CRISC n°2012/2

Knowledge manager: a non-legitimate and amateur profession?

Linh-Chi VO
Professeur, ISC Paris, School of Management

Eleonore MOUNOUD
Maître de Conférences, Ecole Centrale Paris

Correspondant :
Linh-Chi VO
linh-chi.vo@iscparis.com
« L’ISC Paris n’entend donner aucune approbation ou improbation aux opinions émises dans ce cahier de recherche. Ces opinions doivent être considérées comme propres à leurs auteurs ».
Knowledge manager: a non-legitimate and amateur profession?

Linh-Chi VO, Eleonore MOUNOUD

Résumé

The field of knowledge management has developed quickly over the last decade and the literature on the topic has demonstrated increasing diversity and specialization. It has also become a term commonly used in today’s business environment. One prominent stream of research in the literature has focused on the knowledge managers. But it tends to focus on identifying the profile and characters of successful knowledge managers, examining what they really do in reality, and proposing action frameworks for the knowledge managers to follow. The underlying assumption is that the appointed knowledge managers have sufficient expertise and legitimacy to do their job. In this paper, we present a critical view of the knowledge manager position. We argue that it is not always as bright as the literature has shown by presenting a case study, in which the appointed knowledge managers lack formal expertise as well as legitimate status in the organization to do their job. We describe how they suffer from doing their job and how they manage to overcome the job’s hurdles.

Mots cléfs: knowledge management, knowledge managers, profession, legitimacy

1. INTRODUCTION

In the academic world, the field of knowledge management has developed quickly over the last decade and the literature on the topic has demonstrated increasing diversity and specialization (Easterby-Smith and Lyles, 2003). Knowledge management has become a term commonly used in today’s business environment. Many firms have considered their knowledge base as their greatest assets and have explicitly recognized the role of knowledge management by including “knowledge manager” or “Chief Information Officer” in their organizational charts (Johnson, 2000).

One prominent stream of research in the knowledge management literature has focused on the knowledge managers. But it tends to focus on identifying the profile and characters of successful knowledge managers, examining what they really do in reality, and proposing action frameworks for the knowledge managers to follow. The underlying assumption is that the appointed knowledge managers have sufficient expertise and legitimacy to do their job. Indeed, success stories of knowledge management and knowledge managers abound in this literature.

In this paper, we present a critical view of the knowledge manager position. We argue that it is not always as bright as the literature has shown by presenting a case study, in which the appointed knowledge managers lack formal expertise as well as legitimate status in the organization to do their job. Moreover, we study what happens to the knowledge managers when they face with such situation. We aim at describing how the knowledge managers in our case-study suffer from doing their job and how they manage to overcome the job’s hurdles.

2. RESEARCH ON KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS

Research on knowledge managers has two main types: one provides action frameworks that knowledge managers should follow to obtain success, the other surveys real-life knowledge managers to identify their profiles, their characters, and what they really do at work.
Among the authors doing the first type of research, Holsapple and Joshi (2002), Jarrar (2002), Gore and Gore (1999), DeTienne et. al. (2004), and Wiig et al. (1997) provide system approach action frameworks, in which major building blocks for effective knowledge management are proposed. The frameworks put forwards by McCampbell et al. (1999), Bontis (2002) and Wiig (1999) are process-oriented, outlining two major sequential components of the knowledge managers’ activities: achieving an understanding of knowledge management landscape, which means to obtain an appropriate perspective of the actual organizational situation, and performing knowledge management tasks, which means to translate knowledge managers’ understanding of the current state of affairs to knowledge management projects and/or initiatives. This includes capturing, codifying, storing, and transferring knowledge. Rubenstein-Montano et al. (2001) and Mentzas (2001) opt for a hybrid of system and process-oriented approaches, developing frameworks that contain both essential elements and phases in effective knowledge management for the knowledge managers to follow.

In the second type of research, Asilani and Luthans (2003) conduct a web-based questionnaire to identify day-to-day managerial activities of knowledge managers in comparison with traditional managers. Earl and Scott (1999) survey knowledge managers in North America and Europe to see what they do, what their profiles are, and what resources they need. Raub and von Wittich (2004), by interviewing and surveying members of the Geneva Knowledge Forum, reveal that successful knowledge managers relying on targeting key actors, actively fostering knowledge network, and communicating a purposeful message to their firms. Bontis (2001) interviews knowledge managers throughout the world to identify their functional backgrounds and the ways they fulfill their responsibilities. McKeen and Staples (2004) use a questionnaire to examine the knowledge managers’ career aspiration, backgrounds, challenges, initiatives, and key problems.

