

knowldgWORKS Short Number 1
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Introduction to knowldgWORKS Shorts

knowldgWORKS Shorts will be published from time to time to address "interesting" issues and questions in knowledge management and more generally knowledge work. They are intended to be short; a few paragraphs in length, and in keeping with the knowldgWORKS News charter of practicality will remain as grounded real issues as opposed to theoretical as possible.

Short Number 1 - The Nature of Knowledge

As the last hours of the year approach, and as I long for never hearing the term "Y2K" again, I think about my recent debates about the very nature of knowledge management, I am struck with the recurring idea that knowledge is a very personal concept.

Think about it for a moment. If it were possible to come up with a definition of knowledge that was universally accepted, then would it not also be possible to come up with a universally accepted definition of knowledge management? After all if knowledge were something that was well understood then knowing what it is would allow us to be able to manipulate it. Is this too simplistic a viewpoint? Am I missing something here?

Let's for a moment forget about what knowledge is or what it means to manage knowledge, and look at it from the standpoint of what reason would a business have for managing their knowledge. For a moment, let's also put all of that soft and fuzzy stuff aside. Let's understand why a business spends money on knowledge management - because (hold on to your seats) the business expects to make money from the effort. If a business invests money but cannot gain a return from the investment, the business will cease to exist. Perhaps you think this is a one-sided view of knowledge management, but I ask you to consider if Anderson Consulting does not get a return on their knowledge management efforts, do you actually think they will continue to fund such efforts? Really? And can I also take you to the Land of Oz?

Which brings me to the point of this short - the Nature of Knowledge. In some of my interactions, I have learned that knowledge is not knowledge unless it is socially "justified." If it is not socially justified, then it is simply information. This notion creates a dilemma for me because so much of our highly valued knowledge, especially when it comes to invention, does not

come about by way of social mandate. In fact, quite a bit of our knowledge has not been created in a social context, but is very individualistic in nature. But of course some of my colleagues would not call this "individual stuff" knowledge. It must be blessed by a social context and therefore is "less than" knowledge and never makes it above the rather mundane classification of information. Given that TIME Magazine named Einstein the Person of the Century I wonder if $E=MC^2$ is not knowledge, but merely information? Just a short thought. May you find all of the knowledge (or information) you require in the new millennia.

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