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The distinction between Knowledge and Information and what this implies for KM



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This newsletter is about the knowledge continuum, the relationship between knowledge and information, and how information management and knowledge management both handle the overlap between the two.

This is still a thorny topic, and there are still organisations that think information management and knowledge management are essentially the same thing. But they aren't, this newsletter discusses why, and suggests a new way to look at the distinction between the two. This is a more philosophical newsletter than normal, but covers some foundational topics.

What's different about Knowledge?

The English language is inadequate when it comes to talking about Knowledge, and this inadequacy is at the heart of many disagreements about Knowledge Management. Where other languages such as French and German describe two forms of knowing and two types of knowledge, we have only one word for both. We use the same word when asking "Do you know her name" as when asking "Do you know her" for example. However we are describing two types of knowing - the first is a Fact, the second is a Familiarity. If you know someone's name, then you can recall a fact about them. If you know someone, then you are familiar with them and already have a relationship with them. Knowing through accumulation of facts is one form of knowing, knowing through developing familiarity with, and mastery of, a task or a product is another and more valuable form of knowing. We suggest that Knowledge Management focuses on this second form.

Peter Senge, the Organisational Learning guru, describes knowledge as "the ability to take effective action". This description makes knowledge clearly distinct from Information, and addresses the "Familiarity and Mastery" side of knowledge. The Singapore Army uses a

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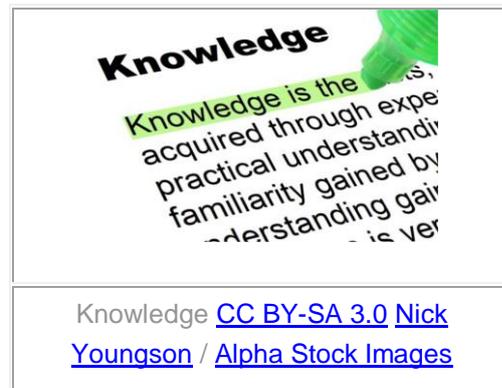
[Knoco on YouTube](#)

similar definition - "the capacity to take effective action in varied and uncertain situations" - and the draft ISO KM standard, published for comment just before the end of last year, used the following definition;

Knowledge - A human or organizational asset enabling good decisions and effective action in context.

Knowledge management has always delivered its real value when applied improving the competence and capability of the organisation by giving people access to the knowledge they need to make the correct decisions. If they are familiar with a topic, a product or an activity, they know how to act, they will act correctly. This sort of knowledge is very close to the concept of "Know-how". Knowledge management focuses on the creation, exchange and re-use of know-how through experiences, guidance and insights; through communities of practice, lesson learning, the development of "best practice" knowledge assets, collective sense-making, and innovation, as well as the development of a culture of learning and sharing.

Information informs, while knowledge educates and so helps develops capability.



[Contact Knoco](#) if you want more help with understanding the value of knowledge.

Can you document knowledge?

Many hours have been spent arguing whether knowledge can ever exist outside the human head. Many people are of the firm belief that knowledge exists only in heads, and once expressed in words or documents it becomes information and simultaneously ceases to be knowledge. The outcome of this view can be that there is no such thing as knowledge transfer, only information transfer, or even that there is no such thing as knowledge management because you can't manage what is in people's heads. Others on the other

hand are of the firm view that you can express and document knowledge. They define knowledge which has been expressed as "explicit knowledge" and knowledge which has been documented as "codified knowledge". There is certainly a long history of using the word knowledge as being held in books and libraries, but long history doesn't make something right.

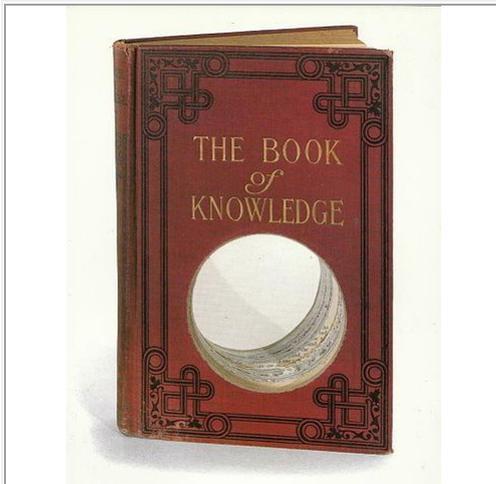
This semantic argument is seldom resolved, and probably never will be. As far as knowledge management is concerned, it does not matter whether codified knowledge is called knowledge or information - you still need to work with it as part of a complete knowledge management framework. It is possible to help people understand how to do things, and to develop their capability, through transmission of the spoken or recorded word. You can add a huge amount of value this way, no matter what you call the medium of transmission (explicit knowledge, or knowledge-focused information). There is a loss of value when things get written down, but where does that loss turn knowledge into information? Is it when you formalise your thoughts into coherent form? When you speak your thoughts? When you record what you speak onto video? When you write a transcript of that video? Nobody knows, and trying to pinpoint the step at which knowledge becomes information, is irrelevant to the fact that you can add value to an organisation (in many cases) through written transmission. It's seldom the best way to transfer knowledge, but sometimes its the only practical way.

