

## **Knowledge management and “organizational memory” – remembrance and recollection in a knowledge-intensive firm**

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Knowledge management labels a fairly heterogeneous cluster of ideas. The concept can be traced to the emergence of communications technologies that create access to computerized networks that allows for (almost) real-time interaction, regardless of physical distance. These technologies includes the internet, intranets, e-mail, and the world wide web. The term also covers currents that draw upon such diverse sources as organizational learning, communities of practice and organizational culture (Alvesson & Kärreman 2001).

Hansen et al (1999) points at two contrasting strategies for knowledge management: codification and personalization. The personalization strategy relies heavily on socialization – that people’s experiences, beliefs, and ways of thinking and acting are shaped by exposure to, and participation and interaction in, particular social situations. Thus, this kind of knowledge transmission can be “managed” by selecting and orchestrating particular situations for particular individuals. Codification, on the other hand, puts more emphasis on behavioral aspects and attempts to exploit the promises of information technology. The idea is that organizational knowledge can be extracted from individuals and converted into databases. The stored knowledge provides templates for thinking as well as action thus making relatively unskilled workers productive on a higher skill-level.

Evidently, both personalization and codification draws upon the idea that organizational knowledge somehow can be stored and retrieved, or at least re-created and re-enacted. Currently there is an interest in gaining a better understanding of how organizations recollect. Typically, this interest is guided by framing organizational recollection in terms of organizational memory and remembrance. However, although the notion of organizational memory is seductive and certainly has some promise and merits, the metaphor behind is problematic. The metaphor can be questioned for both conceptual and empirical reasons. From a conceptual point of view, the concept of organizational memory pictures organizations

as persons: as entities with a capacity to memorize events and experiences. To view organizations as entities with person-like qualities, such as memory, has its limitations and pitfalls. It invites us, or demands from us, to see patterns where such patterns might be irrelevant, misleading or even nonexistent – the problem of reification, or, more specifically, anthropomorphization.

The idea of organizational memory is also problematic from an empirical point of view, – and so is, indeed, the idea of knowledge management – because it runs counter to dominant managerial practices. Jackall (1988), for example, shows that managers in large bureaucracies, in practice, have strong incentives to not keep records of their activities and thus, in effect, encourages a practice of amnesia. Thus, the idea of organizational memory face both conceptual and empirical challenges. Drawing upon a review of influential texts and a case study of a management consulting firm, this paper attempts to critically examine and discuss the analytic value of the idea of organizational memory: its domain of application, value, limits and pitfalls.

### **The highly diverse applications of the concept of knowledge management**

Knowledge management (KM) is a broad field with explosive growth, although there are some signs of saturation. It is ‘a term which has now come to be used to describe anything from organizational learning to database management tools’ (Ruggles 1998:80). It is difficult, almost impossible, to find precise and specific definitions of KM. Swan et al (1999), for example, define KM 'very broadly', as 'encompassing any processes and practices concerned with the creation, acquisition, capture, sharing and use of knowledge, skills and expertise (Quintas et al 1996) whether these are explicitly labelled as "KM" or not' (p 264). There are various synonyms for KM, of which some qualify as metaphors. The various metaphors typically fuel the complexity and variety of the field. For example, some view KM as information management, as architecture for the distribution of knowledge (Brown & Duguid 1998:103). Others view it as community building and as encouragement of care and altruism associated with knowledge sharing (von Krogh 1998).

In an attempt to provide some conceptual clarity to the field Swan et al (1999) make the useful distinction between a cognitive network model, focusing IT and information processing, and a community networking model, emphasizing dialogue and sense making through active networking. Roughly speaking, most KM conceptualizations travel on the continuum between KM as systemic, as a technology- and design-driven system, and KM as community, as a social entity emerging through human interaction.

A key distinction in the KM area is Polanyi's distinction between *tacit* and *explicit* knowledge (c.f. Nonaka 1994 Hansen et al 1999, Koenig 1999, Cook & Brown 1999, 1998, Robertson et al 1999). The importance of the distinction is evident in its prominence in Nonaka (1994) article on knowledge creation, a highly influential text in the field. Nonaka's claims can be boiled down to that knowledge creation can be summarized in four typical modes; from tacit to tacit (socialization), from tacit to explicit (externalization), from explicit to tacit (internalization), and from explicit to explicit (combination). Tacit to tacit knowledge creation is experiential in character and typically involves processes of imitation, and so forth. Explicit to explicit knowledge creation, on the other hand, is based on the combination of various bodies of explicit knowledge. Thus, the “sorting, adding, recategorizing, and recontextualization of existing explicit knowledge can lead to new knowledge” (Nonaka 1994:19). The third and fourth modes of knowledge creation is based on the assumption that tacit knowledge can be converted into explicit forms, and vice versa..