As can be seen from the literature review, the first type of existing research is theoretical, assuming that doing the job of knowledge manager as being constituted of some major activities that can be listed down. The second type aims at obtaining empirical evidence of the knowledge managers’ activities and profiles. The studies tend to assume that knowledge manager is a prestigious position with considerable power to manage other people’s knowledge. They have not looked at the darker side of the knowledge managers’ job, where the knowledge managers do not have adequate knowledge and sufficient legitimacy to do their job.

3. The case study

Our case study is the cement branch of a multinational with a world-wide presence. Its plants are grouped into four different regions throughout the world. Sharing knowledge across dispersed sites was a major issue very early on and led to the setting up of the Technical Know-how Centre in the 1980s. The company also set up in each region one Technical Center to bring technical assistance to the local plants. The Technical Centers report to the Technical Headquarters, who is responsible for leading the technical community toward maximization of plant performance.

The adoption of knowledge management was officially announced in 1997, when the top managers explicitly emphasized the importance of the company’s knowledge assets. The meeting prompted the company to initiate a Knowledge Charter. Sharing knowledge and know-how became one of the Principles of action of the organization. The codification approach was adopted. The Technical Centers and Technical Headquarters experts were assigned the responsibility of providing codified knowledge for an intranet called Technical Portal. The Technical Know-how Center was given the task of ensuring the exchange of knowledge via the Portal, and maintaining the Portal by obtaining new documents from the experts. The Center coordinated a network of five knowledge managers in the Technical Centers,
responsible for training and motivating plants staff to use the Portal and collecting plant contributions for a database called Les Cas in the Portal.

By 2000, a Corporate Knowledge Manager was appointed, but the position was removed in 2005. The Technical Know-how Center ceased to exist in 2006. It became a knowledge management team composed of two knowledge managers, belonging to the Technical Headquarter. The team took over the responsibility of the Know-how Center and the network of technical center knowledge managers remained the same. The organization of knowledge management is represented in the diagram in Appendix 1.

In our study, the interview participants included the knowledge management team (Alex and Christina) and three knowledge managers at the Technical Centers (Mary, Kathy, and Yvon).

4. RESEARCH METHOD

In this research, the conceptual foundation was Dewey’s pragmatism (see Elkjaer, 2004) and the methodology was phenomenological-based (van Mannen, 1990).

The investigation had two phases. The first phase involved three years of participant-observation in different knowledge management projects of the multinational. It enabled us to have a comprehensive understanding of the context. The data sources of this phase include 10 official documents of the company, 6 issues of its internal press, 6 documents on knowledge management function, field notes from 20 meetings and 15 interviews (of 1 to 2 hours) with the company’s top managers, experts, and plant engineers, and 5 reports of the knowledge management consultants working for the company. In this phase, we had the opportunity to know the knowledge managers and build trust with them in order to start the second phase. In the second phase, five knowledge managers were interviewed during two sessions of two hours. We relied on the guidelines of Seidman (2006) and Hycner (1999) for phenomenological interview. The interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions. The participants were asked, among other things, to construct their experience as a story with different chapters, to explain how they did their job, to talk about their working context and how it had an influence on their working practices. They were also asked to identify a critical incident or story that best illustrated their lives as knowledge managers. This approach gave the participants the opportunity to provide information from their own subjective position (Kvale, 1996), using their own voice. Such data provide rich and nuanced description, focus on how individuals make sense of their world and provide narratives from individuals that look forward and backward in time.

In the interpretation process, we relied on the respondents’ own terms. We paid special attention to language because discourse is “the very foundation upon which organizational life is built” (Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004, p. 5). Reading and re-reading our transcripts and other data sources were made to gradually piece together the different storylines of each knowledge manager for a thematic analysis. In seeking the themes, we were guided by van Manen (1990) in his suggested process for isolating thematic statements, including the detailed reading approach, the selective or highlighting approach, and the wholistic reading approach. Although the analysis started with the wholistic reading approach, continued with the selective/highlighting one, and finished with the detailed reading one, the approaches were used in an iterative rather than linear manner. Global themes were identified across interviews and field notes, but it was continuously referred back to individual data sources to ensure that global themes were not rendered in abstract terms removed from the participants’ experience.
5. **RESEARCH FINDINGS: THE DARK SIDE OF THE KNOWLEDGE MANAGERS’ JOB**

5.1 **The knowledge managers’ lack of formal expertise**

The knowledge managers’ working location, official role, direct interlocutors at work, and personal background are detailed in the table below.

