
Foreword by *Richard McDermott*

Nearly 20 years ago, in 1995, APQC offered its first conference on knowledge management. Over the previous decade, many organizations had been exploring ways to organize the rapidly exploding body of information their staff needed to manage. In the oil industry, where I was working, this was particularly difficult. Geologists, petrophysicists, reservoir engineers, production engineers, project managers, drillers and division managers all needed both overlapping and different types of information. Geologists relied heavily on paper maps that took considerable time to create, petrophysicists relied on long rolls of well data that needed to be synchronized with data from nearby wells, drillers on real time data or as close as they could get, production managers on the compilation of data to understand if an oil field was producing as much as had been originally expected. With different types of information and data, different systems for organizing that information, different taxonomies and different people responsible for organizing and managing that information, finding the right information in the right format at the right time was nearly impossible to achieve. The oil industry wasn't unique. As improvements in information technology (IT) made information globally available, many other industries experienced the same chaotic information overload. By 1995, the oil industry had developed a number of frameworks, tools and corporate resources to organize information in a way that got 'the right information to the right people at the right time in the right format'. Knowledge management was not just a set of IT tools. It had emerged as a field.

Over the last 20 years, knowledge management has matured. The software tools for organizing documents and enabling connections have stabilized and most organizations have settled on a relatively few dominant software tools. Communities of practice have become common in most large organizations, often integrated into the standing structure of the organization (McDermott and Archibald 2010). Rather than independent systems, many global organizations have systems that are well integrated across operations, disciplines and locations. Rather than an add-on to professional's work, many organizations have built knowledge management systems and communities into professionals' everyday work.

While the field of knowledge management is much less idiosyncratic than it was several decades ago, there are still some significant differences in approaches to knowledge management. As the chapters in this book

describe, knowledge management approaches, strategies and uses are different in different industries, countries and cultures. As a mature field, knowledge management now has the flexibility to adjust the focus, tools and approaches to very specifically fit the needs of your organization, whether public or private, local or international, heavily influenced by the culture of your organization or not.

This book is organized to make it easier to focus in on the aspects of knowledge management that most usefully fit your organization. Part I describes the overall structure of the book, a guide to key questions each of the chapters focus on, the history of research on knowledge management and a description of the overall organizational conditions that help make knowledge management initiatives effective. Part II describes the similarities and differences in applying knowledge management in different business sectors. Part III is a collection of reflections on the history and the future of the field of knowledge management.

Overall, this book is genuinely a handbook. Using the frameworks provided in Chapter 1 readers can dip into the issues and applications of knowledge management in a wide variety of sectors and countries and use the insights to fine tune their own knowledge management programmes.

Richard McDermott
Knowledge management consultant

REFERENCE

McDermott, R. and D. Archibald (2010), 'Harnessing your staff's informal networks', *Harvard Business Review*, 1 March.