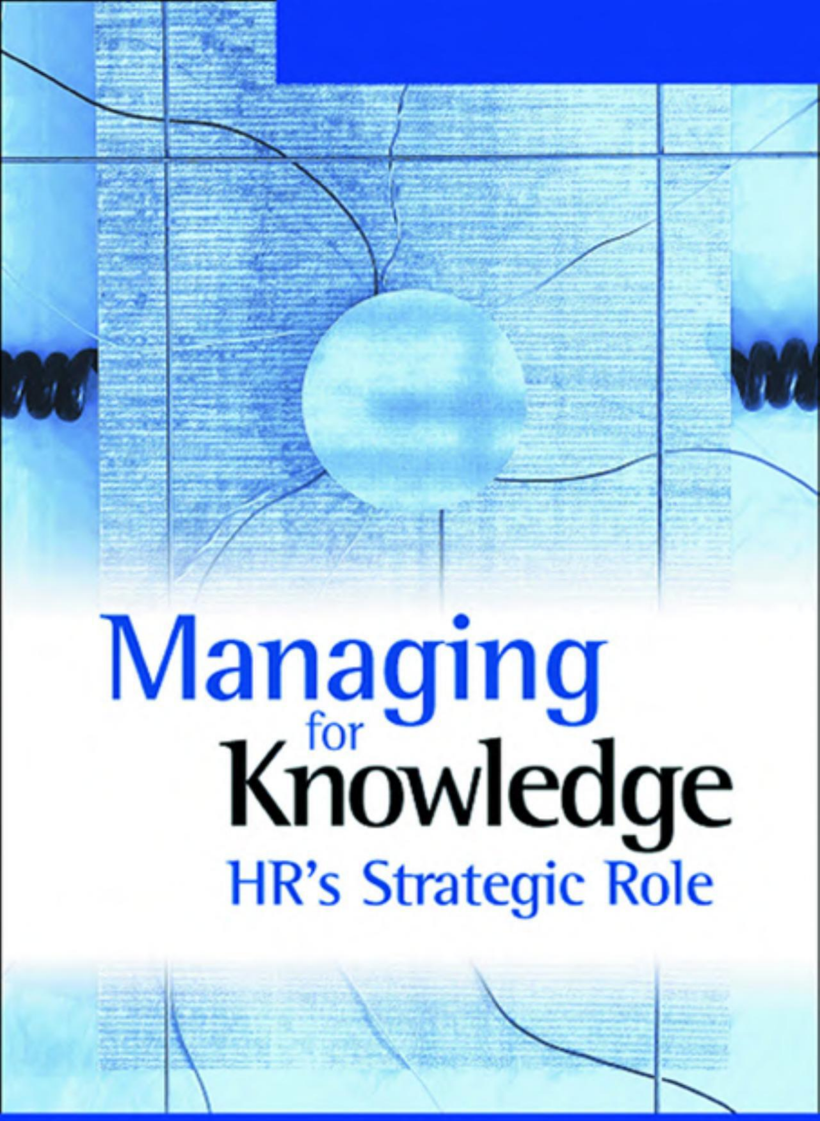

Managing for Knowledge

HR's Strategic Role

Christina Evans

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Foreword

With remarkable regularity a ‘new idea’ surfaces in the management community. Often it results from repackaging a long-lived management issue or truth. Conversely, the current vogue, Knowledge Management, is a genuinely new concept. In summary this involves the processes that ensure all the knowledge, explicit and implicit, that exists in the organisation is organised in a way that enables it to be accessed quickly and easily. This allows for distributed decision making so that new actions, products and services can be built from it at a pace that outstrips similar use by others. Knowledge management simultaneously meets the need to make information freely available while also enabling those with full understanding to move swiftly ahead, thereby rendering the earlier knowledge redundant. In today’s fast paced environment, it offers an essential market edge for individuals and for their organisation.

Knowledge management is frequently linked with technology, specifically computer or information technology. IT developments such as database management, bulletin board systems and web technology offer the potential for information to be gathered continuously from a vast array of sources. Also this ensures that it can be accessed in a similar way giving rise to countless permutations of inferences and new possibilities. At the same time, some researchers and gurus, mindful of the capacity of the human mind to make connections between apparently unrelated facts, have urged the study of human aspects of knowledge management rather than concentrating solely on computerisation. The focus here is on collecting the unwritten stories and morés of organisational experience. The shared assumptions, leaps in understanding and intuition that come from standing simple information on its head, may prompt a ‘eureka moment’. In turn, this leads to breakthrough thinking.

