Unlocking Knowledge Assets: Knowledge Management Solutions from Microsoft

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I decided to review this book because I was impressed with its chapter on taxonomy. Anyone trying to build a taxonomy or metadata can gain some valuable insight from this chapter. Having now read the book, I find that it is quite uneven. Some chapters are very helpful. Others are confused attempts to paraphrase other authors’ works on intellectual capital.

The best thought in the book is the quote by Thomas Stewart from Intellectual Capital: The New Wealth of Organizations (this book was reviewed in the October 2002 issue of Best Practices).

"...money talks, but it does not think; machines perform, often better than any human being can, but do not invent...."

My problem with the book is the authors’ confusion about what humans do and what machines do. The authors use the word “knowledge” in the first line of the introduction but never define it, even in their glossary. Throughout, the authors use the words “knowledge” and “information” interchangeably without defining what they mean by either word. The result is confusion.

We should make a distinction between these two terms that I think is critical to the understanding of knowledge management. I took a look at Random House College Dictionary to confirm my understanding. It makes a careful distinction between the two terms within its definition of information.

Random House states that “information applies to facts, told, read, or communicated that may be unorganized or even unrelated. Knowledge is an organized body of information or the comprehension and understanding consequent on having acquired and organized a body of facts.”

A telephone book contains vast amounts of organized information, but would anyone confuse it with knowledge? Knowledge is the understanding of how to use a telephone book to call someone. Without that knowledge, the telephone book has no value.

The problem with the confusion of terms is that it may lead us to think that the only value people have in an organization is their ability to spill information into a knowledge management system. You have all heard the phrase “converting tacit knowledge to explicit knowledge.” The authors take this approach, suggesting that when people leave an organization, which they do frequently in high-tech, their value can be preserved in a knowledge management system.

The term “knowledge management” is a historical remnant of a time when people thought they would be able to create computers that could interpret information the way humans do. The modern discipline of knowledge management is all about information: collecting, organizing, and distributing information to make the jobs of knowledge workers (people) more efficient. That is the subject of Unlocking Knowledge Management.

Chapters 4 through 10 have valuable information if you are trying to implement a knowledge management, document management, or content management system. Chapters 4 through 10 are attempts to justify knowledge management in the business environment. They are poorly written and irrelevant. Throughout the rest of the book, substitute “information” where you see the word “knowledge.”

Chapter 4 describes issues that you need to consider before you can implement a system. Other chapters describe developing a user community for the system; building and managing taxonomies and metadata; authoring and managing content; the technology of knowledge management, content management, and document management tools; searching for information in the repository; and maintaining and evaluating the effectiveness of the system. All of these chapters contain valuable information interspersed with some advertising for Microsoft products.

Unlocking Knowledge Assets is worthwhile adding to the collection of reading material as you prepare to tackle knowledge management, content management, or document management projects. Many of the practical issues you need to consider are discussed. But don’t be fooled into thinking that a knowledge management system can ever replace the true knowledge that you have invested in your employees.