Tacit Knowledge Management:  
Do We Need a Re-orientation of Traditional KM Approaches? 

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Abstract. Knowledge Management is meanwhile generally recognized as a discipline established in many organisations and no longer needs a special justification. It is certainly not unrestrictedly positively seen and even some of its supporters saw a hype in the development of the last few years, which is fading and is being replaced by a realist view of what is feasible. In the attempt to gain a proof of success, one bumps into further difficulties since the effects of KM activities are often not easily or explicitly measurable. It is not clear if this would not have developed as positively when not measures would have been taken for the development of knowledge management. The goal of this paper is the attempt of a comprehensive explanation of a new theme which is incorporated in Tacit Knowledge Management (TKM), as well as a proposal for the integration of TKM in the traditional understanding of knowledge management. 

Keywords: Knowledge management, tacit knowledge, organisational knowledge, KM paradigm, KM views, KM activities, TKM.

1 Background and Relevance of the Topic 

Knowledge Management is meanwhile generally recognized as a discipline established in many organisations and no longer needs a special justification. It is certainly not unrestrictedly positively seen and even some of its supporters saw a hype in the development of the last few years, which is fading and is being replaced by a realist view of what is feasible. In the attempt to gain a proof of success, one bumps into further difficulties since the effects of KM activities are often not easily or explicitly measurable. It is not clear if this would not have developed as positively when not measures would have been taken for the development of knowledge management. The goal of this paper is the attempt of a comprehensive explanation of a new theme which is incorporated in Tacit Knowledge Management (TKM), as well as a proposal for the integration of TKM in the traditional understanding of knowledge management. 

Based on the predominant positive experience with knowledge management, in spite of the criticism, and the fact that knowledge management is, in the meantime, for some tasks indispensable, the hitherto development shouldn’t be basically questioned. The discipline of Knowledge Management seems the have come to a point,
however, in what a methodical further development and a precise understanding of the addressed phenomena is imperative. At the same time, included is the analysis of so far neglected aspects of Knowledge Management. The feedback from management about KM in practice often brings up disappointment and reports about project failures. Beyond that poor results several question arise. Are we focusing the essential aspects? Are we taking the right measures to solve practical problems? How can we make sure that KM works at all?

Knowledge is the recognition of the relationship between cause and effect and is based on a systematic connection of information. The capability to use, adapt and further develop knowledge, to render it into a profitable, innovative product and service will mark the competition positions of the companies in the next years.

Polanyi originally divided knowledge into two forms, namely explicit and implicit knowledge. Although, one has a differentiated understanding of knowledge today, these differences still play an important role.

Explicit knowledge is knowledge, which can be verbalised and which can be stated. It can be described, questioned, discussed and transported through phrases in different forms, e.g. texts documents, data bases, mathematical formulas. Other people can work with this knowledge, it can be easily transmitted, and it can be understood through logical thinking.

Implicit knowledge is however the part of knowledge, which cannot be totally expressed or understood in words. It includes skills, experiences, beliefs etc. and doesn’t need extensive formal recording. But it is an important part of human behaviour. The existence and the importance of hidden knowledge (tacit knowledge) was first recognised and described by Polanyi (1966). Implicit knowledge is based on individual experience, personal ideas, beliefs, perspectives, philosophy of life, ideals, values and emotions. It includes skills, action routines, convictions, doctrine and mental schemas.

Knowledge should be treated as a production factor and be used as efficiently as possible. Knowledge management in connection with the modern management practice traditionally includes (among other activities)

- The “management” of externalised knowledge,
- supporting of the externalization of knowledge,
- the use of the externalised knowledge in connection with the operational tasks by the employees or software.

The externalised knowledge of an organisation is e.g. in its data bases, archives etc. and can in this way be optimised or examined. Implicit knowledge about methods of Knowledge Engineering are transformed through specific processes into explicit knowledge with varied success. Interesting is the not externalised knowledge (similar as with the human memory) whereby emergent structures have the greatest influence (e.g. memory, will of learning, absorption speed). Especially with these questions in the background, a concentration on externalised knowledge oversimplifies the real matters and blinds out many aspects. Knowledge itself is only found in humans resp. in the interaction of humans. Based on the foundation of this realization, a broader understanding of Knowledge Management has already been propagated in the last few years.