

knowldgWORKS News Number 33 September 4, 2000
The Necessity of Certification in Knowledge Management

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KnowBits

- A. The Prototypical Knowledge Management Organization - A Reference Report Available From ACCSYS Corporation

As part of my ongoing effort to create useful reference materials for those of us involved in knowledge management, I have prepared a report entitled, "The Prototypical Knowledge Management Organization," that is available for purchase. The report costs \$25 and can be downloaded from the ACCSYS Corporation web site at <http://www.accsys-corp.com>. A brief synopsis of the report follows.

Synopsis: The Prototypical Knowledge Management Organization. Dr. R. Kaplan. ACCSYS Corporation. May 2000.

This report focuses on the "design" of a prototypical knowledge management organization. The premise of this report is to design an organization and describe the positions in it that would support a complete knowledge management effort. The report presents the organizational design, describes 11 positions, and provides detailed job descriptions for each of these positions. The content of the report could be used as the basis for a company's own knowledge management effort, as a reference for the necessary positions and the specific requirements for these positions. In addition, the report also describes a

"starter" or "seed" organization that would serve as the beginnings of a knowledge management group within a larger organization.

B. knowldgWORKS is transitioning

This is the 33rd issue of knowldgWORKS News and we are changing. I have been struck with the relationship of knowledge work to creativity and innovation and will be shifting some of the focus of knowldgWORKS News in this direction. Stay tuned as we make this next transition. A name change is in the making.

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The Necessity of Certification in Knowledge Management
(or "Should I become certified as a knowledge management practitioner?")
(or "A shopping guide for knowledge management certification")

In last month's newsletter on the topic of Brand and Intellectual capital, I discussed the idea that intellectual capital may not always be about the intellectual capital itself, but rather about the source of the intellectual capital. In some cases, this branding may represent incremental value, but in other cases, the value is more to the purveyor of the name as opposed to the consumer of the intellectual capital. Any of us who have lived through the changes in the automobile industry can see a prime example of this. The U.S. automobile industry had to change because autos from a part of the world heretofore not associated with quality were about to take over - even though automakers in the U.S. certainly had the brand. The population came to realize that brand by itself was meaningless in terms of quality - an important type of intellectual capital embedded into products.

The parallels to the question of brand in knowledge management are striking to me. There are the thought leaders - those who are recognized as leading our field - driving it forward - forcing change if not more maturity. Clearly the thought leaders have "brand." They would not be recognized as such without it. And clearly they have made a contribution to the establishment of the field. Their thinking has shaped the nature of knowledge management. But

the question, at least to me, is what does certification in knowledge management truly mean? Why should anyone want certification and what's more, if one wanted to get a certification, from where should it come? What are the quality sources of knowledge management certification?

A Historical Note

In 1980, Edward Feigenbaum and Randall Davis, at a meeting at Stanford University, created the term "knowledge engineer" and in conjunction with that announced the first program in any U.S. school that would grant a degree in knowledge engineering.

If you don't know about Feigenbaum and Davis, these are two of the thought leaders in the field of Expert Systems. These two individuals gave birth to what might be the only successful branch of artificial intelligence. Feigenbaum and Davis had "brand," and in conjunction with Stanford they could pull off this program, and I think that getting a knowledge engineering degree from Stanford would have value - in the 1980's. But what value does getting a certification in Knowledge Management have today?

Certification in Other Fields

To answer this question, I need to recall some of my own experience in the realm of certification. Several years ago, I had the honor to work with members of the National Council of Architectural Review Boards (NCARB). The members of this council are highly respected architects who in many cases have volunteered to ensure that architects that are licensed meet certain fundamental requirements. Needless to say, the architects that I had the pleasure of working with were at the top of their game.

Architecture is quite a bit older as a professional practice than knowledge management, and being quite a bit older has had time to mature and develop into something that can be professionally practiced. In essence architecture has had time to "figure out" how and why an architect should be licensed. When I was working with this group, I happened to be working on the very examination that architects must pass in order to become licensed (a.k.a. certified) architects. We may naively think that architects are licensed when they have achieved a certain level of craft. That is somewhat true. More importantly,

architects are licensed when they understand how to design buildings that will not endanger human beings. The charter of the architectural review board is to make sure that architects have the proper knowledge in order to guarantee as best as possible that the buildings and structures they design will not lead to harming people.

