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Maturity model of Knowledge Management in the interpretativist perspective☆

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ABSTRACT

Many authors have proposed categorizations for approaches to Knowledge Management; outstanding prospects including functionalist and interpretativist. In the first approach, knowledge is considered as a "static object" that exists in a number of ways and locations; in the second one, knowledge does not exist independently of human experience, social practice, of knowledge itself and its use, where it is shared by the social practices of communities, because it is "dynamic and active". These articles constitute an extensive review on the subject, focused in reviewing, analyzing and presenting a study of the interpretativist perspective, and describe a maturity model for KM operational from it.

1. Introduction

Since the last years of the 20th century a strong social revolution has begun; it is a revolution based on information and knowledge, which is driven by the developments in informatics and communications technologies ICT. "*We are entering – or we have already entered – in the knowledge society, in which the basic economic resource. . . is the knowledge itself. . . and where the worker of knowledge will perform a central role*" (Drucker, 1993).

Emerging global economy progressively becomes more distinguished by intensive knowledge enterprises that need specialized workers, exhibiting knowledge that diversify and develop unique competences, and that get involved with the collaboration to create new knowledge for the improvement of the company performance. The ICT's progresses perform an integrating role within these companies as a way for the achievement of the shared learning. These changes have resulted in the need for the improvement of Knowledge Management, which in turn leads to more changes in the same companies. Different authors (Brown & Duguid, 1998; Hedlund, 1994; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; Schultze, 1998; Tenkasi & Boland, 1996) have proposed categorizations for the KM approaches, being the most outstanding the *functionalist* and *interpretativist* approaches. In the functionalist approach, the knowledge is considered like an "*static object*" that exists in a number of ways and localizations; in the interpretativist approach, it is considered that knowledge does not exist being independent of human experience, social practice, the knowledge itself and its use, where it is shaped by the social practices of the communities, because it is "*active and dynamic*".

2. The knowledge

In the context of Knowledge Management, the knowledge can be defined in different ways in such a way that it reflects the different research perspectives. Most of the definitions belong to one of the following categories: (1) it can be defined by means of comparison or relation with data and information (Marshall, 1997; Burton-Jones, 1999; Kanter, 1999); and (2) it can be defined as knowledge per se, that is, without any direct relation with data and information (Davenport & Prusak, 2000; Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995; OECD, 1996; Rennie, 1999).

In the first category it is considered as an entity which is located in an authority level higher than data and information (Stewart, 1997). Data is a set of discrete facts about events (Davenport & Prusak, 2000), while information is "*data provided of relevance and with a purpose*" (Drucker, 1988) that can be created by adding value to data through contextualization, categorization, calculation, correction and condensation (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). Therefore knowledge is described like "*information suitable to be processed*" (O'Dell, Essaides, Ostro, & Grayson, 1998; Tiwana, 2000), which provides "*the power to act and to take decisions that produces value*" (Kanter, 1999). On the one hand, however, in the real world, it is not always possible to distinguish among knowledge, information and data, because the differences between these terms are simply a matter of degree (Davenport & Prusak, 2000). On the other hand, in accordance with the importance of the knowledge and the knowledge base of individuals, that which is considered as information for some people is interpreted as knowledge by others and vice versa (Bhatt, 2001).

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The second category presents the features of knowledge, quality and components, instead of contrasting it with information and data. Therefore, avoid the particular distinction between knowledge and information. An example within this category is Davenport and Prusak (2000), who define knowledge like "*a smoothly mixture with a backdrop which consists of experiences, values, context information and expert's visions, who provide a framework to evaluate and to incorporate new experiences and information*". Apart from this, knowledge also is defined like a series of *know-what*, *know-how and know-who* (OECD, 1996; Rennie, 1999), a "*dynamic human process to justify the personal beliefs about truth*" (Nonaka & Takeuchi, 1995) and the result of learning process (Orange, Dugat, & Acker, 2000).

2.1. Knowledge Management

Describing this term is usually difficult because there is little agreement about its definition (Bhatt, 2001; Neef, 1999). Raub and Ruling (2001) point out in their study that there is not a unique area accepted for the discourse in the academic or management-related literature. Many authors simply avoid the term, and prefer to focus on specific issues of the subject like knowledge, innovation or learning (Costello, 1996). Others argue that Knowledge Management is deeply related with concepts like company learning, company memory, information exchange and collaborative work (Schultze, 1998).