However this argument is an example of Dualism, where things are assumed to be either one thing or another - either knowledge or information. Dualism is a very western viewpoint, and we would like to suggest that there is an alternative non-dualist view as follows:

Knowledge which has been expressed and/or codified is "knowledge in information form" and therefore exists both as knowledge and information.

But could something be both knowledge and information? Many people find it hard to accept something can be both, but there is no reason why not - there is nothing to say that knowledge and information are mutually exclusive. After all, an invoice is both information and financial; part of the information management system and the financial management system, and subject both to information management and financial management discipline. Money doesn't stop being money when it's information in a system, otherwise most of us would have no money at all. Similarly we could say that a piece of documented knowledge could be both knowledge and information, and that knowledge does not stop being knowledge when it is documented; it just becomes information as well. If you don't like this view, then treat it as a "thought experiment" or a "what if".

The implications of this new view are explored in the next section.



[Book of Knowledge sculpture, by Lipski, from Wikipedia](#)

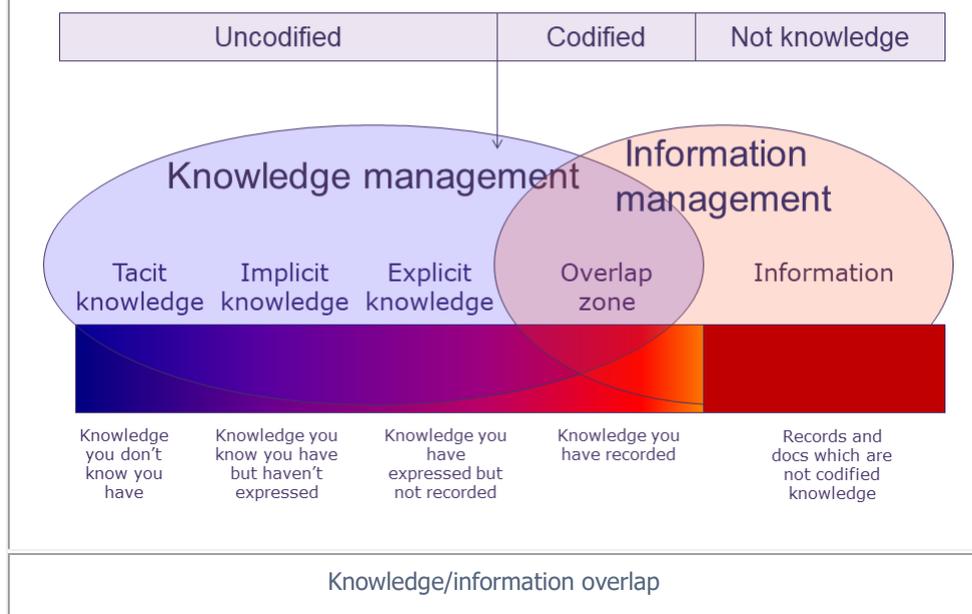
[Contact Knoco](#) to learn more about knowledge management.

The overlap between Knowledge and Information

The alternative view presented in the previous section is that some knowledge exists also as information, and therefore needs to be managed by both KM and IM in parallel. This view also implies that not all knowledge is information (only the codified part), and not all information is knowledge (only the part which is codified knowledge). This section explores these implications a little more.

Let us assume that we are talking about knowledge in the sense that it refers to "know-how", the ability to make decisions and take actions. Know-how comes in a continuum, as shown in the figure above, and as described below.

