

# Unpacking Knowledge Management: Management Fad or Real Business Practice?

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## **Abstract**

Knowledge Management (KM) is a subject that has inspired numerous books and academic papers in recent times. Whilst capturing the interest of practitioners and scholars from the mid-1990s onwards, KM remains an elusive concept, the main criticism being that it is simply another management fad that promises much but delivers little. It is important to reflect on and respond to these criticisms, so that any misunderstanding of KM as a concept can be resolved. If we do not identify and attempt to resolve such misapprehensions, the significance of KM in relation to management thought and business practice, will be reviewed, wrongly, as little more than a mythology and the opportunities for improvements in practice will be lost. The purpose of this paper is to respond to those criticisms of the KM concept and correct misapprehensions through a thorough review of relevant KM literature. The literature review draws attention to a set of pervasive and fundamental criticisms of the KM concept and the contribution of this paper is to respond to those criticisms and misapprehensions, which, if left uncorrected, will act as a barrier to the spread of genuine KM implementation.

**Keywords:** Knowledge Management, management fad, criticisms

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## 1. Introduction

This paper provides reflections on criticisms of Knowledge Management (KM). These criticisms are analysed with the aim of explaining the widespread diffusion of KM implementation across a large number of organisations. In particular, we consider how far these criticisms can be explained in terms of misapprehensions towards KM, and whether the reflections might provide a more complete understanding of the concept and value of KM in practice.

KM has increased in popularity and credibility as a management tool and as a research discipline, over the past decade (Cranfield and Taylor, 2008) when KM has come received considerable and increasing attention from academics and practitioners. Despite such interest, KM is still not a commonly shared concept and lacks a universally acknowledged definition. For example, Davenport and Prusak (1998:p.43) define KM as consisting of ‘processes to capture, distribute and effectively use knowledge’. For Brooking (1997:p.364) KM is ‘the activity which is concerned with strategy and tactics to manage human-centred assets’. While Beijerse (1999:p.102) defines KM as ‘achieving organisational goals through strategy driven motivation and facilitation of knowledge workers to develop, enhance and use their capability to interpret data and information ...through a process of giving meaning to these data and information’. A possible reason for the vagueness and ambiguity in understanding the concept, as well as defining KM, seems to be the word ‘knowledge’. Knowledge means different things to different people, as is revealed in a study conducted by McKinsey & Company and Darmstadt University Technology comprising of more than 400 interviews held at 39 companies around the world; 18 in Europe, 11 in North America and 10 in Japan (Takeuchi, 2001). For example, it may refer to intellectual property (explicit knowledge), whereas others refer to knowledge as something in people’s head (tacit knowledge).

In fact, finding agreement on the definitions is extremely difficult due to the intangible nature of knowledge, subjectivity and the eclectic nature of the field (Hlupic et al., 2002:p.92). Moreover, much of the existing literature is concerned with an ontological debate drawn from philosophical perspectives (Pan and Scarborough, 1999). At the same time the field of KM is relatively diffuse and scattered in numerous fields including economics, human resources, accounting, strategic management, operational management and IT. It is claimed that KM is ‘one of the most ramified topics in the business lexicon’ (Despress and Chauvel, 2000:p.55). As a result, it is characterised by many differing concepts, perspectives and approaches (Wolfgang et al., 2004) and it has been stated that ‘there exists a patchwork of sub-domains in and around KM that deal with one set of issues whilst ignoring others’ (Despress and Chauvel, 2000:p.57). Thus, there is considerable ambiguity in the KM terminology, which has led to fragmented debate on the topic (Bollinger and Smith, 2001). Despite the ambiguity of the terminology and the fragmented debate on the subject area, the experiences of many organisations documented in the literature provide evidence that it is vital for organisations to embrace, adopt and implement KM practices in order to achieve their organisational objectives. The purpose of this paper is to respond to those criticisms of the KM concept and correct misapprehensions through a thorough review of relevant KM literature. The literature

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review draws attention to a set of pervasive and fundamental criticisms of the KM concept and the contribution of this paper is to respond to those criticisms and misapprehensions, which, if left uncorrected, will act as a barrier to the spread of genuine KM implementation. The following section discusses six main KM criticisms.