As we have seen, there is no consensus about a definition of KM, and many authors avoid the epistemological discussion about its definition by comparing knowledge with information and data (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). A generalized opinion is that data consists of facts and raw numbers, that information are processed data and that knowledge is the authenticated information (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). Through a review of the literature on Knowledge Management, Scarbrough, Swan, and Preston (1999) define KM like "*any process or practice of creating, acquiring, capturing, sharing and using knowledge, wherever it lies, to improve the performance and learning of the companies*". Hedlund (1994) suggests that KM refers itself to the generation, representation, storage, transfer, transformation, application, insertion and protection of company's knowledge. Such definitions, apart from incorporate many aspects of the "process" around the Knowledge Management, implies an essentially objectivist vision of the subject. Even the vendors of technology emphasize more on the influence of technology in the KM, for instance, the following definition of Knowledge Management was quoted in the web page of Microsoft (Brown & Duguid, 1998):

> Knowledge Management is the use of technology to make that information become important and accessible wherever is located. To perform this efficiently it is required the appropriated application of the proper technology for the specific situation. The Knowledge Management incorporates systematic processes to find, select, organize and present the information in such a way that it improves both the employee comprehension and the use of company's assets.

Others argue their own points of view about knowledge and point out that it also occupies itself of creating an environment and a culture in which knowledge can evolve (Davenport & Prusak, 1998; Wenger & Snyder, 2000; Wenger, 1998). For example, already in Davenport, Jarvenpaa and Beers (1996) criticize the technologies approaches for KM:

> The emphasis of encoding in the KM literature probably reflects the predominance of the vision of information systems: many articles have been focused on the development and implementation of the KM databases, of tools – for example, decision supporting tools – and techniques despite the recognition, now very wide, that most spectacular improvements in the KM capacity in the next ten year will be in the human and managing issues.

The lack of a rigorous definition and the aggressive promotion of technologists have lead many people to point out that Knowledge Management is a fashion-like subject. Although the subject clearly exhibits the features of a fashion issue (Davenport & Grover, 2001), and even can be analyzed from the fashion perspective (Raub & Ruling, 2001), the consultancy firm TFPL (1999) considers that is probable that concepts and values of the KM practice are deeply-rooted in the basic managing processes of the companies.

3. Perspectives of Knowledge Management

Applying the Burrel and Morgan framework (1979) in a social and company-related research, Schultze (1998) identified four research paradigms in KM: radical humanism, radical structuralism, interpretativism and functionalism, as it is showed in Table 1.

Among these paradigms exist a continuity between the subjective and objective perspectives: from the objective's point of view, knowledge is considered as an object awaiting to be discovered, that can exist in a number of forms – tacit or explicit, and in a number of places – individual, group or organization (Schultze, 1998); from subjective point of view it is pointed out that knowledge emerge through a continuous elaboration, it is determined by social practices of communities, and cannot be located in an specific place because it cannot exist independently of human experience and social practices of knowing (Schultze, 1998).

According to these paradigms, functionalism prevails on KM current research, that frequently contrast with the interpretativism, because exist a lack "*of structuralist perspectives or humanists in the research on Knowledge Management*" (Jashapara, 2004). Probably the weight of both perspectives can be affected by its incapability to accept post-structural theories (Schultze, 1998), for this reason they must be mixed in a "critical perspective" to accept them (Schultze, 1998; Venters, 2002). Schultze applies a framework developed by Burrell and Morgan (1979), with the objective

Table 1
The four paradigms in the KM research (Schultze, 1998).

	The sociology of change		
	Radical humanism	*Radical structuralism*	
	Knowledge as social practice of knowing	Knowledge as an object that can exist independently of human actions and perceptions	
Subjectivism	The value of knowledge and work is refuted, and it becomes a source of conflict	The value of knowledge and work is refuted, and it becomes a source of conflict	Objectivism
		Interpretativism	*Functionalism*
	Knowledge as social practice of knowing	Knowledge as an object that can exist independently of human actions and perceptions	
	There is a consensus about the value of knowledge and work	There is a consensus about the value of knowledge and work	
	Sociology of regulation		