The knowledge continuum



1. There is the knowledge you don't know you have - the deep tacit knowledge, which is intimately linked with the person themselves, and which can only be deployed by deploying the person;
2. There is the knowledge you know you have but haven't yet expressed - explicit knowledge by the original definition (knowledge that can be readily articulated, codified, accessed and verbalised), or sometimes referred to as implicit knowledge. This knowledge can be transferred from one person to another by bringing them together to learn from each other;
3. This knowledge then, in conversation, moves to the next stage of the continuum and becomes knowledge you have expressed but not recorded. This is explicit uncodified knowledge - spread through conversation, and open to being recorded;
4. Finally there is knowledge you have recorded - explicit codified knowledge in the form of documents or recordings which contain know-how, and which can guide or advise others towards action. Here are your recipes, your tips and hints, your guidance notes, training material, best practices, standard operating procedures and checklists. By our alternative viewpoint **this material could be both knowledge and also information**, as it is information which conveys knowledge in a documented form.
5. Finally there are the documents which are information and not knowledge. By "not knowledge" I mean they do not address know-how and do not transfer knowledge of what to do or how to do things. An invoice, for example, allows you to know what price something was invoiced for, but it does not help you know how to become a better invoice clerk. A record of a meeting allows you to know what was discussed in a negotiation, but not how to be a better negotiator. These are documents which contain information, but do not carry knowledge.

As knowledge moves from the left of the continuum to the right, it loses richness and context, but gains in both manageability and robustness. By robustness I mean that much of the deep tacit knowledge may be a combination of real knowledge, opinions, cognitive biases and falsehoods and it is only through conversation and synthesis that these opinions are tested, become validated as knowledge, and are protected from the fragility and distortions of human memory. I have drawn the boundary between codified knowledge and "not knowledge" documents above as a hard boundary, but there may be some overlap between them. There may be documents that contain SOME knowledge, such as project reports with a "lessons learned" section, for example.

We discuss the management of the overlap zone, where documents or recordings are both information and contain knowledge, in the next section.

[Contact Knoco](#) to learn about how we can help you design a KM starter week program for your organisation.

What does this mean for Knowledge Management?

We can see that there is a class of knowledge which could be considered to be both knowledge and information. This is the class that causes much of the confusion, with some people assuming that because this knowledge is carried as documented content, then management of documents alone equates to management of knowledge. However we believe that class 4, being potentially both information and knowledge, needs to be addressed by both disciplines. Knowledge Management addresses the contents of the document, Information Management addresses the container - the document itself.

Codified knowledge, because it is in the form of information, is managed as information. It needs to comply with the IM requirements and needs to be categorised with the correct metadata using the correct taxonomy or ontology, and needs to follow the rules of information architecture and information lifecycle. Because it is also knowledge, it is managed as knowledge. It needs to comply with knowledge management requirements, and the knowledge which the document contains needs to be valid, up-to-date, and structured and presented in such a way as to be maximally useful to the reader. Both the document and its contents are managed, but are managed separately by the two separate disciplines. This insight is what we need to fully understand how the two disciplines work together, and we would summarise it as follows:

Knowledge Management and Information Management are two separate but complementary disciplines. [The Knowledge Management framework](#) focuses on Knowledge, with the aim of developing and deploying collective know-how for business improvement. It covers the whole spectrum of knowledge - classes 1 through 4 above - and addresses issues such as the validity of knowledge, its availability to the people who need it, its usefulness, its currency

and accuracy, its application etc, regardless of whether the knowledge is in people's heads or in documents. It covers both connection people and collecting knowledge, both knowledge stock and knowledge flow, and both knowledge content and knowledge conversations.

The Information Management framework focuses on information, and covers the spectrum between classes 4 and 5 above. It is concerned with information architecture and structure, categorisation, taxonomy, ontology, findability, information lifecycle etc, regardless of whether the content is knowledge, or financial, or records etc.

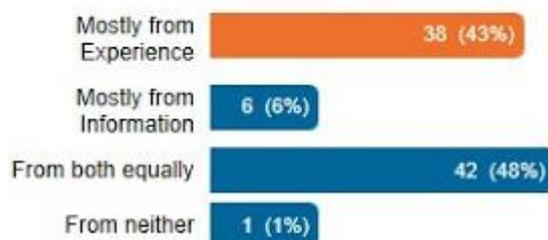
Where knowledge is carried in the form of information, as codified knowledge within documents, then to these documents both disciplines are applicable. Information management is concerned with management of the document itself, knowledge management with the contents of the document. Problems only arise when people think that only one discipline is needed.

[Contact Knoco](#) for advice on the development of a Knowledge Management framework.

Does Knowledge come from Information?

In most of the Knowledge Management training courses we run, we ask the question "where does knowledge come from?" Always, every time, the first answer we get is "Experience - Knowledge comes from Experience". "Knowledge comes from Information" is never the first answer. Maybe the second, or third, or fourth, but never the first. If you don't believe me, try it yourself. Ask people "where does knowledge come from"? and see what they say. We tested this with an online poll, the results of which are shown below.

