



# NAVIGATING YOUR WAY THROUGH KM

through crowdsourcing, to knowledge algorithms.

## PICK A CARD

A few years ago someone gave me a pack of KM method cards – one card for each of 80 KM approaches, methods and tools.

The cards cover great practices including concept mapping, rich pictures and graphic facilitation – but then I found a card called ‘Project KM’. My heart sank. The card makers had made a big mistake. Whether they intended it or not, they had given people permission to think that KM in project environments was something different from KM anywhere else.

Just in case you’re about to go out and buy a pack of KM method cards, expecting a set of recipes that will produce perfect KM, a word of caution. It is generally accepted that knowledge isn’t a thing that can be managed. What can be managed is the environment in which knowledge is created and shared, and the processes and tools available to do this. KM methods basically connect people to information and to other people – sometimes in interesting, fun and creative ways.

Mainstream project KM is stuck in the 1990s. A few years ago, when I was researching project KM, most of my literature searches turned up articles about lessons learned databases and document management systems – the information management flavour of KM. The few articles I found that acknowledged the later flavours of KM concluded that project KM focuses on collecting information rather than connecting people to people.

The authors of these more serious articles listed many factors that make KM difficult in project environments. They wrote about the uniqueness and transience of projects, the controlled, hierarchical and time-pressured nature of projects, and the difficulties of sharing knowledge between project team members from different disciplines.

I don’t buy this. The world of work has become more complex,

workers have become more mobile and the difficulties of managing knowledge exist in all environments. Increased project working and the professionalisation of project management is itself a response to this. The development of new KM flavours is another. But somewhere along the way the two responses seem to have parted company. What I think is happening is that we tend to see project management as something quite separate and different from any other kind of management. This ‘difference’



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- Be aware that KM can mean many different things. Decide which flavours of KM you need for your project, your business and your sector.
- Think about what you’re trying to achieve with KM. Are you trying to create new knowledge or share existing knowledge? How complex is the knowledge you’re trying to create or share? How context-specific is it? The more complex and context-specific it is, the more you need conversations rather than documents.
- Even if you are simply trying to avoid repetition of mistakes, don’t put all your KM efforts into codifying what people know. Make sure you connect people to other people as well – or else you’ll be missing out on sharing valuable ideas, insights and experience.
- Remember that the environment for KM is just as important as the processes you put in place. Don’t expect people to seek out and share knowledge without giving them time to do it.
- Try looking at your projects through a knowledge lens. Projects are all about combining and integrating the knowledge of team members. If you can’t do this, can your projects succeed?
- Remember that most KM methods are just ways connecting people to information or connecting people to other people. The methods themselves don’t matter. Build on good knowledge-sharing practices that already exist in and between your projects. Good KM includes not reinventing the wheel. If you’ve already got some wheels, use them.
- If you’re not sure what KM methods will work best, experiment. Pick a few methods, try them out. Continue to support the ones that work.
- If you’re not convinced that KM is important, think about what you do every time you pitch to be involved in a project. Where does knowledge and experience fit in?
- If you’re still not convinced that KM is important, imagine a world in which you weren’t allowed to talk and listen to your project team members. How would anyone know what to do?
- Don’t believe everything you read about KM. Look at when it was written. It might have been written before the latest flavours of KM emerged – or by someone who wasn’t aware that there are different flavours of KM.

argument is reinforced by project management training and professional associations – and makes it difficult for project management professionals and project-based organisations to learn from the rest of the world.

Of course it isn’t this simple. Some organisations excel in both project management and KM. But many project managers still think of KM as lessons learned databases. Even the enlightened KM method card makers are reinforcing the ‘difference’ argument.

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The Knowledge SIG has just started a benchmarking project that is looking at KM beliefs and practices in project-based organisations. If you are interested in taking part in the project, contact Judy at [judy@hemdean.co.uk](mailto:judy@hemdean.co.uk)