

Knowledge only exists in the human mind

In every day language the words “knowledge and “information” are used loosely and interchangeably.

Knowledge is often defined in rather nebulous or philosophical terms such as “justified true belief” which is practically not very helpful. Or it is defined like this:

Knowledge is a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information, and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating new experience and information. It originates and is applied in the minds of knowers.

In organizations, it often becomes embedded not only in documents or repositories but also in organizational routines, processes, practices and norms.

Credit: [Thomas H. Davenport and Laurence Prusak](#)

As Knowledge Management (KM) definitions go this is a good one. But if we are to manage information and knowledge I think it is important to make a clean, clear, crisp distinction between the two concepts.

Some people say that knowledge can only exist in people’s heads and that anything else such as stuff that is written or stored in databases including voice, video etc is information.

Others make a distinction between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is stored in people’s heads while explicit knowledge is stored digitally and is in various ways different to information. Larry Prusak makes that distinction above.

But the distinction is never clear and in any digital form so called explicit knowledge is always tangled up with data and information.

Tom Wilson clearly and eloquently distinguishes between knowledge and information here:

Knowledge only exists in the human mind. Everything else, however is information.

Knowledge is defined as what we know: knowledge involves the mental processes of comprehension, understanding and learning that go on in the mind and only in the mind, however much they involve interaction with the world outside the mind, and interaction with others.

Whenever we wish to express what we know, we can only do so by uttering messages of one kind or another – oral, written, graphic, gestural or even through ‘body language’.

Such messages do not carry 'knowledge', they constitute 'information', which a knowing mind may assimilate, understand, comprehend and incorporate into its own knowledge structures.

Credit: [Tom Wilson](#)

But there is no *right* or *wrong* definition. As human beings we get to chose how we define things.

And there is nothing wrong living with two or more definitions – using the one most appropriate to the context in which we are working. A little like scientists living with the dual nature of light – both a particle and a wave at the same time.

It is good to also minimize the use of the terms explicit and tacit knowledge. There is nothing wrong with the terms as such but the additional jargon only serves to alienate many people.

So if we accept this distinction between information and knowledge then what is the difference between Information Management (IM) and Knowledge Management (KM)? Well:

Information Management is practiced by improving the systems that capture, store, categorize and transmit information.

It's about databases, records management, libraries, document repositories, taxonomies and the like. In other words it is very much about Information Technology (IT). On the other hand:

Knowledge Management is practiced through activities that support better decision-making and innovation.

It's about understanding information, making better sense of the world, improved decision making, creativity and innovation. This is something only human beings do. Computers can do none of these things. Putting it simply IM is about technology and KM is about people.

Reports aren't knowledge.

Credit: Peter Senge

But of course, to do a good job of KM you need to focus on people but you also need a good IM foundation. Does everyone in the KM world agree on this? No. Will they ever agree? No. Does it really matter? I don't think so.

You can make sense of things on your own by reading, observing and by thinking. But as individuals our capabilities are limited and we have many biases and flaws in our thinking.

If we wish to make good sense of the world we need to pool our minds and think together. We do this through conversation. Let's take an example.

Many organizations have a small team dedicated to what is often called market or business intelligence.

Knowledge is the capacity for effective action. There is no capacity for effective action in a database.

Credit: Peter Senge

They look out into the big wide world and make a note of new technologies, new products and services, new competitors, changes in regulations, risks etc.

They then produce a regular report that they circulate to relevant people in the organization. This is essentially IM – getting high quality information to the right people.

But this is all they do. Often this is seen as a KM role. It is not – it is an IM role.

The smarter organizations add a second step to this work. When they discover things of significance they convene a Knowledge Cafe to make sense of the changes.

Now this is the KM part and it can only be done by people in conversation.

We need both – IM and KM to do good KM. IM on its own is just that IM!

For all our knowledge, we have no idea what we're talking about.

We don't understand what's going on in our business, our market, and our world.

Knowledge Management shouldn't be about helping us to know more. It should be about helping us to understand.

So, how do we understand things? It's through stories that we understand how the world works.

Credit: David Weinberger, The Cluetrain Manifesto