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**The major causes for the failure of KM projects**

**Abstract**

It is a well known but dis-heartening fact that many Knowledge Management projects either fail outright or do not live up to the expected promises of working with knowledge. Some of the causes of these failed attempts are easy to understand: Macroeconomic changes that can constraint an organization's new project funding; change of ownership or senior management with new ides and disdain of older projects, and several other forces out of the control of KM managers.

However in my experience there are other sources for these failed attempts that are not too difficult to avoid and can make a huge difference in the sustainability and value of knowledge and learning projects. This talk will focus on these- fully aware that there are other disarming factors at work.

A. Not agreeing on, or even understanding a workable definition of knowledge

B. Not understanding or caring about the absorptive capacity of the user of the KM system.

C. Not having a unit of analysis that is functional, useful and productive.

D. Not having adequate organizational structures, resources and roles to make the project work.

E. Not limiting the roles of technology to what it does best.

KM has been around for over two decades and unfortunately has a very mixed record in terms of demonstrable success. This is not too different then other management techniques that have been tried for the past few decades but it is a disturbing trend nonetheless

Success is often hard to measure, especially when the object is also intangible and one that is particularly difficult to measure, evaluate, and transfer So we are hard pressed to find actual statistics on project failure....for example often well thought out projects are upended when their executive sponsor leaves or changes positions and no longer is interested in the work. This has happened several times at the Word Bank, for example. Other projects dissolve due to external market or political conditions that are not in the control of any manager.

So I am going to base this paper on my experiences and the experiences of several colleagues who consult and do research on the whole KM and learning spectrum. I have been working in this field for over 25 years and have worked with over 150 specific KM projects as well as trying to keep up with other projects that I am aware of.

I would say that no more then half of these projects were successful and /or sustainable; some due to the reasons listed above and to some due to a combination of factors listed below. Needless to say there are other causal factors but I would say the following are the most salient. I am writing about them in an approximate order of importance to project success.

A. Not using an agreed upon definition of knowledge

One would assume that if an organization was going to commit resources to a project there would be agreement as to what the object of the project was-what economists call the “Unit of Analysis” issue i.e. what particular thing are we working with at he most simple level?

Now this issue presents a problem to all of us because in English and in most modern languages the word knowledge -unlike information or data- is used in multiple ways and therefore has multiple definitions . One can think of knowledge as having a spectrum of meaning. At one end of this spectrum is a clear simple propositional statement-say a formula or economic fact or even an algorithm-which some knowledge theorists call “Know-What” . While this can can also easily be understood as information at the same time it also often part of someones knowledge. Think of the Pythagorean theorem..it is a stand alone piece of information but also part of someones knowledge of geometry …almost like a piece of knowledge. All the points on this spectrum are codified-and can easily be put into a system and replicated and transferred endlessly at a very low cost. And that is part of the problem. Since it is so easy to store and transfer this type of knowledge it is often the only type of knowledge used in knowledge management projects. However there is another part to the spectrum and one that is more valuable in economic terms…and that is “Know-How”

Know- how is the sort of knowledge that is difficult to, if not impossible, to codify or put into any system..it is strongly experiential in nature, very hard to measure but essential for any successful organization. Think of any expert or even any experienced employee you know maybe even yourself. How much of what you know is capable of being codified? How much of your knowledge is dependent on connections, leaps, inductive jumps that can never be explicitly taught but bring great value to understanding problems and bringing meaning to information and data.

Now it is hard to know what to do with such expertise that know-how brings to us-especially in technology centric KM projects. S o we often disregard it and focus our attention on the easy to use type of knowledge called know-what.

The problem with mainly focussing on know-what -often int he form of documents and data is that this type of knowledge is often out of date, not interactive or available for questioning, It needs vetting and updating and some judgment applied as whether it is useful or not...true it can be stored but is it worth the expense and effort? Sometimes yes, but often no...so that elaborate knowledge projects that just focus on this end of the spectrum often end up disappointing its developers and users-producing more a slightly more efficient document library then a true knowledge system.

