge and perspectives to contribute.

3. Shifting emphasis from knowledge to influence

Knowledge management practice now includes the creation of internal communities to foster face-to-face and e-mail interaction among staff. But, current studies indicate that these communities tend to be used for improving specific business processes (how work is being done), rather than leading to innovation (new knowledge) or change outside of the enterprise.¹

Knowledge mobilization addresses how external knowledge (outside of the organization) is sought out and combined with internal knowledge to create new knowledge that meets the needs of target users/clients.² Knowledge mobilization emphasizes purpose (meeting the needs of clients) and looks to how one brings in the knowledge of others. It recognizes that organizing one's own intellectual capital does not necessarily lead to innovation or change; implicit in the concept is the need for working relationships with others.

In order to mobilize knowledge to have influence in the world, organizations may need to change their starting point. Too often, groups begin with what they know, or what they want to know, and then do the research. Only when this is done do they consider how this knowledge might be communicated to others for application to conservation and development problems. IISD is experimenting with a different approach: *Having influence* begins with determining *what exactly it is you want to influence*—what decisions you want to influence; what specific changes you want to see in the world. From there, you determine *whom you need to influence*—who is in a position to make or influence that decision or effect that change? Only then do you consider the knowledge question: what knowledge does that person need;? what do you need to know in order to advise them?; and how are you going to share that knowledge with them?

Having influence involves shifting the emphasis from knowledge itself to relationships and interaction.

¹ Queen's Centre for Knowledge Based Enterprises: Knowledge management in organizations: the state of current practice (WP 03-02, 2003); also comment from Head of Knowledge Management, CIDA.

² Adapted from: *Advances in Strategic Management Conference on Strategy Processes*, INSEAD, 2003: C. Annique Un and Alvaro Cuervo-Cazurra.

4. New focus on social capital and social networks

Social capital is becoming recognized as being as important as intellectual capital. Social capital is built through interaction and leads to improved knowledge-sharing.

Organizations are now looking at the tools and training for staff to map their existing social networks and to understand how to build “social capital” with their colleagues, clients and audiences. Social network analysis is the mapping and measuring of how knowledge flows through these relationships. It is a new view of the old adage that “it’s not what you know, it’s who you know.” As groups begin to explore how to bridge research, policy and action, it will become critical to understand how information flows through social networks and how to build social capital with decision-makers to create those channels for knowledge.

5. Open Source/Open Content: Addressing the democratization of knowledge-sharing

The concept of “Open Source” is of growing interest to knowledge-based organizations. It originated in the practice among computer programmers to release source code for others to work with and adapt, with no retention of intellectual property rights (IPR). This practice has evolved into “Open Content,” an ideology of collaboration that grants broader rights for sharing and using new ideas and practices. Commercial control of intellectual property rights has been considered a significant barrier to knowledge-sharing and knowledge generation among experts and organizations. By adopting principles of Open Content, knowledge-sharing becomes more likely, and the protection of what may be desired to be public goods more feasible. Open Content is changing publishing practices by allowing IPR to remain the author’s to share rather than the publisher’s to sell.

6. Adoption of different modalities

The Open Source approach to developing and applying new knowledge is only one model for collaboration. What is becoming clear in the KM field is that organizations can apply a variety of modes of collaboration both to improve the quality of their knowledge and get it into use more broadly. The models range from informal internal networks to share information among staff, to structured networks of individuals and organizations that are focused on specific objectives. The major distinctions revolve around issues of purpose (are there specific tasks and objectives to be met?); membership (open or by invitation); beneficiaries (is knowledge-sharing solely for the benefit of network members or is the knowledge generated for use beyond the network?); structure (is the collaboration guided or facilitated in any way?); and governance.

There is growing interest in how collaboration among groups of people can be “governed” rather than “managed.” An organization creates the space for knowledge-sharing through providing leadership and resources, and through clear articulation of roles and expectations, and then lets the emerging community run itself. The boundaries for participation by internal staff and external stakeholders are quite porous. This process is becoming known as “post-modern knowledge management.” Key to this approach

(indeed key to all models) is the upfront planning—the formulation of purpose, provision of resources, and articulation of objectives and expectations.

Communications tools are as important for knowledge mobilization as models of collaboration and, again, need to be consciously chosen and deployed. Innovation—the generation of new ideas or new applications of existing ideas—often depends on how individuals communicate with each other or reach out to others. Tools vary according to the knowledge-sharing relationships involved:

- *Communications that support group processes (many to many)*: Based on principles of participation and the belief that solutions developed collectively are more likely to be implemented than those imposed by others. Innovation comes about through dialogue and joint problem-solving.
- *Communications that support knowledge dissemination (one to many)*: The delivery of an individual's or organization's information, knowledge and beliefs to others. Innovation comes from feedback loops: encouraging responses to the knowledge provided.
- *Restricted or secure communications (one to one, or a few to a few)*: Based on two concepts:
 - the desire to catalyze and support the interaction of individuals and teams; and
 - the concept of “safe spaces,” where individuals feel empowered to take risks and express thoughts more freely.
- *Education and training*: the transfer of knowledge and experience through formal and informal means.

7. Adaptive management

Concepts of individual and collective learning, adaptive management and formal evaluation processes run throughout all the KM literature and practice. There is an increasing recognition that for learning to be transformational, there have to be mechanisms for monitoring work, relationships and knowledge exchanges as they progress.

Current research focuses on what is needed to be a “learning organization”—one that takes an adaptive approach to its work, with shorter cycles of assessment and adjustment. There is a growing trend within organizations towards more informal “lessons learned” cycles, where knowledge gained is more rapidly and easily shared, and work adjusted accordingly. In general, there is growing acknowledgement that organizational cultures of adaptation need to be developed in order to respond more readily to changing circumstances.

IISD's Knowledge Communications program works at the intersection of communications, networks and sustainable development knowledge. Research and communications go hand in hand; IISD can make a difference in the world by sharing what we know—and what others know—about sustainability.