**Table 1: Interview participants**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Participants</th>
<th>Working location</th>
<th>Official role</th>
<th>Direct interlocutors at work</th>
<th>Personal background</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Alex (full-time)</td>
<td>Knowledge Management Team Technical Headquarter France</td>
<td>Leader of the Knowledge Management Team Coordinating the network of Technical Center Knowledge Managers</td>
<td>Top management Experts at the Technical Headquarters and Technical Centers</td>
<td>Young, new to the company No expertise in cement production Master degree in Knowledge Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Christina (full-time)</td>
<td>Knowledge Management Team Technical Headquarter France</td>
<td>Collecting codified knowledge from the experts and archiving it in the Portal Maintaining the Portal by making regular updates</td>
<td>Experts at the Technical Headquarters and Technical Centers</td>
<td>Previously administrative assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mary (part-time)</td>
<td>Technical Center - Europe and Africa France</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Previously administrative assistant</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kathy (part-time)</td>
<td>Technical Center – Central Europe Austria</td>
<td>Training and motivating plant staff to use the Portal Collecting lessons learned from plants for the database Les Cas.</td>
<td>Experts at their respective technical center and plant staff at their region</td>
<td>Having been training officer at the technical center since his arrival at the company No expertise in cement production</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yvon (part-time)</td>
<td>Technical Center – Asia China</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

As can be seen in from the table, most of the knowledge managers in this case study do not have formal knowledge in doing knowledge management. Also, they are not familiar with technical knowledge in cement production, which is the knowledge they are supposed to manage. This lack of necessary knowledge and expertise has led to considerable difficulty for the knowledge managers in doing their job.

5.2 **The knowledge managers’ lack of legitimacy**

Besides the lack of formal knowledge, the knowledge managers do not have a legitimate status in the organization, as shown below.

**Top management’s perception of knowledge management and the knowledge managers**

The top management’s adoption of knowledge management can be understood as a response to the environment’s mimetic and normative pressures, in which the knowledge management fashion was reaching its peak. The appointment of the Corporate Knowledge Managers was just to ensure the
company’s legitimacy in the eyes of the financial analysts and other MNCs following its merger with a major competitor.

However, the fashion has declined; “the golden age of knowledge management at the company is over”, said Alex. The strategic priorities of the company are now cost reduction and security improvement (all the knowledge managers) and sharing knowledge no longer has attention of the top management (Alex). The knowledge management discourse is no longer echoed throughout the organization and the knowledge managers are considered as only “nice to have” in the organization (Kathy and Mary).

Experts’ perception of knowledge management and the knowledge managers

In the branch, there is a clear distinction between providers and receivers of knowledge. Experts at the Technical Centers and the Technical Headquarters are taken for granted as the best people in the field, hence play the role of knowledge providers (all the knowledge managers). Plant engineers and technicians, in need of technical assistance, are considered as receivers of knowledge (all the knowledge managers). The only type of documents made by the practitioners themselves (plant engineers and technicians) is for the database Les Cas. The knowledge managers are considered only as distributors of knowledge, who make codified knowledge of the experts available for plant staff via the Technical Portal.

For the experts, knowledge management means writing knowledge documents and then giving them to the knowledge managers to archive in the Portal (Alex). It is their job to do knowledge management because they are the holders of knowledge (all four knowledge managers). Once the documents are written and stored in the databases, the experts consider their work as over and knowledge management has been done. They make no attempt to promote the usage of those documents among plant staff (Alex and Christina).

The knowledge management team is regarded by the experts as librarians, whose job is to simply archive their documents (Alex). Alex has tried to apply and impose what he learned in his Master of knowledge management on the experts, but he just made himself seen as a “complicated guy” for the experts and underwent a period of nervous breakdown.

Plant staff’s perception of knowledge management and the knowledge managers

Knowledge management encounters resistance throughout the plants. As the codification process is left in the hands of experts, documents are seen by plant staff as belonging to a theoretical world, not adapted to the daily constraints at plants (Mary and Kathy).
Plant staff has blamed the knowledge managers for the many hurdles of the Portal. Language is one “big problem” (Alex, Christina, Kathy, and Mary). The languages of the Portal are English and French, which are not spoken by many employees. A significant barrier is the IT issue, which make the life of the knowledge managers “really hard” (Kathy). For example, in the past, the system was so complicated that navigating to any new page required a different password, the many passwords changed every three months. Kathy described the password problem as “a complete mess”. In addition, not all local units have adequate network speed to access to the Intranet. To get to a page, people “click on the link, go get a coffee, and come back”, they just do not bother to go to the Portal (Mary). The heterogeneity of documents in the databases has been a commonly heard critique, which makes people get lost easily while looking for a document (Alex).