## **2. Knowledge Management: Reflection on Criticisms**

KM has attracted substantial criticisms in relation to its claims, content and approach. The six main criticisms and arguments are summarised in the following subsections.

### *2.1 Poor Conceptual Understanding*

The vast majority of the knowledge literature builds on the assumption that knowledge is a resource amenable to management control (Scarborough, 1999:p.9). This represents the fundamental assumption underpinning objective-based perspectives of the KM concept. Further, the terminology of ‘management’ implies that knowledge is a ‘thing’ and an object that can be captured, transmitted amongst individuals, and stored in multiple ways within organisations. However, the characteristic of tacit knowledge make it difficult to control and manage through action-oriented styles of management. The KM issues become more problematic as it is taken into consideration that knowledge cannot be directly managed (Von Krogh et al., 2000). The question that would arise is: ‘is knowledge manageable?’ It could be argued that KM is not about managing knowledge but about changing entire business cultures and strategies of organisations to ones that value learning and sharing knowledge (Kakabadse et al., 2003:p.86). Such an argument is reinforced by the people-based perspective, where the importance of human, social and cultural factors has been highlighted. In general, organisational management should be able to manage knowledge through utilising people-centred mechanisms and processes, although, it would be a misconception to suggest that KM is about direct manipulation of controllable resources. As further described by Allee (1999:p.121);

“People working in the field of KM find themselves living the paradox of having our feet in two worlds. One foot stands rooted [some would say stuck] in the corporate world of management practice as it has existed for several decades. The other foot stands in the fast moving but somewhat murky new waters of intangible assets and knowledge as the new economic foundation of organisations and companies. In the body of thought and practice loosely called KM one can clearly see both perspectives in play” (Allee: 1999:p.121)

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## 2.2 Lack of Common Knowledge Management Frameworks

KM, when it first became popular in management circles, lacked strong foundations to support the ideas. It was largely based on observations of consultants in leading organisations using IT to implement KM initiatives. Consequently, in reviewing the literature, KM lacks a common framework. This is because there is no consensus of a working definition of KM itself. Moreover, it has been argued that the field has been slow in formulating a generally accepted and comprehensive framework, despite a myriad of frameworks being developed for KM (Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001b). There are four main streams of disagreement with regard to KM frameworks (Metaxiotis et al., 2005:p.11-12). Firstly, *disagreement regarding the elements of a KM framework*. The majority of the frameworks presented in the literature are prescriptive, ‘task-oriented’ and provide general directions about KM implementation and procedures without providing specific details of how these implementations and procedures can be achieved (Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001a). While in essence the frameworks prescribe different ways to engage in KM activities, in contrast, descriptive frameworks characterise or describe KM through identifying important attributes that influence the success and failure of KM initiatives (Rubenstein-Montano et al., 2001a). Secondly, *disagreement on the ordering or structuring of KM frameworks*. This concern mainly focuses on prescriptive frameworks since they usually include some elements which must be followed in a particular flow where, in many cases, the same element can be found on the opposite order in different frameworks (Metaxiotis et al., 2005). Thirdly, *inconsistency regarding the use of terminology in KM frameworks*. In many cases, different KM frameworks include the same elements but different terminology is used for similar activities and processes, for instance, frameworks developed by Liebowitz (2000), Demerest (1997) and Van Heijst et al. (2000). Finally, the KM frameworks presented in the literature tend to *emphasise different aspects of KM*. KM frameworks do not address the hard issues (e.g. IT) and soft issues (e.g. culture) equally. For example, many of the KM frameworks focus on knowledge process (capture, share, storage of knowledge) and, consequently, other elements such as the cultural context, within which KM is developed, are neglected.