An interesting aspect of Nonaka's categorization, given its influence on the knowledge management scene, is the relatively limited role technology is permitted to play. Nonaka

claims that it is only in combination, the conversion of explicit to explicit knowledge, information technology really can make any difference. Technology can facilitate the other forms of knowledge creation, of course, but have limited prospect to make any major difference. It is possible to argue that the limited role for technology proposed by Nonakas categorization is a red herring since most knowledge is going to be created, empirically speaking, through combination. This is, in fact, Lyotards (1984) argument in his classic report on knowledge under the postmodern condition. He claims that the existence of knowledge retrieval through searchable databases will eventually crowd out all other forms of knowledge generation since this will be most economical, and thus conform to the call for performativity in the postmodern era.

Another way of open up for knowledge management in the light of Nonakas categorization is to, as Hansen et al (1999) have done, introduce a distinction not only between forms of knowledge, but also between strategies of knowledge management. They claim that strategies for knowledge management can be implemented in at least two ways: through *codification* or through *personalization*. Codification attempts to exploit the promises of information technology. Here, “the strategy centers on the computer. Knowledge is carefully codified and stored in databases, where it can be accessed and used easily by anyone in the company” (Hansen et al 1999:107). Personalization, on the other hand, downplays the significance of computerization. Here it is the cultivation and training of individuals that takes the center. Knowledge management is pursued through embodying it in individuals, rather than embedding it in computer systems.

“[K]nowledge is closely tied to the person who develop it and is shared mainly through direct person-to-person contacts. The chief purpose of computers at such companies is to help people communicate knowledge, not to store it”. (Hansen et al 1999:107)

Hansen et al manage to allow knowledge management to play a wider role than suggested by Nonakas categorization. In fact, they implicitly argue that knowledge management is involved in all four types of knowledge creation. It is, for example, quite clear that codification primarily manages and facilitates knowledge creation through combination, in Nonakas terminology. But it also includes externalization, since codification at least calls for efforts to codify previously tacit knowledge, thus making it explicit. Personalization, on the other hand, relies on socialization and internalization.

The two strategies moves focus from knowledge, and knowledge creation, to management and, more specifically, to managing core competencies. This is accomplished through a radical expansion of the meaning of the term ‘knowledge management’. According to Hansen et al, knowledge management includes both the management of knowledge through information technology *and* the management of all kinds of knowledge creation. Thus, knowledge management is explicitly (re)claimed as a managerial tool for strategic action.

As such, knowledge management seems to be generic with most other forms of managerial tools, and also to have longer history than otherwise suggested. For example, what Hansen et al labels codification is captured in the concept of formalization, which of course is a cornerstone in the bureaucratic organizational form, and thus pretty well understood in organization theory since Weber. Personalization is, on the other hand, another word for what most student of knowledge-intensive firms always claimed to be essential for that type of organization; the reliance on the competence of individuals (Alvesson 1996).

## **Organizational memory**

The promise of the possibility to manage knowledge inevitably leads to questions how knowledge may be stored, retrieved and recollected. Thus, the idea of organizational memory has little distance to travel. In particular, the idea of codification, which suggests that organizational knowledge may exist independent of individuals, suggests the existence of memory-like capabilities on the organizational level. However, it has been suggested that even tacit knowledge may be stored and memorized on an organizational level. Nonaka (1994), for example, points at Sandelands and Stableins (1987) proposition that the organization may be mind-like – thus having faculties such as intelligence-gathering, -storing and decision-making similar to the human mind - as a way of understanding how tacit knowledge is shared and transferred to the organizational level.

Although the idea of organizational memory fits well into the general KM frame of reference, the concept can be traced to other academic disciplines, particularly to the field of organizational analysis. The idea of organizational memory has, for example, been used within perspectives on organizational information processing (Walsh & Ungson 1991), organizational improvisation (Moorman & Miner 1998), and information management (Anand et al 1998).

Organizational memory is defined in various ways: it may for example be defined as the “information and knowledge known by the organization and the processes by which such information is acquired, stored, and retrieved by organization members” (Anand et al 1998:796). Other definitions are typically variations upon this theme. Sometimes it is defined in a weaker sense, as in Walsh & Ungson’s (1991:61) minimalist definition: “In its most basic sense, organizational memory refers to stored information from an organization’s history that can be brought to bear on present decisions”.

Moorman & Miner (1998) provides a bolder definition where they quite literally claim that organizational memory operates in the same fashion as individual memory. Thus, they distinguish between content and level of memory, and further distinguish the content of memory into procedural and declarative types. They elaborate:

“ As an example of the content and level of memory, an organization that has been working in a particular industry for an extended period of time will likely accumulate a high level of declarative memory about the competitive structure and detailed traits of this industry. It might also accumulate a number of standard practices for dealing with others in the industry, representing a high level of procedural memory. (Moorman & Miner 1998:708)

Unsurprisingly, the literature on organizational memory generally presents an optimistic view on the concept. In particular, it is believed that the concept may be helpful in providing understanding on decision-making processes. Walsh & Ungson (1991), for example, develops a rather ambitious research agenda, where they believe that the concept of organizational memory may be helpful in understanding uses, abuses and misuses of organizational memory, thus highlighting organizational inertia, political processes and decision-making practices, and provide input to management for informed organizational change. However, in this article we adopt a more sceptical perspective. There are several reasons to be pessimistic about the fruitfulness and analytical value of the concept. The concept of organizational memory has three fundamental problems: it anthropomorphizes the organization, it mystifies organizational processes, and it overemphasises integration thus suppressing the fluid and political character of organizational action.