And yet this could be rather easily dealt with by asking the rather simple but rarely asked question: What sort or type of knowledge are you trying to manage in your project? Where can it be found? A number of times I have brought this issue up and was told something like”This is a business-not a philosophy class” But philosophy is what knowledge is a part of.

I have seen literally tens of millions of dollars wasted on projects that promised to manage knowledge and ended up managing information that could have been managed far more efficiently by different means.

B. Absorptive capacity and the user.

Very very few KM managers have an interest in ethnography. I am certain this statement would not be disputed. Yet it turns out that it can be a critical tool in understanding how to build a system that users would actually use and value.

Ethnographers, usually anthropologists, use close observation to better understand their subjects and usually write cases that provide a “rich picture” as Clifford Gertz famously named it. This is essential because many system developers of all stripes tend to develop systems and believe that if they build a system and it seems useful it will be used. This very abstracted view of users rarely works out well for a valued system regarding knowledge . This is especially true regarding how much new knowledge the user may be able to effectively absorb or similarly adapt their own knowledge for someone else's use. Management scholars call this activity “absorptive capacity” and while it sounds like something that applies to diapers, it is a very handy conceptual tool. By watching and observing and talking and maybe even “shadowing” a sample of users the KM person can get an understanding of just what this person could best use in solving knowledge problems or helping someone else solve theirs.

Most workers in organizational situations today work up to or even exceed their capacity. To add something new for them to do in their day to day routines and processes is taking a great chance on it being used under duress or avoided completely

Established management theory,as taught in business schools, often take their lead from economists who assume a friction-less flow of knowledge because they conflate knowledge and information. While It surely is true that one can send an eternity of information around the globe in seconds and encounter little friction-though who would want to read or even look at it? However Know-how can not be sent this way-at best it

needs to be explained, watched, and best of all participated in to make it your own. And that takes time, money, and motives. Observing a user will give a KM manager a good base from which to understand what type of knowledge the user really needs or wants to solve some of hitter problems.

Imagine feeding some guests a fine meal when they have had a huge lunch? Or serving some small tapas to a group of starving adolescents. One has to “know the territory” and as an early information theorist Count Alfred Korzybsky put it and “The Map is not the territory” One need to learn the territory before you design anything for it.

C, The Unit of Analysis Issue.

So, you get the KM message and you want to initiate a knowledge management project in your organization. You read many of the standard texts, talk to people who have done this already, and lined up some support. So what’s next?

Many organizations at this point undertake a KM strategy of one sort or another. As stressed above this often done without the benefit of actually observing how people work or ,just as importantly where they go to gain access to the knowledge they need. If this is done well it is very likely that the employee will seek out this knowledge in some network, community, or practice where needed knowledge often resides. We all do this unless we are looking for knowledge that is outside our usual work needs. It is just these knowledge aggregates-groups of maybe 25 to 250 employees- that we would most often recommend as the unit of analysis for a knowledge project.

As second type of Unit of Analysis that has been used successfully at NASA and in several other organizations I am familiar with is “Critical Knowledge” This strategy focusses on a “clump” of knowledge that may be cross organizational-spread over several practices, networks an communities. It is often identified by network analysis tools as well as survey questions and live interviews. This choice is especially valuable for gaining senior management support and for highlighting the absolute value of the knowledge and the importance of developing, retaining and transferring it.

However without these more appropriate choices many organizations have chosen either the individual or the enterprise as the unit of analysis. This is a sure recipe for failure.

Knowledge, unlike information and data, is profoundly social. It is developed and thrives in some social group of like minded workers across all sorts of boundaries and this is why the most useful unit of analysis should be placed on a manageable aggregate. No individual has knowledge ever has knowledge that is unique to them. They may surely have individual memories, skills, talents that are somewhat unique but not the sort of knowledge we are discussing here. That is a function of a group. And by stressing the individual we lose this perspective and develop systems that are over-complex and create unneeded and expensive knowledge transaction costs. Another path often tried is to somehow try to use the entire enterprise as the unit of analysis. This approach was pushed by vendors, consultants etc who have commercial reasons for advocating such approaches. Clearly it is useful to have common infrastructure and maybe protocols for a knowledge system but the to “manage” the knowledge of an entire organization is a techno-fantasy often fund in Science Fiction books and movies. The Chrysler Corp , not at all alone in their folly once once tried to do this with its ”Book of Knowledge’ -and ended up with a hugely expensive failed project that could have been prevented by some serious thinking. The whole idea of “capturing” the type of skill based know-how so important to Chrysler is a fantasy that is still common in many techno-utopian minds and boardrooms.