## 2.3 Rebottled Old Wine

A common criticism is that KM claims to be too philosophical and covers a very broad range of business practice. Critics argue that KM owes a substantial debt to past business concepts and ideas such as Scientific Management (Newell et al., 2002), Organisational Learning (Senge, 1990), Business Strategy (Zack, 1999) and other change management concepts such as benchmarking, total quality management (TQM), business process reengineering (BPR) and Six Sigma (Binney, 2001). Many of the ideas in KM are, indeed, old ones with new labels (Birkinshaw, 2001). Further, it is claimed that KM is nothing new and simply uses established management tools e.g. IT, human resources and incentives tools (OECD, 2003:p.9). A central issue of these claims is related to the nature of KM that is defined broadly and inclusively to cover a loosely connected set of ideas, tools and practices centring on exploiting knowledge in organisations. As a result, organisations are exposed to the commercial exploitation of the idea of KM (Scarborough and Swan, 2001). Consultants are

actively marketing KM as an attempt to harness knowledge resource as the primary source in gaining a competitive advantage. For many, efforts to promote KM often involve a repackaging of tools and practices which have been developed in a different context. However, while KM is criticised by many as a management fad, it is hailed by others as a new way of management thinking and more than a buzzword (Ruggles, 1998) and an emerging discipline (Wiig, 1997). This is consistent with Abrahamson's (1996) account of management fashion as more than aesthetic form, but as a response to performance gaps opened by technical and economic environmental change and collective beliefs as to which management techniques may help to fill the gaps. As Abrahamson (1996:p.279) further describes:

“Management fashions are not cosmetic and trivial. Management fashions shape the management techniques that thousands of managers look to in order to cope with extremely important and complex managerial problems and challenges”  
(Abrahamson, 1996:p. 279)

Certainly, the development of KM stems from a desire by organisations to learn about management techniques that could help them respond to environmental factors in the knowledge-based economy. In sum, although KM largely relies on the manipulation of past and existing business practices, it also reflects the more positive management agenda arising from greater awareness of increasingly dynamic and complex competitive business environments.

#### *2.4 Bandwagon Effect*

The need for security in competitive industries, due to turbulent business environments and the advent of IT, creates a tendency for organisations to jump on the KM bandwagon. Many companies have jumped onto such a bandwagon without understanding the meaning and implications of KM, in fact, most companies are still grappling with the concept (Wah, 1999:p.17). Further, organisations that have jumped on the bandwagon to implement KM may fail in their efforts because they do not know where to start and lack the guidance of a proper and cohesive implementation framework (Wong and Aspinwall, 2004:p.93). As a result, the majority of organisations put emphasis on IT utilisation and infrastructure in KM implementation. It is particularly important to correct this error, so that KM does not become yet another management fad that promised much but delivered little (Fahey and Prusak, 1998:p.265). Apparently, it is not a management fad or buzzword since a KPMG (2000) survey of companies across all sectors and public organisations in UK, Europe and US confirmed confidence in KM as a strategy that will offer competitive advantage in the future. The results revealed that 81% of the respondents had a KM programme in place or were considering implementing one, and a majority of 79% respondents believed that KM could play a significant role in improving their competitive advantage. KM is criticised as being a

fashion, a so-called fad or buzzword because of its ambiguity (Scarborough and Swan, 2001). This ambiguity means that the term ‘knowledge’ and even ‘Knowledge Management’ as described in a previous section, can mean quite different things to different people and thus the concept can have potentially multiple interpretations and broad appeal. In consequence, such critics implicitly assume KM practitioners are relatively passive and even naïve consumers, who are prey to the efforts of opportunistic consultants (Hislop, 2005). However, Scarborough and Swan (2001) suggest that such critics play down the extent to which consumers have active and positive roles in the consumption of new management ideas, such as KM, because the growing interest in KM is claimed to provide potential solutions to deal with the real business problems within competitive business environments. Thus, the weakness of the view of KM as a fad or buzzword is the negative and erroneous and impression this portrays to the consumers or practitioners (Hislop, 2005:p.242). To ensure that the concept of KM will not be regarded as a management fad and vanish, as has happened to so many other management concepts, it is important that KM is not regarded as a ‘Jack of all trades’ because if this happens, there is the risk that it will probably become the ‘Master of none’ (Martensson, 2000:p. 214).