5.3 The knowledge managers’ suffering

The knowledge managers took actions to directly convince top management, experts, and plant staff to participate in knowledge management. They tried to organize meetings with the top management to discuss with them the strategy for the future of knowledge management. The knowledge managers communicated with the experts about their role and knowledge management in an attempt to take away the label of librarians. They also sought support from the expert to promote the usage of the Portal through their contacts with plant staff. They overcame the language barriers by pushing plant staff to learn English. They collaborated with IT staff to improve the password problem. Christina had been doing what she called “auditing” to reorganize the structure of the Portal, to put away obsolete documents, and to extend the expiration date of valid documents. The knowledge managers were planning to conduct a communication campaign to promote the Portal throughout the multinational and organize a competition for best plant contributions to the Portal. They used success stories of knowledge sharing to convince people of knowledge management’s benefits.

However, these actions did not really help change the organizational actors’ perception. There were not many “success stories about learning English” (Yvon) because plant staff “could still work without knowing the language” (Yvon). The knowledge managers did not have any hierarchical power over the IT department, so they could raise the issues but had no authority to make changes. Christina says: “we have to accept the situation, we have no choice”. Despite their effort to motivate people to share knowledge via the Portal and to restructure the Portal, the rate of usage kept declining (Alex). The experts were not willing to collaborate. Alex complained that he could not have contact with plant staff through the experts because they never informed him when they had meetings or went to plants on mission. He said: “we are completely put aside”. The knowledge managers were not able to obtain top management support. Making knowledge management become part of their preoccupations is a challenging task. Alex explained: “in my boss’ memory, the space that can be devoted to knowledge management is already full. We cannot add in anything else. There are many other things like industrial performance or investments. They are a lot more important”.

Without positive results, the knowledge managers did not really know what they should do. They felt lost and suffered. It is here that the idea of knowledge management is lost, as the chain of translation cannot extend further than the level of the knowledge managers. Alex described this way: “KM is considered as nice to have here… If one day the knowledge management team ceases to exist, that won’t make any difference to the company…” He was joined by Yvon, who felt that he was like “in the middle of a forest, without knowing how to get out”. Mary shared similar view, telling us that she has to “have enough faith and be cold-blooded to do this job”. Christina said: “we don’t know if what we are doing contributes to the organization”. The knowledge managers found themselves in the situation of “knowledge managers, where do we go?” (Kathy).
5.4 The knowledge managers’ coping with their difficult situation

The knowledge managers realized that the essential problem of their situation is the decline of knowledge management fashion in the multinational. It led to the lack of top management support for knowledge management. Alex admitted: “four or five years ago, the top managers said: ‘KM is important, we need to do it’, and then everybody followed’. In the past, the experts spent time in making contributions to the Portal. But the decline of knowledge management had made it much more difficult to make them involved (Christina). Plant staff did not want to learn English because they saw no need in doing it (Yvon). They used the lack of time as the excuse for not sharing knowledge because they had to work on the current strategic priorities (Kathy). The IT issues, the language barriers, the lack of a knowledge sharing culture had existed. But in the past, plant staff was still motivated to make contributions to certain databases in the Portal. The database now is buried in the Portal (Alex).

The knowledge managers undertook three solutions to cope with their situation. First, the knowledge managers desperately sought sponsorship from the top management. This is because only with the sponsorship of the top managers, do organizational members acknowledge the importance of knowledge management. Among the five knowledge managers, Alex is the only one having direct contact with the top managers. He has been seeking support from the top management. He said: “Their role is critical. If they do not tell the employees that knowledge management is important, no one will think that it is important” (Alex). With the sponsorship from the top managers, the legitimacy of knowledge management will increase in the eyes of experts and plant staff. The experts will be more committed to collaborate and plant staff will pay more attention to the knowledge management discourse.

Alex was undertaking two main actions. One was to constantly remind the top managers in periodical reports, in project prosals, or any form of internal communication that “knowledge sharing is part of the Principles of Action of the company”. Another was to make knowledge management look useful for the organization by aligning the benefits of sharing knowledge with the organization’s goals. That means the knowledge managers looked for true success stories, “shining examples” in his words, to show how knowledge management contribute to the achievement of the strategic objectives, such as cost reduction or security improvement.

