

KnowldgWorks News
Volume 1 Number 7

KnowBits

Minimum Cost of Starting a knowledge work effort: \$25,000
Maximum Costs (to date) of a known knowledge work effort:
\$60,000,000

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KnowldgWorks News Topics

To provide a more regular editorial schedule, I have decided to divide the monthly writings of the news into five topics. The purpose of this editorial schedule is to provide more balance in the news and to address the various interests of the subscribing community. The five topics are as follows:

General Discussion - Information of general interest to all readers including definition of terminology, introduction of processes and methodology, project descriptions, case studies, and interviews.

People - Devoted to the people aspects of knowledge work.

Management - Leading a knowledge work effort has its challenges. These issues will focus on management and leadership issues of knowledge work.

Technology - Reviews of technology to support knowledge management, both real and possible.

Guest - Submissions by readers and others about knowledge work to the news.

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Topic: General Discussion
Neats vs. Scruffys

One of the early pieces of feedback I received about this newsletter concerned itself with whether or not this newsletter was providing useful information about knowledge management or just providing my opinions disguised as useful information. These comments made an impression on me

and left me facing a paradox. Precisely what is the craft (the 90's term for craft is best practices) of knowledge work?

As I review what has been written about knowledge management, I see an amorphous conglomeration of stuff. Even though we are as much as six years into what might be called the era of official knowledge management, there are still major debates about what it means to manage knowledge. In a discussion group I recently agreed to join, I see the same amorphous discussions occurring. What is knowledge? What is knowledge management? How do you DO knowledge management? These questions are still prevalent. The paradox for me goes something like this. If there is still major disagreement about what knowledge management is, how can there be anything but opinions? Until such time as the true craft of knowledge work (including knowledge management) has been widely recognized, opinions are as good as we can expect. I have yet to see the craft emerge, and that is part of the reason for this newsletter - to offer another perspective on how to understand knowledge work, and more importantly, to offer practical advice about knowledge work.

This said, here is a disclaimer. The following represents my opinion about a particular aspect of knowledge work. Hopefully, it will be of value. If not, then let me know. This is a learning process for me too!!

Let me get started by defining two classes of people.

Scruffys: The scruffy class of people consists of very practical individuals. They believe it is more important to show results than it is to carefully develop theories, and prove the theories are true. A scruffy works like this: get an idea, try the idea, learn from the trial, try again if it doesn't work. To me scruffies epitomize the process of invention. Extreme scruffies are mad scientists.

Neats: The neat class of people consists of individuals who find it very important to be formal in their approach to experimentation. A neat works like this: develop a theory, collect evidence for the theory, prove the theory, and only then implement the theory. A neat requires every i dotted and t crossed. Without a formal consecrated theory an extreme neat may not be willing to proceed to implement the theory.

The world needs neats and scruffies. I freely admit to my own "scruffyhood." I want to experiment and see if it works. I am interested in practical and tangible results. I learn by trying.

Lately, some interesting knowledge management artifacts have been appearing in print. #'s 1 and 2 come from the writing of others. #3 is my own.

1. $I > KM > K$, where I represents information, KM, knowledge management, and K knowledge.
2. $W = D + I + K$, where W represents wisdom, D data, I information, and K knowledge.
3. $In(D) = I$, where In represents a function named interpretation, D data, and I information.
 $In(I) = K$, where K represents knowledge.

Each of these is an attempt to position knowledge work in the realm of a formularic representation. Let's consider what my formula, #3 above, means.

In trying to formulate the relationship between data, information, and knowledge, I wanted to express the relationship as a function. Looking at it formally, it seemed to me that data underwent a transformation into information when a human performed a cognitive transformation on it. I identify this transformation as interpretation and represented it functionally as $In(x)$. $In(x)$ can be defined further as a composition of other functions. Conceptually we could write something like $In(x) = f(g(h(x)))$ where f, g, and h are all cognitive processing functions. Candidates for f, g, and h, might be Understand(x) where Understand represents the process of understanding, Integrate(x) where Integrate represents the cognitive process of integration of new knowledge, and Create(x) where Create represents the process of creating new knowledge. Likewise to transform information into knowledge we again call on $In(x)$ to perform the transformation.

What precisely is the nature of $In(x)$? What operation(s) does the function involve? If it were possible to precisely define it, I believe we would be able to defined a key aspect of human thought. Once defined we could embody the functional definition in a computer

program and have a computer capable of creating knowledge. It is not this simple.

The state of the art of understanding human thought is such that $In(x)$ cannot yet be precisely defined. We can make rough approximations, but in general these approximations are still far from representing any true cognitive process.

So what is $In(x)$? It is nothing more than a representation for some reasoning process that occurs. It is an abbreviation. It is a shorthand. It does not explain the process; it represents the process.

Now let's consider formula #1 and #2. What do these mean?

In the case of $I > KM > K$, the '>'-sign means something like input-output. This formula could be written as $K = KM(I)$, KM takes I and transforms it into K . The '>'-sign should not be confused with the arithmetic comparison operator '>'. Nevertheless, it is difficult not to interpret the operator in this way. This formula is also a representation as opposed to an explanation.

Likewise, what does $W = D + I + K$ mean? Does the '+'-sign have the traditional meaning of addition or is it to be interpreted as the concatenation operator? And if it has the traditional meaning, then what does it mean to add D to I and I to K ? Also if the following is true that $K=In(In(D))$ (here In is the same function as used in formula #3), is it also true that $W=In(In(In(D)))$? in which case, since there is a dependency between D , I , and K , what effect does this dependency have on $W = D + I + K$. Does this mean that $W = 5D$? or wisdom is five times data?

The difficulty with these representations is that they trivialize the complexity of the subject if they are taken literally and not interpreted for what they are - conceptual attempts to represent extremely complex ideas. In essence I'd characterize the authors of formulas like these (including myself) as neat-wanna-be's. Beware of scruffy's in neat's clothing. When you see a formula like #1, #2, or #3, make sure you understand what they actually represent. Are they well defined? Do they truly represent what is going on? It would be nice to assume we could codify everything succinctly, but in the case of human

cognition, a very old lesson that needs to be learned again and again is that cognition is much more complex than it looks.

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You may type an x in the subject or body if your e-mail program requires.

Next week's issue: "It's the People Stupid"

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