Nevertheless, most authors and speakers about knowledge management focus on the computer systems that assist the collection of knowledge or, more accurately, information. In this book, rather than relying on technology to manage knowledge as if it were an entity in itself, Christina Evans correctly focuses on human interaction – the need to manage *for* knowledge: that is to organise people, such that they gather and act on the knowledge that is inherently available to them. By directing her attention specifically to HR, she puts this function at the heart of the business since leveraging knowledge effectively is a vital strategic goal of all organisations today. Clearly and directly Christina sets out the role for HR in building a culture where harvesting knowledge as opposed to simply gathering information is the norm. She shows why managing for knowledge is important, how to do it and gives practical examples. She offers guidance to encourage HR specialists to reinvent their role, to become full business partners. Most significantly, she demonstrates the crucial importance for HR to work effectively with knowledge management, the concept and the technical support, in order to create organisations that are successful tomorrow as well as today.

Val Hammond
Chief Executive, Roffey Park Institute

Introduction

The Knowledge Economy – opportunities and challenges for business

It is difficult to pinpoint an exact time when the current interest, possibly obsession, with knowledge management took off. Certainly some of the seminal books from management writers began to emerge in the early 1990s. Yet managing knowledge is not a new concept. Professionals, i.e. individuals whose work depends on them making judgments that are grounded in their knowledge base, have always had to manage their knowledge in order to continue practising.

So why has managing knowledge suddenly moved up the strategic agenda for large corporations? What has changed? A number of fairly significant changes have occurred over the past ten to fifteen years. One significant change has been the shift from manufacturing to service-based businesses, where companies are competing to attract and retain more knowledgeable and more discerning global customers. In this environment speed to market has become all-important.

To compete, some organisations have had radically to rethink how to do business. In the IT sector, for example, most of the major manufacturing companies have transformed themselves into services companies, where they now offer ‘total solutions’. In this context knowledge about customers’ businesses, i.e. what their business issues are, what their strategic goals are, is crucial. Of course this information is only of value if the organisation then acts on it, in order to deliver what the customer wants, in a cost-effective way, and timely manner, ahead of the competition.

In the race to get a handle on managing knowledge many organisations have come unstuck by investing too much energy in developing formal systems, often IT systems, to facilitate knowledge sharing, at the expense of capitalising on the benefits that come from informal processes.

Organisations have spent millions of pounds on systems to capture, store and improve access to vast quantities of information that is now available, through one source or another, and yet this does not always bring the expected business benefits. I am using the term organisation here as the collective name for its people. As it is people who act on information, not machines, this reinforces the need to focus on mobilising, energising, supporting and enabling individuals at all levels within the organisation to combine their 'Know of' and 'Know how' to deliver existing services more efficiently, as well as to create new services. Perhaps one of the questions that needs to be asked is can we achieve what we want to achieve without an IT solution? If not, should we not at least ensure that any new system can be integrated with what we already have? What seems to have been overlooked is that knowledge doesn't always flow from formal structures and systems, but instead is often the by-product of day-to-day interactions.

Why another book on managing knowledge?

My intention is to stimulate a debate about the role of HR in helping organisations move forward on their knowledge management journey. HR has come under a lot of criticism as it is perceived not to be taking a proactive role in the knowledge management arena. In many organisations it is business teams, or IT teams, that have taken the lead. In practical terms this means that while the systems aspects are addressed, the people and cultural aspects are sadly often overlooked.

A cynical view of the role of HR in managing knowledge could be that HR do not have the skills and knowledge needed to be proactive in the knowledge management arena. After all aren't HR just administrators? What do they know about business and how to make businesses more efficient?

That may have been the old view of HR, but just as the business world has been changing in recent years, so too has the agenda for HR. There are now many good examples of where HR professionals are performing the business partner role, a role which Dave Ulrich suggests is the new mandate for HR. This does not mean that HR have abandoned their administrative role, instead they are finding ways of delivering this part of their work more efficiently, and in doing so are creating the much needed space to operate more strategically.

This was the experience within IBM where the HR function was completely remodelled to channel resources into HR strategy, rather than administrative tasks, in order to support IBM's business transformation in the 1990s[1]. Drawing on techniques from Customer Relationship Management a new HR delivery model was introduced. This reflected the different types of customers that HR have contact with e.g. manager, employee, applicant, together with the different types of interactions e.g. advise, transact, or consult. The delivery model involves a service centre that provides information and advice covering most of the simple questions, an intranet system that enables policy and procedure to be easily accessible at individual's desktop and HR strategy partners, who focus on the strategic issues the business is facing. The global e-HR system has been rolled out to 320,000 employees in 180 countries and is saving the organisation around $320 m (£238 m) a year[2]. It enables HR practices to be quickly updated in line with the changing business. Of course IBM is not the only organisation that is investing in new solutions to enhance the way that it delivers HR services to its different users.

