

Reflections on the future



20 years of The Henley Forum – Reflections on the future

Judy Payne Knowledge Management Consultant reflects on 20 years of the Henley Forum.

Twenty years is a long time in knowledge management. So much has changed since I worked with the Henley KM Forum between 2002 and 2011 – and all the signs point to further, more rapid change in the future.

What might these changes be?

When I started out in KM, there was a handful of books and academic articles on the subject. It was just about possible to read everything that had ever been written about KM. According to Amazon, there are now over 6,000 KM books. A quick skim through these reveals that the interpretation of KM is fairly broad (and that's putting it mildly – some are clearly about data – but as we'll see in a moment, data might be the future of KM).

Different interpretations of KM have always existed, so no change there. Will KM be more consistently understood in the future? I'd like to think so, but I doubt it. The confusion around KM is so deep seated that it's going to be difficult to shift. Technology doesn't help with this. Search engines don't forget, even when they should – so a Google search for KM throws up all kinds of out of date material and wonky thinking. Echo chambers add to the confusion, even for people who value different perspectives and are open to changing their minds. Then there's the conundrum around what knowledge is and whether it's socially constructed: if 90% of the world believes knowledge is a thing that can be captured and shared, something is wrong.

Does any of this matter? For the last few years, some of my work has focused on KM in project environments. It's a sweeping generalisation, but project management people tend to think of KM as a series of discrete activities, and tend to equate knowledge with information (and KM with IM). They end up doing IM and calling it KM, which can get in the way of project success. In this context, the meaning of knowledge and KM certainly does matter – and it's important to point out the difference between KM and IM. In other contexts, the difference between KM and IM might not matter at all. At a conference earlier this year, I was impressed by a KM case study and told the presenter it was the best example of KM I had heard in a long time. While we were talking, another conference participant joined us and announced that the case study was the best example of IM she had heard in a long time. After more discussion and much reflection, I

am beginning to settle on the idea that the meaning of knowledge and KM only matters in some contexts. There are some wonderful, insightful and skilful information managers who are doing what I would call KM. It doesn't matter that they call it IM. Long may they continue.

At the same conference, I was blown away by the brilliant Kriti Sharma. If you haven't come across Kriti, please look her up – she is inspirational. Kriti is into artificial intelligence and ethics. At the conference Kriti told the story of a robot she made, then left to wander around her apartment block and, well, *learn*. Kriti interrogated the robot to find out what it knew.

Kriti: *Who is the Prime Minister of the UK?*

Robot: *Theresa May* (correct at the time).

Kriti: *Who is the President of the United States?*

Robot: *Donald Trump, god help us.*

Is AI and machine learning the future of KM? Not yet. There are too many hurdles and challenges to overcome. It's easy to think of AI and machine learning as *progressive*, but machines learn from data (big or otherwise) – and data is inherently *regressive*. That's not to say machine learning is worthless. Far from it. Given appropriate data, machines can uncover all kinds of knowledge that we don't know exists – it's just that we still need people to make judgements. And to provide appropriate data. Big data, AI and machine learning might well be the future of KM – even if this is only because their existence forces us to reflect on our human knowledge, prejudices and biases.

The Henley Forum dropped its 'KM' label in 2013, although KM is still on the Henley agenda. Elsewhere, KM is gaining traction: the first ever international KM standard was published in 2018, and CILIP has launched its Chartered Knowledge Manager route to professional registration. Is this the shape of things to come? Is KM on the rise again? Or is the Forum leading the way by blurring the boundaries between KM, organisational learning and organisation development? I suspect both.

Then again, 'KM' has become a dirty word in some contexts. An instant turn-off. Maybe because of people like me picking definitions apart and insisting that knowledge is intangible, so can't be managed directly.

So what is the future of KM? Is there anything about KM that everyone can agree on and that gives us a clue where it's going? I'd like to say that KM is about people, and that this won't change. Surely knowing will always be a human capability? Maybe not. Research over the last few years indicates that dogs, chimpanzees and pigeons seem to be capable of conceptual thought. And you have probably read about the non-human rights work that argues animals are legally 'persons'. Are animals capable of knowing? Can we learn from animals?

I am sure of one thing. Since its inception, The Henley Forum has been ahead of its time and led the way in developing KM thinking. We need to talk more about the future of knowledge and KM – and next year's 20th anniversary conference is the perfect place to do this. Who cares what knowledge is? Let's talk – and let's learn.

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Judy Payne works independently as a KM consultant, reluctant academic, educator and writer. Her work is positioned at the boundaries between theory and practice, and she enjoys exploring the boundaries between KM and related disciplines such as information management, artificial intelligence and project management. Judy chairs the BSI KM committee and is a member of the ISO working group that produced the KM standard. She is a friend and past director of the Henley Forum. Her work has been published in books, articles and videos. Judy lives in Caversham, Reading with husband Martin and two naughty cats.