

32 KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT SYSTEMS: HYPE, HOPE, OR FOLLY?

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Abstract

This panel questions whether knowledge management (KM), and more specifically knowledge management systems (KMS), offer real hope for organizations in harnessing the undoubted power and capability of information and communication technology (ICT) as we enter the new millennium. More broadly, we question whether the field of Information Systems (IS) should continue to be distracted from its natural locus of concern and competence, or claim more than it can actually achieve. As a case in point, we raise serious questions regarding ICT-enabled KM, from both theoretical and practical perspectives, utilizing research and practical experience in the U.S., UK, and German traditions. We question whether KM and KMS are more than the most recent in a long line of

fads and fashions embraced by the IS community that have little to offer or, conversely, whether there is real substance in them. The former line of reasoning might lead us to the conclusion that a refocusing of our attention back on the management of data is in order. This is so because IT processes data—not information and certainly not knowledge. The latter might lead us to an exciting new line of research in the field of IS and related disciplines.

1. BACKGROUND

In reflecting on key issues and related fundamental concepts for the new millennium, there is an understandable tendency to embrace the latest fads and fashions uncritically. This is especially so in a relatively new field such as Information Systems (IS) where advances both in information and communication technology (ICT) and its application occur rapidly and incessantly. At the very first International Conference on Information Systems, Peter Keen bemoaned the lack of a cumulative tradition in IS (Keen 1980; see also Keen 1987). Notwithstanding, this trend has continued in the two decades since. Thus, for example, prior to Keen's pronouncements—during the 1970s and early 1980s—many embraced database technology as *the* solution to our corporate information needs (Martin 1982). Later, during the 1980s and into the 1990s, we willingly accepted the notion that IT could lead to a sustainable competitive advantage (e.g., Porter and Millar 1985). More critical reflection (e.g., Ciborra 1994) emerged later. Similarly, business process reengineering (BPR) was proffered as the means to achieve order-of-magnitude improvements in business performance (Davenport 1993). Again, however, critical evaluation has brought the earlier claims into question (Davenport 1996; Sauer et al. 1997).

More recently, the solution to the provision of necessary information across functions, business units, and geographically dispersed organizations has been identified as ERP systems (Holland et al. 1999). A related trend in the late 1990s and into the current decade has been the emphasis on KM and KMS (e.g., Alavi and Leidner 1999; Marshall 1997). Here, the astute capture—and, more importantly, *creation*—of organizational knowledge is said to lead to innovation in the development of new products and services (e.g., Nonaka and Takeuchi 1995). There is even talk of wisdom management (under the guise of human resource management) these days (Turner 2000).

One can argue with some justification, therefore, that the IS field has been populated by example after example of one fad after another. There has thus been a tendency to embrace new concepts, sometimes at the expense of long

standing issues,¹ sometimes at the expense of past learning about IS design and implementation. So, for example, while Davenport (1996) refers to BPR as “the fad that forgot people,” similarly KM has been criticized for emphasizing technology at the expense of people (Swan et al. 1999).

In this panel, we present contrasting perspectives on KMS in an attempt to lay the basis for a serious debate on the role of ICT in the management of knowledge. We will question whether such developments are more potentially regressive than progressive. We will question the extent to which these new, so-called radically transforming technologies have been considered in relative isolation from the more general business strategy and management of change issues, and whether they have tended to be considered from a single rather than a transdisciplinary perspective. The aim is to provoke debate and reflection on key issues confronting us in the field of organizational IS.

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¹Compare some of the key IS management issues that have persisted over time with others that have waxed and waned. See, for example Brancheau et al. (1996); Watson et al. (1997).

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About the Panelists

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Bob Galliers is Professor of Information Systems and Head of Research in the Information Systems Department at the London School of Economics. Prior to joining the LSE, he was Professor of Information Management (and Dean for the period 1994-1998) at Warwick Business School. In 1998/99 he was a Visiting Professor of Information Systems at INSEAD, France. He is currently an Honorary Professor of the European Institute for Advanced Management Studies, Brussels, and is Gemini Consulting Visiting Professor in Knowledge Management at the University of St Gallen. He was previously Foundation Professor and Head of the School of Information Systems at Curtin University, Perth, Western Australia. Professor Galliers was awarded an Honorary Doctor of Science degree from Turku School of Economics and Business Administration, Finland, in 1995. He was President of the Association for Information

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Lisa Murphy is an assistant professor of Information Systems at Ourso College of Business Administration at Louisiana State University, Baton Rouge, Louisiana. She earned her doctorate in MIS from Indiana University's Kelley School of Business after working in the aviation industry for nearly two decades. Her IS experience includes over two dozen IS development projects as well as budgeting, project management, systems planning, architecture, and infrastructure activities. Her experience as a participant in nearly all aspects of this one industry—from operating a commuter airline, to designing airports, marketing business jets, providing operations support for aircraft manufacturing, analyzing technology needs for engineering design-build teams, and assessing environmental consequences—gives her an unusual perspective on trivial, complex, transitory, long-lived, tacit, and explicit flows of information and knowledge. Most recently she has been researching the roles of digital documents in communities of practice among aerospace engineers. Lisa can be reached by e-mail at ldmurph@lsu.edu.

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