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Whatever Happened to Knowledge Management?

By Thomas H. Davenport

I would never claim to have invented knowledge management, but I confess to an intimate involvement with it. I co-authored (with my friend Larry Prusak) one of the best selling books on the topic (in case you are into the classics, it was *Working Knowledge: How Organizations Manage What They Know*) and am supposedly the second-most cited researcher in the field (after the Japanese scholar Ikujiro Nonaka).

So I should know whereof I speak when I say that knowledge management isn't dead, but it's gasping for breath. First, the ongoing evidence of a pulse: academics still write about it, and some organizations (most notably [APQC](#)—a nonprofit research organization of which I am a board member and respect a lot) sells out its knowledge management conference every year. Professional services firms are still quite active and successful with the idea.

But there is plenty of evidence that it's gasping as well. Google Trends suggests that “knowledge management” is a term rarely searched for anymore. [Bain's Management Tools and Trends survey](#) doesn't list it in the top 25 tools for the 2015 or 2013 surveys; it was included before that. More subjectively, although I am supposedly an expert on the topic, hardly anybody ever asks me to speak or consult about it.

What happened to this idea for improving organizations? I'm pretty sure that knowledge itself hasn't become less important to companies and societies, so why did many organizations give up on managing it? Is there any chance it will return? And what does its near-demise tell us about the attributes of successful business ideas?

Although it's impossible to know for sure why something rises or declines in popularity, here are some of my ideas for why knowledge management (KM) has faded:

- It was too hard to change behavior. Some employees weren't that interested in acquiring knowledge, others weren't interested in sharing what they knew. Knowledge is tied up in politics and ego and culture. There were methods to improve its flow within organizations, but most didn't bother to adopt them. Perhaps for this reason, the Bain survey ([for example, the one from 2005](#)) suggests that corporate satisfaction with KM was relatively low compared to some other management concepts.

- Everything devolved to technology. KM is a complex idea, but most organizations just wanted to put in a system to manage knowledge, and that wasn't enough to make knowledge flow and be applied.
- The technology that organizations wanted to employ was Microsoft's SharePoint. There were several generations of KM technology—remember Lotus Notes, for example?—but over time the dominant system became SharePoint. It's not a bad technology by any means, but Microsoft didn't market it very effectively and didn't market KM at all.
- It was too time-consuming to search for and digest stored knowledge. Even in organizations where a lot of knowledge was contributed to KM systems—consulting firms like Deloitte and Accenture come to mind—there was often too much knowledge to sort through. Many people didn't have the patience or time to find everything they needed. Ironically, the greater the amount of knowledge, the more difficult it was to find and use.
- Google also helped kill KM. When people saw how easy it was to search external knowledge, they were no longer interested in the more difficult process for searching out internal knowledge.
- KM never incorporated knowledge derived from data and analytics. I tried to get my knowledge management friends to incorporate analytical insights into their worlds, but most had an antipathy to that topic. It seems that in this world you either like text or you like numbers, and few people like both. I shifted into focusing on analytics and Big Data, but few of the KM crowd joined me.

Any chance that this idea will come back? I don't think so. The focus of knowledge-oriented projects has shifted to incorporating it into automated decision systems. The hot technology for managing knowledge is now [IBM](#) Corp.'s Watson—very different from the traditional KM model. Big Data and analytics are also much more a focus than KM within organizations. These concepts may be declining a bit in popularity too, but companies are still very focused on making them work.

If you believe in knowledge management—and you should—perhaps in your organization you can avoid the pitfalls I have listed and allow the idea to thrive. And if you favor a different idea and want it to survive over the long term, don't hitch a complicated set of behaviors to technology alone. Don't embrace a vendor for your concept that doesn't care much about your idea. And if another notion that's related to yours comes along and gains popularity, don't shun it, embrace it.

Thomas H. Davenport is a Distinguished Professor at Babson College, a Research Fellow at the Center for Digital Business, Director of Research at the International Institute for Analytics, and a Senior Advisor to Deloitte Analytics.