### 2.5 Success or Failure?

One view that has been advanced in relation to KM practices is that it offers companies the promise of success, but fails to deliver significant results (Lucier & Torsilieri, 2001) and the success rate is mixed (Burkinshaw, 2001). Although the literature is sprinkled with examples of organisations which have successfully implemented KM initiatives, Lucier and Torsilieri suggest that 84% of all KM initiatives will fail to have significant results (Storey and Barnett, 2000). In addition, some observers have declared that KM is a fad that does not produce results (The Economist, 1997). There are several reasons leading to the failure of KM practices, as summarised by Burkinshaw (2001:p.15-16). Firstly, *firms do not sufficiently recognise that they already have KM in place*. This is because the KM field is so broad that it is difficult to tell whether such initiatives belong within the scope of KM. Consequently, what KM is all about is not clear without having a sufficiently firm grasp of the issues and the methods involved, for example, the significant differences between KM and IT is unclear (Spender, 2006:p.13). Secondly, *IT is often regarded as a substitute for social interaction*. Although IT has its limitations in dealing with tacit knowledge in the codification process, it still can facilitate social interaction through its capacity for video conferencing, for example. Thus, IT tools and social tools such as Communities of Practice (CoPs) are complementary (Burkinshaw, 2001). Thirdly, *KM typically ends up focussing too much on recycling of existing knowledge* such as sharing best practice, rather than generating and creating new knowledge in organisations, through innovation. Finally, *most KM techniques are similar to traditional techniques* that have been used by organisations for years, for instance, the concept of CoPs could be said to be essentially about encouraging people to communicate and share ideas.

Despite the setbacks of KM practices, the real promise of KM is by achieving significant

results with significant efforts by integrating knowledge into management and not the other way around (Lucier & Torsilieri, 2001). Three lessons from results-driven programmes illustrate the integration of knowledge with management which provide guidelines to KM initiatives, as suggested by Lucier & Torsilieri (2001:p.238-239). Firstly, new KM disciplines must be synthesised with traditional management practices. Secondly, the link between KM and benefits must be made more explicit. Finally, a new view of change programmes must be embraced which is called ‘learning dynamic’ (Lucier & Torsilieri, 2001). It means that together KM initiatives and organisational change drive the results. Unlike a traditional approach, organisations should design a sequential approach, which identifies what they want employees to do and then craft a change programme to induce them to do it.

All in all, despite promising results from practitioners in particular areas of KM, it is difficult to weigh up the success and failure of KM initiatives. This is because the nature of KM practice is multifaceted and multilayered, where the goals, targets and objectives set vary between organisations. KM implementation also requires concerted effort by people throughout the organisation to achieve the desired results as the focus of KM doesn’t ‘just happen’ (Covin and Stivers, 1997). Furthermore, KM measurement is inherently subjective and problematic in practice to validate the KM outcomes.

### *2.6 Value and Measurement: The Missing Link?*

While knowledge is widely recognised as a valuable resource and it is one of the basic premises of KM, there is little understanding of what knowledge is valuable (Ford and Staples, 2006). It is important to know how the value of knowledge influences the KM process because without fully understanding how the value of knowledge is determined, it is somewhat simplistic to assume that KM practices will automatically add value to organisations. Yet, the concept of value is not clearly defined in the literature, because the term ‘value’ itself is ambiguous (Najder, 1975:p. 42). Consequently, value closely relates to the concept of ‘values’ in a cultural perspective (Andriessen, 2004). According to Trompenaars and Hampden-Turner (2000), value is defined as the degree of desirability of something, especially in comparison to other things. This is in line with Rescher’s (1969) value theory, which indicates that values are inherently benefit-oriented. People engage in valuation, ‘not as an abstract exercise, but to determine the extent to which benefits accruing from realization of some values are provided by the item at issue’ (Rescher, 1969:p.61-62). For example, an item is evaluated ‘in point of’ some consideration or other. Cars are always evaluated in point of their ‘economy’ and ‘reliability’, clothes in point of their ‘fashions’ or ‘durability’. However, value is not a property inherent in the item at issue (Rescher, 1969) which depends on the subject’s view of the benefits and desirability. In that respect, value is ‘in the eye of beholder’ (Andriessen, 2004:p.237). In other words, it is based on people’s perceptions. Likewise, value has been well studied and defined in the marketing literature, where Zeithaml’s study (1988) of how people distinguish value from quality and price, found that the participants used the term ‘value’ in many different ways, describing a wide variety of attributes and higher level abstractions that provided value to them. What constitutes value,

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even in a single product category appears to be highly personal and idiosyncratic (Zeithaml, 1988). Therefore, value is a perception and this is expected to apply when the ‘object’ being interacted with, or considered, is knowledge.