Having been conducting research into the cultural dimensions of knowledge management for some years now I have found a mixed level of interest in the area of knowledge management among HR practitioners. My initial contact with organisations has often been with the IT or KM department. It is only when I have started to ask questions about the processes that support learning, in its broadest sense, or the informal processes for knowledge sharing, that I have then started to connect with the HR community.

My previous research suggests that HR needs to work in partnership with their business colleagues in the knowledge management arena. Indeed some of the case studies that I draw on in this book show the benefits of adopting this approach. In some organisations HR has been part of the catalyst team set up to get knowledge management onto the corporate agenda. In others, the Chief Executive has tasked HR with moving the organisation forward on its knowledge management journey, because of their expertise in the area of learning and change.

Given their knowledge of how to facilitate learning and change there is a real opportunity for HR to move more centre stage in the knowledge management arena.

However, HR will need to re-educate their business partners, and possibly themselves, on what is meant by learning and also how best to encourage and facilitate learning in the modern workplace. Etienne Wenger (1998), a leading researcher and writer in the field of learning, believes that one of the assumptions that many institutions hold about learning is that of learning being an individual process, one that occurs through teaching in locations held away from the workplace. Wenger has developed a theory of learning – a social theory of learning – that is based on the assumptions that (a) learning is as much a part of human nature as eating and sleeping and (b) learning occurs naturally through our active participation in the practices of different social communities. What does this mean for organisations? They need to adopt an integrative training approach, one which focuses on practice and seeks 'points of leverage' to support learning. These 'points of leverage', according to Wenger, can come from learning through everyday practice, as well as by encouraging shared working and learning in communities of practice.

HR can also add value by using their knowledge of best practice occurring outside the organisation to help managers address first-order (i.e. doing the same things, only better) and second-order (i.e. doing different things) change. Part of the value that HR can bring here is in challenging existing assumptions and beliefs about the way business and work gets done. So questioning whether faster is always better and helping the organisation strike a balance between what needs changing and what does not.

However, HR's contribution does not, and should not, stop there. In their strategic partner role HR can add also value in the knowledge management arena by developing a focus on capability building and retention; helping the business develop more efficient business processes, as well as facilitating relationship building, both within and outside the organisation (Evans, 2002).

Building a knowledge-centric culture takes time. As David Parlby, from KPMG, points out, few organisations have reached this stage on their knowledge management journey. While there are some common building blocks, i.e. building, sharing, reusing and retaining knowledge, how organisations move forward depends on their initial starting point and their overall business priorities. The case studies in this book provide examples of where different organisations are focusing/have focused their energies at different stages on their journey. The key message is that knowledge management activities need to add value to the business, it is not just a nice bolt-on to have. Managing knowledge should not be seen as a separate activity, but instead needs to be integrated into day-to-day business processes. The journey is an evolving one too, practitioners need to apply the learning cycle to their knowledge management approach. This requires identifying and using strategic change levers: What are we good at now? Where do we need to improve? How will we do that? Who needs to do what? How will we know that we are moving forward?

This book provides ideas, questions, and tools to enable HR to move their organisation forward on their knowledge management journey. One of the biggest challenges for HR as a function is to position itself as a role model for the knowledge-centric organisation through the way that it is structured, conducts business and builds and enhances its own capabilities. With the right attitude and knowledge HR can achieve this.

Notes

1. Leighton, R. Ensuring employee satisfaction. In *Making e-business deliver*. This is one of a series of business guides, produced jointly by Capstan Publishing and IBM.
2. HR budget at IBM slashed through e-HR. *Personnel Today*, 4 June 2002. See *www.personneltoday.com*

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Part One

The Strategic Context for HR's Role in Managing for Knowledge

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> *Through knowledge creation, firms [and people] are able to revitalize themselves and set themselves apart from their competitors.* (Bird, 1994: 328).

Other leading management writers, such as George Stonehouse *et al.* (2001), argue that there are three factors that influence why one business outperforms another. These are competitive positioning, resource or competitive-based positioning and a knowledge-based approach, i.e. having a focus on knowledge building and organisational learning. Sustainability, according to Stonehouse *et al.*, comes from the level of importance that is placed on information and knowledge within the organisation. They suggest that competitive advantage only arises when an organisation is able to generate new knowledge, something that is heavily dependent on an organisation's learning environment.

