Book Review


The idea that an organization needs to have a structured approach to its learning, and make sure that it can leverage the tacit and explicit knowledge of its members is by no means a new one, but the discipline of knowledge management (KM) has only begun to grow on its own since the mid-nineties. Kimiz Dalkir’s *Knowledge Management in Theory and Practice, Second Edition*, (the first edition was published in 2005), is an excellent overview of the discipline, providing a comprehensive review of the field, while striking an excellent balance between theoretical insight and practical application.

The first section looks at some broad definitions of knowledge management, as well as a look at its history. One of the challenges in the field is that there are so many overlapping definitions, models, and sets of terminologies, so the author spends some time comparing and contrasting those models to find the common ground between them as a starting point for further discussion. Since KM is a cyclical process, moving back and forth between the stages of capture, sharing, and application can and should be expected in a knowledge management system.

The middle of the book begins to delve into the process in more detail. Techniques for knowledge capture are introduced, and the reader is cautioned that this capture needs to happen systematically and methodically to ensure collection of the complete body of knowledge. In addition, a balance needs to be struck in any system between capturing tacit knowledge, which tends to be more valuable but also more difficult to collect, and explicit knowledge, which is easier to capture. Conversely, for retrieval and sharing of knowledge, again, users need to have a system where information retrieval is straightforward yet also thorough. If information retrieval is too difficult, knowledge sharing will still continue, but outside of the system, where the value will be lost because the knowledge is not available within the system. This section also introduces the categories of tools that can be used in a knowledge management program, such as groupware, collaboration tools, content management systems, intelligent filters, and data mining applications. Techniques for task analysis are also introduced. Understanding what knowledge users need to perform their jobs will help identify the patterns and structure the system will need.

The final chapters identify some challenges that a knowledge management program may encounter in an organization. The costs of implementing a knowledge management program are very tangible, but the benefits are often intangibles such as improved communication, more efficient process, and greater innovation. However,
with proper planning in the initial stages of a program, and explicit goals, it becomes much easier to highlight to senior management the value that a knowledge management program can have, and through a gap analysis, also measure the progress from the current, as-is status towards the goal. Senior management is not the only stakeholder in the process. The users of any knowledge management tool have to be invested as well. At its core, knowledge management is a process about communication, and social interaction, and any attempts to formalize that communication have to be cognizant of the organizational culture and social dynamics of the specific organization. Finally, Dalkir speculates on what the future of knowledge management may hold, and about some of the challenges it will face, and also identifies additional resources that the reader may find helpful.

Dalkir makes a logical and orderly progression defining what knowledge management is, its history, major components, and how to apply it in an organization. Context is key for her, and she is very adamant that there is no one true path to knowledge management, rather, the goals and needs of the organization ought to be the starting point, rather than any one process or system. She also identifies that knowledge management is relevant at the organization level, the group (or Community of Practice), level, and the user level. She is very specific, and makes it very clear that knowledge management is about reducing the friction inherent in communication within an organization, and that there is no one true path to good knowledge management. In addition, she makes heavy use of real-world examples from major businesses that have had success implementing knowledge management programs.

The book places a heavy emphasis on the social aspects of knowledge management. Topics such as organizational culture, facilitating communication, and social dynamics within an organization are prevalent. The fact that knowledge management is first and foremost about capturing and leveraging communication between people in an organization is perhaps the most important lesson a new knowledge management student can learn.

The well-rounded approach to knowledge management that Dalkir takes, with its balance between theory, practice, terminology, history, issues, and challenges makes this an excellent textbook for a knowledge management class in an information science program, and it would be an excellent starting point for a professional tasked with implementing a knowledge management program in their organization, especially since the author has included an entire chapter on the types of skills that a knowledge management professional would need, and the roles they may need to fill in an organization.

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