Further, it is argued that the key feature of creating value from intangible asset differs in several important ways from creating value by managing tangible physical and financial assets (Kaplan and Norton, 2004:p.29-30). First, *value creation is indirect*. Knowledge (they use the term intangible asset) seldom has a direct impact on financial outcomes i.e. an increase in revenues or decreased costs, rather, it affects financial outcomes through chains of cause-and-effect relationships. For example, KM activity, such as TQM, can directly improve process quality. Such improvement can then be expected to lead to improved customer satisfaction, which, in turn, should increase customer loyalty and improved sales from long-term customer relationships. Second, *value is contextual*. The value of knowledge depends on its alignment with the organisational strategy. For example, sharing best practices has greater value for organisations following a low total cost strategy than for one following an innovation strategy. Third, *value is potential*. The investment in KM represents a poor estimate of its value to the organisation. For example, employees trained to upgrade their skills have potential value but not market value. If the investment in training and development is not directed at customer value propositions, then the potential value of employee capabilities will not be realised. Finally, *‘assets’ are bundled*. Knowledge seldom creates value by itself and does not have value that can be isolated from organisational context and strategy. The value from knowledge arises when both explicit and tacit knowledge are combined. For example, the quality of on-the-job training is enhanced when employees have access to detailed data from information systems.

In addition, Andriessen (2004) argues that KM measurement frameworks (he uses the term ‘intellectual capital’) are a measurement method not a method for valuation, because they use a measurement scale that cannot represent the real value with such scaled numbers quantitatively. But Rescher (1969:p. 61) describes valuation (he uses the term evaluation) in the strictest sense as “e-value-tion” which is ‘a comparative assessment or measurement of something with respect to its embodiment of a certain value’. Knowledge is not an object or thing but more an aspiration to be insightful, it is dynamic and grows in firms all the time and, therefore, it makes little sense and is impossible to arrive at one finite ‘value’ that is presented in IC measurement frameworks (Mouritsen, 2004). But how can knowledge be managed if the value of knowledge is not predictable? KM value, as perceived through IC measurement, is not about the precise prediction of knowledge but about orienting the production of knowledge towards a purpose that involves being able to make a difference to somebody or being good at something (Mouritsen, 2004). In summary, the value through measurement frameworks is not easy to establish and the mechanisms do not have explanatory power to demonstrate the linkage.



### 3. Conclusion

The paper has highlighted six main criticisms levelled at KM as a concept and, through the discussion, identified a range of perspectives through which knowledge is defined and addressed by organisations. The main criticisms are summarised in Table 1.1. From the definitions of knowledge, debates and disagreements continue to exist concerning the fragmentation of the KM topic. In fact, The nature of the KM literature is not coherent in character which encourages ongoing debates and disagreements regarding the nature of knowledge and KM and the practical value to organisations.

Table 1.1 Summary of Main KM Criticisms

Main Criticisms	Key points
Poor Conceptual Understanding	The vast majority of the knowledge literature builds on the assumption that knowledge is a resource amenable to management control which represents the fundamental assumption underpinning the objective-based perspective of the KM concept. However, the characteristic of tacit knowledge make it difficult to control and manage through action-oriented styles of management. The KM issues become more problematic as it is taken into consideration that knowledge cannot be directly managed.
Lack of Common Framework	In reviewing the literature, KM lacks a common framework as there is no consensus of a working definition of KM itself. Moreover, it has been argued that the field has been slow in formulating a generally accepted and comprehensive framework, despite a myriad of frameworks available. For example, KM frameworks do not address the hard issues (e.g. IT) and soft issues (e.g. culture) equally and many focus on knowledge processes (capture, share, storage of knowledge). Consequently, other elements, such as the cultural context within which KM is developed, are neglected.
'Rebottled Old Wine'	KM is claimed to be too philosophical and covers a very broad range of business practices. Critics argue that KM owes a substantial debt to past business concepts and ideas including Scientific Management, Organisational Learning, Business Strategy and other change management concepts such as benchmarking, total quality management (TQM), business process