For me this makes wonderful sense. The certification and licensure of architects is about the service they provide. They don't get a "brand." They can't say "I was certified by such and such an architect, and that means I am great architect!" And for this reason, the architecture certification and licensure process has significant meaning.

Let me now return to the idea of certification for the knowledge management professional. What does this mean? What does it guarantee? What are the standards to be enforced for knowledge management practitioners? All of these questions and many more loom very large for me personally and also for the field. How can we certify anyone in the practice of knowledge management when the practitioners themselves cannot even agree to a definition of the field? Imagine if the architects could not agree how to build a column to hold up a certain amount of weight. I don't know about you but I would not ever want to enter any structure under these circumstances unless I was sure it was not going to collapse. How do we ensure that a knowledge management practitioner will deliver analogous quality?

I would not question the value of an educational program for knowledge management. By all means, educational programs will help to set the standards for the types and kinds of knowledge that knowledge management practitioners will require to practice their profession. But I do question the value and meaning of certification - especially when knowledge management is in such a formative stage. For example, it is impossible to say at this time whether knowledge management will be subsumed into a more holistic approach to business and become a skill for the individual and the organization or if it will become a whole field unto itself. Where is the "National Council of Knowledge Management Professionals" - a group chartered and sanctioned by the professional practitioners of knowledge management? A group that is independent of any commercial interests and has at its core the charter to ensure that

its practitioners adhere to certain standards of professional behavior and craft. I have not seen any such group to date. The groups that do exist have some commercial interest in that they are not entirely independent of organizations wishing to profit from knowledge management. The NCARB mentioned above is completely independent from any commercial interest.

A Buyer's Guide

Having said all of this, there may be valid reasons for getting certified. How do you go about selecting a certification venue? Here are some of the questions I would ask before giving anyone my credit card number or check.

1. Why do I want to be certified? Is there a professional requirement? Will certification make me more marketable? What is the problem that certification will solve?
2. Where should I be certified? Should I take a certification in a University setting or in a commercial setting? What are my alternatives for certification? How do I find out about the quality of the certification process? Can I speak with others who have been certified? How many others have been certified?
3. What are the requirements for certification? Will there be courses? If so, how many courses? Who designed the curriculum? Who developed each course? Is there a syllabus for each course? Is there a reading list or bibliography? Will there be an examination? If there is no examination, why not? If there is an examination, how was it prepared? Did a panel of experts prepare the examination? How will the examination be graded? Will a panel of experts grade the examination?
4. What does the certification cost? What will I get for this? How long is the certification process? How long does the certification last?
5. Is there another source for the same education? If I look at the subject matter for the certification, can I get the same education by reading a series of books? If this is the case, then what is the value-added for doing the certification process?
6. What is the experience of the certifiers? Who will be the trainers in the certification process? Am I able to look at their credentials? Am I able to see what

knowledge management projects they have worked on in the past? What is the extent of their experience? Have they actually deployed an operating knowledge management process or environment anywhere? Can I speak with those who currently use the process or environment?

I believe certification and licensure is a good thing. It is a way that the consumer of goods and services can (in the best possible scenario) be protected, and it is a way for consumers to understand what they are getting. Given the immaturity of knowledge management, the lack of definition, and the rapidly changing landscape of the field, the utility of such certification is questionable to me personally. The point of this month's newsletter is basically a message - "Caveat Emptor" - "Let the buyer beware." On the one hand I can easily see how any certification can be used to enhance brand and marketability. On the other hand as a consumer of these services, I would most likely not consider such a certification an indication of the level of expertise I would receive - until knowledge management matures to the point where a majority of practitioners and customers can agree as to what it is.

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The knowldgWORKS News is written in its entirety by Randy Kaplan and edited by Harriet Trenholm. Suggestions for the newsletter should be sent to rkaplan@accsys-corp.com. All suggestions will be considered and always appreciated.

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