Abstract

There has been an explosion of interest in Knowledge Management [KM] theory and practice. However, it is argued here that much of this work fails to consider the purpose for which knowledge is ‘being managed’. In this paper, purpose is considered in terms of encouraging innovation. Given that innovation is a complex, episodic process, it would appear unlikely that a single set of tools and methodologies for managing knowledge would be appropriate across all episodes. Rather, it is proposed that different approaches to KM are likely to facilitate the management of knowledge during different episodes of the innovation process. Three approaches are outlined and illustrated using empirical material from a case study involving the implementation of technology. The analysis of the case highlights potential tensions and contradictions among KM practices for different innovation episodes. The paper concludes that careful consideration needs to be given to both purpose and process when introducing KM practices. Approaches to KM that are useful for some aspects of innovation may be useless, irrelevant or even disruptive for others.

1. Introduction

Interest in Knowledge Management [herein KM] has seen an exponential growth over the last 2-3 years [1]. Whilst KM could be dismissed as yet another in a long line of management fads, the fundamental problems it seeks to address are, it is argued, more enduring [2]. These centrally concern the difficulties of developing, sharing, co-ordinating and re-cycling knowledge in the context of new structural forms of organization (flatter, decentralised, networked, possibly even virtual –[3]). The current focus on KM thus appears to reflect fundamental and convergent shifts in thinking about organization as well as substantive changes in the competitive context of organizations. These shifts recognize the decline of traditional manual work and the importance of innovation, knowledge work and knowledge workers in an era described variously as the ‘information age’, the ‘knowledge society’ and the ‘post-industrial era’ [4]. Thus knowledge is seen as outstripping traditional resources such as land, labour and financial capital as the key source of comparative and competitive advantage [5]. The emerging consensus on the importance of knowledge in organizations has not only fuelled much of the interest in KM, but has also coloured understandings of the role of KM in practice. As knowledge has come to be viewed as a critical resource, there has been a tendency towards what might be termed a ‘quantity theory’ of KM. According to this theory, the role of KM is to enhance the production, circulation and exploitation of knowledge. By capturing, stockpiling and transferring greater quantities of knowledge the organization’s performance will be automatically improved. The recent period, however, has seen a critical reaction to this quantity theory of KM. A number of writers have pointed out that too great an emphasis on knowledge qua resource risks divorcing it from concrete actions and outcomes. This may lead to excessive stockpiling of knowledge at the expense of important organizational tasks. These writers argue that knowledge should not be seen as valuable in itself, but as adding value only where it is created and applied for specific purposes [6].

This paper aims to develop this alternative perspective on KM by analyzing the deployment of knowledge through empirical data on the development and implementation of an IT-based organizational innovation. Where quantity theorists see a linear relationship between knowledge stocks and flows and innovative outcomes [7], this analysis suggests a more episodically and socially embedded interaction between knowledge deployment and innovation. In particular, it