	<p>reengineering (BPR) and Six Sigma. Many of the ideas in KM are, indeed, old ones with new labels. A central issue of these claims relates to the nature of KM that is defined broadly and inclusively to cover a loosely connected set of ideas, tools and practices centring on exploiting knowledge in organisations.</p>
<p>Bandwagon Effect</p>	<p>Many companies have jumped onto such a bandwagon without understanding the meaning and implications of KM, in fact, most companies are still grappling with the concept. Further, organisations that have jumped on the bandwagon to implement KM may fail in their efforts because they do not know where to start and lack the guidance of a proper and cohesive implementation framework. As a result, the majority of organisations put undue emphasis on IT utilisation and infrastructure in KM implementation.</p>
<p>Success or Failure</p>	<p>One view that has been advanced in relation to KM practices is that they offer companies the promise of success but fail to deliver significant results and the success rate is mixed. Although the literature is sprinkled with examples of organisations which have successfully implemented KM initiatives, it is argued that 84% of all KM initiatives will fail to have significant results. In addition, some observers have declared that KM is a fad without real business benefits.</p>
<p>Value and Measurement</p>	<p>While knowledge is widely recognised as a valuable resource and it is one of the basic premises of KM, there is little understanding of what knowledge is valuable. The concept of value is not clearly defined in the literature because the term ‘value’ itself is ambiguous. Knowledge is not an object or thing but more an aspiration to be insightful. It is dynamic and grows in firms all the time and, therefore, it makes little sense and is impossible to arrive at one finite ‘value’ that is presented in IC measurement frameworks. In summary, the value of knowledge, through measurement frameworks, is not easy to establish and the mechanisms do not have explanatory power to demonstrate the linkage.</p>

KM reflects a move towards a new management paradigm in response to the competitive business environment. A large number of organisations, recognising the pressure from increasingly competitive and global markets, are willing to invest a great deal of time and resources in KM initiatives (Bahra, 2001). The motivation is the recognition of knowledge as a key resource and its potential in achieving a sustainable competitive advantage. Nonetheless, if organisations are unable to implement it successfully, it could possibly be viewed as a fad (Wong, 2005) rather than a valuable business practice.

KM has rapidly gained widespread acceptance, but what started off as a new management paradigm has gone astray due to a lack of theoretical underpinning, compounded by a lack of conceptual understanding and problematic measurement methods. However, much has been uncovered and clarified based on the experience of practitioners and extensive academic research. This is reflected in the growing number of articles and books in this area (Edvardson, 2006). In turn, this has led to a deeper understanding and greater appreciation of KM as a management philosophy. Although its name has been sullied, and some argue that KM is no more than a management fad or ‘rebottled old wine’, equally, a substantial number of other theorists maintain that it is a viable management practice representing the way forward in an increasingly volatile and competitive global business environment. Ponzi and Koenig (2002) have argued, based on their studies, that KM is at least living longer than typical fads and, perhaps, establishing itself as a new aspect of management. Consequently, many organisations, as reported in the literature, remain committed to KM and continue to implement KM initiatives.

In conclusion, it is important to reflect on and respond to the criticisms of KM, so that any misunderstanding of the concept can be resolved and many of the barriers to successful KM implementation can be removed. Whilst much hype surrounds the concept of KM and many misapprehensions exist, large numbers of organisations, from across all industry sectors, have reported successful implementation, although, the benefits are difficult to quantify. The fact that the concept has endured for so long, indicates that there is real value to be gained and that it is much more than simply a management fad. This paper has attempted to identify, explain and respond to the main criticisms levelled at KM. The purpose was to pave the way for organisations to achieve significantly improved results through a better understanding of what knowledge means to them, thus, enabling them to successfully integrate knowledge into management.

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