The combined effects of globalisation, influenced by new technologies, and better communication and transport facilities means that consumers now have more choice over the goods and services available to them. They are constantly being inundated with new product offerings from global companies. For organisations this means that they cannot afford to be complacent about how they conduct business. They cannot assume that the products and processes that made them successful in the past will continue to do so in the future.

Davenport and Prusak argue that companies now require quality, value, service, innovation and speed to market, in order to remain successful in business; the business imperative then is one of knowing how to do new things well and do them quickly.

But businesses have also got to keep an eye on their cost base and seek new ways of managing this. One of the ways in which many organisations have done this is through reviewing their core competence, and outsourcing business activities that do not map directly onto their core competence. Over recent years we have seen an increase in the number of organisations that have outsourced their manufacturing, and in some case part of their service function, to countries where labour costs are lower than in their native country. The area around Bangalore in India, for example, is now a world centre for software production; an example of where the globalisation of knowledge is unaffected by traditional boundaries. Of course by shifting production to different continents, organisations can take advantage of different time zones, which means that they can offer a twenty-four hour service to customers in a cost-effective way.

The introduction of flexible working practices has organisational benefits too. These include: the ability to provide a more responsive service to customers; the ability to attract employees from diverse backgrounds, who otherwise might be excluded from traditional employment models; attracting and retaining skilled professionals; and retaining employees looking to have a balance between their work and home lives.

However, when considering structural change, such as the introduction of flexible working practices, organisations also need to consider and plan for the impact that this might have on their ability to manage their knowledge (Evans, 2002). While having more mobile and flexible workers may make it easier to deliver a more responsive service to customers, unless properly managed, this could have an adverse affect on an organisation's knowledge capabilities. In addition, organisations will need to plan for the fact they may have less time to capitalize on their employees' 'know how'.

The combined effects of structural change i.e. the shift from manufacturing to service-based businesses (which are more information and knowledge dependent) and technology is having an effect on the skills needed within the workplace. To-day's businesses are more knowledge intensive. Statistics provided by the OECD indicate that the percentage of GNP that comes from knowledge-based business is now around 50% (OECD, 1999). This is leading to an increased demand for cognitive skills (i.e. problem-solving, communication, and interpreting information), which have become more important and in demand than manual skills (DfEE National Skills Task Force, 2000). Where these skills are in short supply, organisations are finding that they are struggling to recruit and retain employees (Gubman, 1998).

Equally the percentage of the workforce employed in managerial, professional and technical roles, working in 'information occupation' is increasing (Allen, 1992; DfEE Labour Market & Skills Trends, 2000). Employees who fall into the category of professional and technical workers are among those listed in the statistics on 'hard-to-fill vacancies' (DfEE Labour Market & Skills Trends, 2000).

These combined changes have important implications for employees. There is a danger that it could lead to polarisations in the workforce, with knowledge workers becoming an elitist group within organisations and within society more generally (Castells, 1989). Ian Angell, Professor of Information Systems at the London School of Economics, suggests that in the Information Age it is not simply a question of replacing 'old jobs' with 'new ones', it is about building 'intellectual muscle', in the form of intelligent knowledge workers, as this will be the source of growth.

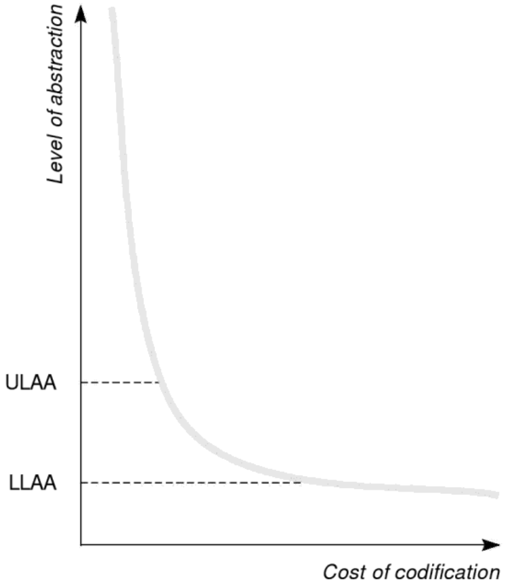

Figure 10.2 Relationship between level of abstraction and codification

The highest level of abstraction is where individuals have a conversation with themselves. Language, experience, values and beliefs are nearly always identical and as such rapid and effective communication of complex ideas is easily possible. There is some cost in note-taking or other forms of codification, but no one really expects other people to read their notes. At the other extreme where the requirement is to communicate with everyone the cost of codification is infinite as it requires not only a common language and education, but also common experiences and value systems at a level probably even denied to twins.