D. Organization and Roles

In the 1980s, , when the whole subject of knowledge, knowledge workers and knowledge work entering the common conversation of organizations, the Viennese born Peter Drucker was perhaps its most prestigious propagandist. And at one point he stated that “knowledge in organizations is everyones business” While this is true in one sense it was also a disservice to building a successful knowledge system since like any other organizational system it needs maintenance, advocacy against other competing systems for revenues, attention and other resources , and perhaps most of all people who can find and/or design innovations to a system that will be quickly evolving due to hard and soft technology innovations.

The whole idea of self-organizing systems may hold true in complexity theories but in the real world of organizational life nothing new will ever succeed without advocacy, marketing, and the internal advertising of proven successes. Successes that need to be brought to the attention to as many decision makers as possible. There is not as much meritocracy among organizational ideas as many seem to think. Since management is not a science in itself there are not many eternal truths available and ideas come and go for all sorts of reasons unrelated to their veracity. All new ideas need to be sold -especially in an era of increasing competition for resources.

Many organizations, reluctant to dedicate human resources to un-proven ideas, have given the knowledge function little human support. While this is changing it is still a problem. If the KM function is managed by a low-level manager it will never be seen as

being critical to the success of the organization and if there is not an advocate for resources at a senior level of the organizations it will always be among the first functions to be reduced during a downturn in the economy.

It is also very important to have knowledge roles. Concierges, CKOs’ CLOs, Practice knowledge managers, Innovation and knowledge departments-all these are common titles I have worked with in the past few years. And there are many others throughout the world. Fuji used to have “knowledge bandits”-people who sought out new ideas and brought them to the attention of management! All these roles need to be coordinated within the knowledge structure of the organization. For example NASA’s successful knowledge program is run on a Federal model-all 12 NASA sites have their own Chief Knowledge Officers who work as a committee and are coordinated and advocated for by the NASA CKO, Ed Hoffman. This model works quite well for geographically dispersed operations who also have a working central office. It also is in accord with the generally accepted premise that often the most valuable knowledge in an organization is local and contextual-and it is notoriously difficult to work with such knowledge at a distance.

D. The roles for Technology

Not to long ago an executive at a large natural resources firm told me that they effectively managed “all” their knowledge since they bought Sharepoint. I have nothing against Sharepoint but even Microsoft might acknowledge that managing technology is not the same thing as managing knowledge. Not at all!

Techno-utopianism, is a rampant factor at least in the USA. Its fundamental belief is that organizational efficiency is all that matters in driving success and that all other factors are far less important. This may prove true one day but sadly not today. Are all our decisions that much better then they were in prior decades? Hard to answer that!

However we can say that while AI is making some remarkable progress we still count on humans for judgement, wisdom, discernment, understanding and make sense of things-including data and information. Organizations need to act, and action based on knowledge is needless to say a very human attribute.

Now this is not to state that there is no role for technology in any knowledge system. Not at all.. However in my experience the technology role is far more useful in connecting knowledge sources to one another then trying to capture this knowledge.

I have said in many forums..if you have a dollar to spend on KM, spend 80 cents on connection and 20 on “capture”!

Expertise locating systems os a fine example of what I am referring to...people in organizations rarely know what other people outside their own practices know-and sometimes not even within their own units of work. And since we now live in such a connected world finding useful knowledge outside the organization through the growing practice of knowledge networks is also a fine way to find and adapt available knowledge.

The only knowledge that can effectively be captured is knowledge about knowledge and technology is is excellent way to do this. Only do not confuse this map with the territory. We still are dependent on humans to get the right things don the right way.