Second, the knowledge managers tried to make knowledge management become a part of what plant staff had been doing. This solution aimed at making them not resist against knowledge management. They integrated knowledge management into training activities of the company. Thanks to Mary and Kathy, the training program for new employees now contains two hours on knowledge management. Contributing one document to the Portal has become one training assignment. They saw this approach as “the most effective one to make people involved”, “to push people”, and “to generate pressure” (Yvon). Alex and Christina assisted Mary, Kathy, and Yvon by providing documents in accordance with the plant objectives and priorities (Christina). Alex said that “there is no point in seeing knowledge management functioning on its own, it has to be related to the strategic imperative”. In addition, rather than wait for the users to come for knowledge, the knowledge managers actively brought knowledge to them. This means each time a new document is posted, Christina finds a way to notify users through Mary, Kathy, and Yvon, by e-mail, newsletter, or presentation at employees’ meetings.

Third, the knowledge managers sought help from the experts to do their job. This is because the experts have the respected status of holders of knowledge, their participation in knowledge management helps increase the legitimacy of knowledge management in the organization. Each of the knowledge managers had his/her own way to get help. Christina relied on the experts to maintain and update the Portal by
constant follow-up. She had to be permanently “re-activate” the experts by “reminding them all the time”, “being in their face”, by “emailing them”, by “regular meetings” to review the progress, so that “things will not be forgotten”.

Mary and Kathy had been working at the company for a very long time. They were both administrative assistants before becoming knowledge managers and had good working relationships with the experts in their former positions. Thus, both relied on the personal network they had with the experts to do their job. Kathy said that knowing the experts in person was very helpful. She is joined by Mary, who said that it is important to be “in the right network with the right experts” to do her job.

Yvon dealt with the experts differently. To get help, Yvon provided the experts with training to make them familiar with the Portal. He came regularly to the experts’ network meetings to introduce the Portal. He prepared some slides on knowledge management and made the experts include those materials in their training at plants. Yvon also sent his monthly newsletter to the experts to keep them informed and asked them to forward it to their own contacts.

Alex kept communicating with the experts about knowledge management and the role of the knowledge management team, making clear that knowledge management is more than archiving documents. For example, he actively participated in the experts’ network meetings and in the organizational events, although “half of the meeting participants may fall asleep and the other half may just check e-mail on their BlackBerry”. He regularly informed them of updates in the Portal, prepared two or three slides on knowledge management for the experts to integrate into their own training materials, and made a booklet to guide the experts how their documents can be distributed.

6. CONCLUSION

In this case study, we found that doing the job of knowledge manager is not necessarily easy and enjoyable. Lacking both legitimacy and expertise to do the job, their experience can be described as being abandoned by the top managers, difficult to work with the technical experts and plant staff, and struggling to accomplish their objectives.

This study contributes to the literature in several ways. First, rather than providing a list of knowledge managers’ profiles or activity, we present the stories of the knowledge managers as non-legitimate and amateur professionals. We focus on the question of “how” rather than the question of “what” in achieving an understanding of the knowledge managers. Importantly, feelings and thoughts of the knowledge managers, which have been neglected so far in the literature, are addressed. Second, the decline of the knowledge management fashion has been acknowledged elsewhere (Scarborough and Swan, 2001), but its impact on the knowledge managers has not been considered. This study addresses this gap by showing how the knowledge managers suffer from this change and how they struggle to deal with it.

Third, compared to the existing literature on knowledge managers, our research findings provide some further insights into the job of knowledge manager. One insight involves one underlying assumption of existing frameworks and empirical findings in the literature: the manager of knowledge is separated from the holders of knowledge. The case of this study shows that this distinction can be a significant barrier for the manager of knowledge and it should be taken into account in future development of implementation framework for knowledge management. Finally, empirical research reports the profiles and competencies needed for successful knowledge managers. Compared with those findings, the profiles of the knowledge managers in our study do not really have much. Kathy, Mary, and Christina are former administrative assistant. Yvon and Alex are young and new to the organization. They do not have
such profiles as organizational reputation and credibility (Earl and Scott, 1999) or knowledge sharing icon (Bontis, 2001). This helps understand partly why the knowledge managers of our case have difficulty in doing their job and supports the aptness of those research findings.

APPENDIX 1

Experts
Codify knowledge to store in the Portal

Technical headquarters

Technical center

... ...

Technical center

Knowledge managers
Distributor of knowledge

Industrial Knowledge
Take care of the Portal and promote its usage

Knowledge managers
Train plant staff to use the Portal

Plants

Plants
REFERENCES


