

Harvard Business Review on Knowledge Management

This is not a new book. Published in 1998, it is a collection of HBR articles bound together in this volume as they contribute to our understanding of knowledge management. As such, some of the articles date back to as long ago as 1987.

Influential

Many of the articles are classics in their own right and the authors have been some of the most influential writers and thinkers on the combined disciplines of knowledge management and organisational learning in the last two decades.

Articles

The list of contributions illustrates the range and variety of perspectives on offer here:

- Peter Drucker: "The Coming of the New Organization,"
- Ikujiro Nonaka: "The Knowledge-Creating Company,"
- David Garvin: "Building a Learning Organization,"
- Chris Argyris: "Teaching Smart People How to Learn,"
- Dorothy Leonard & Susaan Straus: "Putting Your Company's Whole Brain to work,"
- Art Kleiner & George Roth: "How to Make Experience Your Company's Best Teacher,"
- John Seely Brown: "Research That Reinvents the Corporation,"
- James Brien Quinn, Philip Anderson, & Sydney Finkelstein: "Managing Professional Intellect: Making the Most of the Best."

Commentary

Peter Drucker

The short introductory chapter is one amongst several in the book that offer insights into the changing nature of organisations. The collection begins with an article by Peter Drucker, probably the most influential management thinker of our age. Drucker poses some challenges for management that organisations are often still struggling with. What might be an organisational structure that enables all organisational members to know who depends on them for information and knowledge and on whom can they depend upon in turn?

Learning histories

I was reminded of the book when researching on learning histories prior to facilitating a Masterclass for a client on instruments for mobilising and capturing knowledge. Art Kleiner and George Roth's concept of learning histories adds value to the KM toolbox by providing methods that support the capture of stories of critical events and ensure that the narrative includes insights from participants to those events but also analysis by objective external contributors (the learning historians).

Tacit knowledge

Nonaka's chapter describes, what he calls, the four basic patterns for creating knowledge in an organisation:

1. Tacit-tacit (a process of socialisation)
2. Explicit–explicit (a process of synthesising information from different sources and creating a new perspective)
3. Tacit-explicit (a process of articulating tacit knowledge)
4. Explicit-tacit (a process of using codified information, internalising and re-framing one's own tacit knowledge).

I have problems with this concept as the concept of tacit knowledge draws upon Michael Polanyi's beliefs about tacit knowing. It is important to understand that Polanyi wrote about a process and not a form of knowledge. The concept of tacit knowledge is now commonly used in knowledge management circles although we must acknowledge that Polanyi believed tacit knowing to be wholly or partly inexplicable. Nonaka's contribution to this volume ignores such a problem for his model.

Creative abrasion

Leonard and Straus discuss the interesting concept of creative abrasion in which conflicting views often result in the creative process breaking down. Management's challenge, they argue, is to establish ground rules for collaboration to enhance the potential for innovation. Other chapters contribute insight for practitioners and students of KM alike.

Valuable

Despite the time that has lapsed since these articles were first published (and indeed since the volume itself was first published), a recent re-read has confirmed that it remains one of the most valuable books in my collection. If you are looking for short introductions to ideas and research that have helped to shape how we view knowledge management today, then this volume is highly recommended.

More information

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