In between these two points we have a zone of acceptable abstraction within which any form of communication can take place. Understanding is not just a question of comprehension, but also of attitude. In a community of experts they may understand material below the lower level of abstraction (LLAA), but they will not pay attention to it, it is too simplistic given their level of understanding. Sometimes this is a form of entrainment by which they fail to see something because it does not fit the pattern of expected knowledge; often it is simply a question of available time. Those same experts may tolerate knowledge above their personal upper level of acceptable abstraction (ULAA) because they know how to gain access to it, or pride may just prevent their admission of ignorance! Levels of abstraction apply to all types of knowledge from the esoteric knowledge of a theoretical physicist, to the intricacies of a plumbing system. Understanding, or allowing the emergence or evolution of an understanding of those levels is key to any knowledge management activity which focuses on a community or communities; given that most does it is vital.

Diverse types of community

The zone of acceptable abstraction is one aspect of understanding the nature of possible knowledge flow within an organisation, the other is that ubiquitous word 'culture', generally the bucket class concept for anything that we don't fully understand or which is problematic. A useful distinction can be made between cultures as systems of rules and practices embodied within formal organisations and societies, and culture understood as a value or belief system (Keesing and Strathern, 1998). Rules and practices can be taught, measured to some degree and enforced; values on the other hand rely more on tacit understanding and factors such as ritual and obligation. Another way of describing this difference is to contrast teaching with learning. In teaching we teach what is known and there is no ambiguity as to who is the teacher and who is taught, we know what the right answer is. Learning, on the other hand, is a sense-making process of creating new meaning and insight in which there is considerable ambiguity between the teacher and taught, in fact frequently the expertise of the teacher prevents new learning in a radically new context.

Taking these two aspects, abstraction and culture allows us to identify four different domains in which functionally different communities exist and in consequence to model the dynamic flows of communities and knowledge that need to take place between those domains. This is an application of the generic Cynefin model to communities and is shown in Figure 10.3. Cynefin is a Welsh word whose literal translation into English as *habitat* or *place* fails to do it justice. Its meaning rests in the sense of multiple belonging which is an aspect of all social systems, the many tribal, religious, geographic and cultural histories that profoundly influence what we are, but of which we are only ever partially aware. The name reminds us that a full understanding of the past or present is never possible in human systems. The Cynefin model has applications in more or less all branches of management science, here it is being used in the context of communities and as such acquires the axis labels of culture and abstraction shown in Figure 10.3. Its use and background in knowledge management are more fully described in *Complex Acts of Knowing* (Snowden, 2002a).

response to known threat or opportunity. It is also the space in which reality is imposed through a corporate decision, we often forget that many organisations impose reality on their employees and that something that is true in one organisation may be false in another. Knowledge management in this domain is about standards and committees more than spontaneity.

Expert This is the dominant area in most conventional knowledge management practice and, while it is one of the most useful, it is not as universal as many commentators would claim. Expert communities share a common language, often-based on advanced training, and are able to communicate at a high level of abstraction to other experts. Such communities need to preserve the boundaries for both people and material to prevent compromise of this level of abstraction; a community of experts in which trainees take part as full members will soon result in the non-use of the system by real experts who have limited time for collaboration and have to prioritise into areas where new learning will be more readily achieved. These very boundaries are in turn a danger as the expertise becomes entrained and may not see opportunities or threats that fall outside the habituated patterns of meaning within that community. A brief study of the history of science, and the history of breakthrough innovations demonstrates that few innovations come from established experts, but from accidents and heresy!

The Shadow All organisations have an extensive informal network of communities that arise through common value systems, the experience of working together on projects, joining the organisation at the same time, common social activities; the list is endless. The membership and knowledge controlled within this space is constantly shifting and adapting and is rarely codified. One study in IBM revealed 65,000 informal communities in about 150,000 staff as against 50 formal communities of practice, and that was only a count of those who used virtual tools to share experiences so the actual ratio is probably more extreme. Similar ratios are found in most organisations down to about 500 employees although there are no hard and fast rules. The Shadow is also the domain of emergent leadership. Too many organisations try to repeat past success by selecting against competences 'measures' based on past practice rather than using the informal community to throw up natural leaders equipped to handle newly emergent situations.

Chaos The domain of chaos in which all existing patterns cease to exist is low abstraction because we have no formal

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