A short history of knowledge management

This sheet gives a short overview of developments in and around concepts of knowledge management.

Earlier forms of KM

Although it can be said that various forms of knowledge management have been around for a very long time, the explicit notion of managing knowledge started as an offspring of rapid developments in information technology. At the same time current knowledge management efforts sometimes resemble older methods such as apprenticeships, which have been around for millennia.

KM as ICT or Information Management

KM emerged in the early 90s of the last century as a pure ICT approach. Knowledge was perceived to be written or digitised content. Answers to managing knowledge were sought in ICT tools such as databases, (online) libraries etc. This evolved into what most people nowadays call information management (IM - although KM itself is often perceived as overlapping with or the same as IM). This approach currently translates into popular tools such as wikis, blogs, social media, discussion forums, etc. This approach is also called the 'stock' concept because it aims at storing information. The ICT approach is an ideal supplement to the other KM approaches, in that it provides the opportunity for, and stimulates the continuation of knowledge and information sharing and communication. So the approach still exists. However, KM evolved further - and got personal.

KM as Human Resource Development or Human Talent Development

In the late 90s, the focus of KM shifted towards the personal side of knowledge. This was partially due to the realization that knowledge would not let itself be contained into ICT systems, but is rather personal and subjective: "knowledge is in people". The human resource or human talent development approach focuses on the development of personal capacities, as individuals are seen as the main carrier of knowledge. It comprises methods such as technical, management and personal trainings, appraisal talks, formulating personal goals. The HRD approach is also called the 'flow' concept as it tries to steer the personal development processes.

KM as organizational approach

The next major step in knowledge management thinking was the focus on people interacting in an environment, such as within a company, a network or a community. This led to the understanding that more attention needed to be given to the organisational setting in which people work, hence the introduction of concepts such as 'knowledge-intensive environments' as well as 'knowledge-workers' working in such an environment. The overall objective of KM in this approach is to help individuals develop within their surroundings to create an optimal working environment for the knowledge worker. It also focuses on capacity building of stakeholders, thus strengthening organisations and partners in their capacity to effectively apply knowledge and use information.

KM as an integral approach, optimising knowledge ecosystems

The integral approach described in these sheets builds upon other approaches in KM. It regards the objective of Knowledge Management to be instrumental for 'integral development'. This approach aims to develop optimised 'knowledge ecosystems' in which individuals, organisations and networks/communities alike are equipped to create added and sustainable value for their partners, clients and members. This thinking is based on the principles of systems thinking and is closely related to concepts like organisational learning and innovation systems.

Integral KM develops and balances out five important dimensions of any knowledge intensive environment:

a. 'root' aspects like strategy, values & culture, structures & governance, management & leadership, and skills & staff;
b. knowledge processes like knowledge creation, storage and use;
c. enablers like communication, systems & technologies, learning and M&E, and internal innovation;
d. external factors like stakeholders participation, external influences and external resources.
e. brokering, adoption and monitoring & evaluation of knowledge products & services;
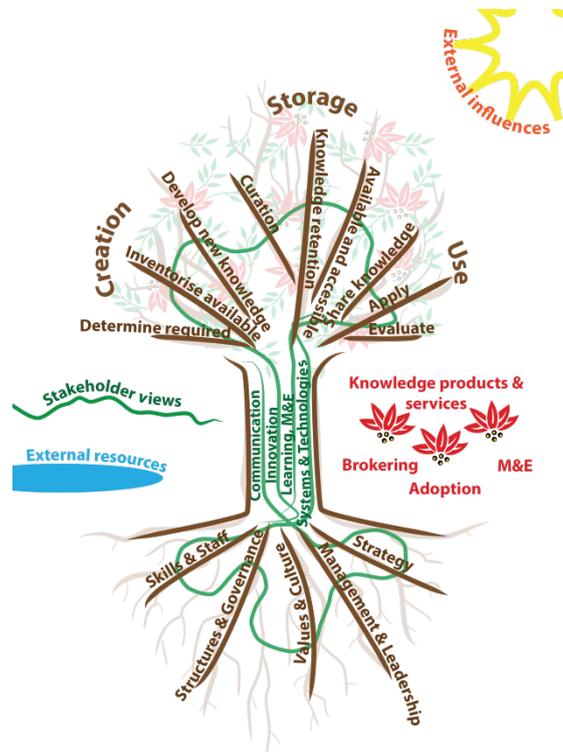
The fundamental assumption behind this approach is that these five dimensions need to be looked at and worked on integrally. Optimising one dimension (like external service delivery) will not be fully successful if the other dimensions are not considered at the same time.