Where do you think Knowledge primarily comes from?



Results from a poll asking "where does knowledge come from"

91% of respondents believe that knowledge comes totally or partly from experience. But if knowledge comes from experience, why do we persevere with the Data/Information/Knowledge model? You know what I mean - that common triangular diagram that asserts that knowledge comes from information, and that information comes from data. This diagram is not aligned with the majority view of where knowledge comes from, as only 6% of the people who responded to our survey believed that information was the only source of knowledge.

If you believe that knowledge comes from experience rather than information, and therefore that shared knowledge comes from shared experience, then your KM approach will be based on review and transfer of experience, connection of people, and conversation. This contrasts with approaches based on the Data/Information/Knowledge model, which sees Information as the source of Knowledge. This approach can lead to Knowledge Management being seen as an extension of information management and data management, resulting in a belief that organising and aggregating information somehow turns it into knowledge.

Instead of Knowledge Management being seen as an extension of information management, let's rather look at it as an approach of sharing experience in order to make better decisions and to take better actions. Peter Drucker said, in a much quoted sentence from an Information Week article on January 24th, 2000 that "**Information only becomes knowledge in the hands of someone who knows what to do with it.**" In other words, Information only becomes Knowledge, in the hands of someone who has Knowledge. Knowledge is something we add to information, and information is something that can be added to knowledge to make more knowledge. My guess is that Peter Drucker would have voted in the poll above that knowledge comes from "both information and experience".

So let us recognise the value of both knowledge and information - that knowledge can develop capability, one of the capabilities being the ability to interpret information, and that information can therefore inform knowledgeable people - and let us develop both KM and IM systems and strategies in parallel.

[Contact Knoco](#) to help plan and develop your Knowledge Management strategy.

Why Knowledge Management is not Information Management - an IT view



Ian Fry

Ian Fry, Knoco Australia

As I clock over 50 years IT experience I am still amazed at the muddy thinking in many areas of IM, and this one - the distinction between IM and KM - is one of them. I regularly run seminars on the topic and it takes a while for IM people to get the message. In the seminars I take the relatively simple exercise of building a WIKI, and then contrast the IM normal approach and what a KM system would look like. As KM focusses on employee capability, organisational learning and knowledge transfer; it can be characterised as "what happens beyond the GUI". That is, HOW people use the system, HOW the system supports what they need, and so forth.

So, the standard IM approach of a Business Analysis/Requirements Gathering one-time exercise for such a system is a nonsense. It needs to be repeated often, probably even before implementation; simply because Knowledge Needs are not static, and there could be a different set of employees each time. Clearly IM has a prominent role in supporting KM, but in the seminars, I highlight the way in which the introduction of KM puts extra demands on the functionality and support provided by the IM systems. With the issue above - changing requirements - does the metrication in the system track the shifts in usage / search terms / calls for assistance which would point in the direction of the shift? Is the system capable of differing styles of usage depending on context? It is a very different ball game, and poorly understood by IM people.

News from Knoco

Some updates from across the Knoco family are listed here.

The ISO KM standard - status update

Work continues on the ISO Knowledge Management standard (ISO 30401). The standard was opened for public consultation over the Christmas period. Over 350 comments received on the standard through the UK system, and the UK committee has been working through these and will pass the endorsed comments to the global team to be combined with comments from other countries in the next stage of development of the standard.

[Knoco Chile](#)

In January we held the 8th meeting of the KM Community in Chile. This group gathers KM professionals of around 40 public and private organizations, holds its meetings every 2 months. On this occasion, we held a retrospective to evaluate the first year of operation and also planned the activities for 2018.

On April 26th Javier will be opening the seminar "How to manage and transfer the knowledge in your organization" held by EIPA in Barcelona and May 9th and 10th he will be participating in the EDI international congress also in Barcelona <http://edoserveis-uab.cat/congreso2018/>



The Chile Knowledge Management Community

Knoco Kansas

Corey will be presenting at the Second DoD/Joint KM Summit in May in Baltimore, MD as well as at KM Australia in 8-9 August in Canberra on KM in a Combined/Joint Environment and a Workshop during the Canberra on developing Battle Rhythms and Decision-Cycles.

Knoco UK

Nick will be presenting at several conferences in the next few months, including the NATO lessons learned conference in March, and KA Connect (San Francisco) and KM UK (London) in May.

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