



meet some need in the market. The faster that you can do this, the more you can attract buyers of your product. After all, the more needs that the product meets, the more attractive it is over time. Note that churn does not mean innovative, or best in class, or the most elegant, or highest quality. It just means change. Microsoft is expert at churning products. At a recent meeting with CEOs, Bill Gates spoke about knowledge management and the revolution it was going to bring. And of course embedded in all of this was how well Microsoft would support the revolution. In the context of knowledge management, how are we, as knowledge work and knowledge management professionals to interpret the latest from Microsoft about their offering in the knowledge management arena?

A Tool is a Tool is a Tool is a Tool

Here are some quotes from a web paper entitled, "Practicing Knowledge Management" that can be found on the Microsoft site at <http://www.microsoft.com/dns/km/KMpract.htm>. They are relevant to this discussion and I include them here for that reason.

"... knowledge management is about embracing a diversity of knowledge sources, from databases, Web sites, employees, and partners and cultivating that knowledge where it resides while capturing its context and giving greater meaning through its relation to other information in the company."

"Its essence involves what knowledge workers do best - what Microsoft CEO Bill Gates refers to as "thinking work."

"Knowledge management helps prepare people for an environment of constantly shifting demographics, industries, economies, and customer needs by ensuring that people have the expertise and information they need in order to properly assess business problems and opportunities."

First, I will admit to the crime of removing these statements from the context in which they are embedded. This is admitting to a "sound byte" approach to considering what it is that Microsoft considers knowledge management. Nevertheless, a snap shot approach is sometimes valid because it gives us a flavor of what something is about. Having said that, what can we surmise about the Microsoft definition of knowledge management?

1. It involves thinking.
2. Knowledge sources are things like databases, web sites, employees, and partners.
3. Knowledge sources are meant to be cultivated.

4. Knowledge management involves relating knowledge to other information in a company.
5. Knowledge management helps people by giving them the information they need.

If we consider the knowledge management in a wide context, the statements from the Microsoft paper address important considerations of knowledge management. Later in the paper, the author(s?) also address some of the typical concerns; for example clear leadership and rewards for participation. The questions that remain for me though are, (1) Does the entry of Microsoft into the knowledge management arena make knowledge management more well defined? and (2) To what extent does the Microsoft set of tools support knowledge management?

With regard to the first question, namely, does the entry of Microsoft into knowledge management make knowledge management any clearer?, I would answer no. Their definition, although touching many of the issues, does not create any new clarity. It is simply a restatement of what practitioners already know. Furthermore, some of the statements I extracted may go some way to muddy the definition of data, information, and knowledge and the distinctions among them. To me, this muddiness acts to position the Microsoft suite of tools as a potential tool for knowledge management, and here is where the churn lies. Office 2000 will be seen as a solution for knowledge management.

On days when I am feeling less than charitable towards Microsoft, I would think that if Bill Gates could find a way to say that Office xxxx is a cure for the common cold, he would. That said, how far does Office 2000 go as a knowledge management solution?

Out on the Microsoft web site, at <http://www.microsoft.com/dns/km/default.htm>, you will find an index of "case studies." These case studies are divided into several categories including knowledge creation and sharing; access to information anytime, anywhere; and better decisions through better information. Clicking down further into these "studies" you find descriptions of what Microsoft characterizes as knowledge management scenarios. One of the first things that you will notice when you look at each of these cases is the list of Microsoft tools used by the organization described in the case study. I would recommend a look at these studies, but the short version of the story is that most only touch knowledge management in the most elementary way and do not give any great insight into creating a knowledge management culture. They are about the technology used

to solve a particular problem--not a surprise considering that Microsoft sells tools.

Notice I said most of the case studies can be characterized by the description above. At least one that I found is worth reading. This is a description of the work in knowledge management that was carried out at J.D. Edwards. It can be found at <http://www.microsoft.com/dns/km/jdedward.htm>. This case study describes the transformation of a culture to a knowledge management culture using technology to augment the process. Most important about this case study was the involvement of the people who would live in this new culture.

I would ask the following question of this case study. Could the same have been accomplished with any technology supporting the required functionalities? I would have to say yes. There is nothing about the J.D. Edward's situation that makes one technology better than another (except, perhaps, J.D. Edwards investment in a particular technology). And this observation is critical to the interpretation of the role that technologies like those produced by Microsoft play in the knowledge management arena. Technology is not the primary consideration AND a knowledge management effort should not be based on any particular technology.

Having said this, I will point out a couple of things. Office 2000 has extended and improved its integration with the web and HTML. Therefore, it is easier to deploy web-based information using this tool suite. Office 2000 also has improved features for collaboration, an important aspect of knowledge management. Interestingly enough, the solutions touted a couple of years ago for collaboration are the same - namely shared folders in Exchange. Of course, the new version of Exchange, code named Platinum is supposed to improve knowledge management functionality support. What this is and how it works have yet to be seen.

I would also like to point out that many of the world's computer-based documents happen to be in Microsoft Word document format. The significance of this is important because any knowledge management technology might need to manipulate documents in this format as part of the intellectual capital of an organization. The integration of knowledge management technologies with Microsoft Office formats is a critical consideration if a knowledge management solution will make use of these documents. By virtue of the prevalence of information in these formats, Microsoft has a significant role to play in knowledge management specifically and knowledge work in general. I believe that the role Microsoft will

play is still churning. Commitment to a particular Microsoft Knowledge Management solution at this time may be premature.

Microsoft will probably sell more products based on its representation of the Office 2000 suite as a tool for knowledge management. This is most certainly a part of their churn. But one should remember that Microsoft has been and will continue to be a tool builder, and tools are the means to an end, not the end itself. The Office 2000 suite represents a potential tool for knowledge management and should be considered with other tools offering similar functionality. In the end, the consideration of what tools to use should be about meeting the needs of the knowledge sources, individuals, groups, and organizations.

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