- The problem of anthropomorphism. It is clear that the idea of organizational memory demands us to understand organizations as person-like entities. As Walsh & Ungson (1991) notes, to view organizations as persons may cause conceptual problems, in particular the

problem of anthropomorphism and thus either imposing irrelevant (person-like) qualities or omitting central (organizational) features. It is, in fact, quite popular to view organizations as person-like. Czarniawska (1997) claims, for example, that the organizations-as-superperson is the most popular and frequently used metaphor in organizational analysis. Population ecologist's claim that organizations are born, grows, and dies, just as persons. There are recent claims that organizations learn, adapt, and change, just as persons.

Anthropomorphism causes most concern when taken literally. When used metaphorically, cognitive mistakes are less likely to occur. It thus makes sense that Anand et al (1998:796) explicitly uses organizational memory as a "convenient metaphor". However, Moorman & Miner (1998) use another analytical strategy and ignore the issue, except for acknowledging, in a roundabout way, that there are issues in using the concept of memory on an organizational level. As Walsh & Ungson (1991) points out, advocates of the concept may have good reasons to insist that the concept of organizational memory provides more than just metaphorical illumination. After all, nobody denies that organizations can "remember", on way or another. Organizations are by most definitions populated by human beings that, from a memory point of view, minimally can remember on the behalf of the organization. The problem is that the concept loses its specific analytical value if interpreted in this broad way. Both Moorman & Miner (1998) and Walsh & Ungson (1991) insist that organizational memory actually occur on the organizational level. It is not simply a matter of aggregating organizational members's various 'organizational' memories. But since memory in this sense demands specific cognitive capacities, they must assume that organizations have cognitive capacities that are similar in form and properties (or homomorphic, in Walsh & Ungson (1991) vocabulary) to the individual's cognitive capacities. In other words, the concept of organizational memory must assume that organizations are not only similar, but also literally identical in this respect to individuals to provide analytical value. However, this farfetched idea has yet to produce empirical support. The reason is simple: organizations are not persons, they do not have anything that resembles cognitive capabilities, in the way persons have, and they are highly unlikely to ever develop such capabilities, for reasons developed below. To put it bluntly, the concept of organizational memory is thus either flawed by anthropomorphism – assuming that organizations are far more person-like than is justifiable – or a rather bland and pointless metaphor.

-mystifying organizational processes. A related problem is that the concept mystifies, rather than clarifies, organizational processes. The idea of organizational memory suggest that organizational storage, recollection and retrieval of knowledge can be understood in cognitivist terms, that is, function more or less through the same processes and mechanisms as the human brain, as suggested by the cognitive psychology perspective. However, there are ample evidence that perception, memory and knowledge are shaped in social processes, as social psychologists (c.f Asplund 1987), sociologists of knowledge (c.f. Berger & Luckmann 1966), and, indeed, organization theorists (c.f Salancik & Pfeffer 1978) has pointed out. The disregard for the social processes that affects memory and remembrance in organizations disqualifies the concept of organizational memory from being able to provide insights on how memories are socially constructed, maintained, used, and resisted.

- Overemphasizes integration and suppresses conflict. The concept of organizational memory suggests that the organization is a unitary and integrated whole, and that it has at least the capacity for unitary and integrated memories. This is problematic in two respects. First, it fails to acknowledge the emergence of new organizational forms, such as the network form and temporary organizations, with weaker ties and more fluid relations between organizational elements. As Hansen (1999) points out, the processes for sharing and distributing knowledge are different and vary, depending on organizational form. Thus, it is

unlikely that processes for storing, retrieving and recollecting knowledge would stay the same, independent of organizational structure. Second, it disregards the potential plurality within organizations. In this sense, the concept is essentially managerialist and elitist, since it cannot account for the exercise of power in organizations. As a consequence, it a priori assumes that power is righteous: that the memories sanctioned by powerful groups are the only valid memories.

There are, as we have demonstrated above, good reasons to avoid the concept of organizational memory. However, this does not mean that processes of storage, retrieval and recollection of knowledge are either uninteresting or impossible to research. On the contrary, the case for investigating such processes is still compelling. In the final section of the paper, we will, drawing from an empirical study of a management consultancy company, attempt to suggest ways of understanding such processes.

### **Method.**

The research that provides the empirical basis of this study includes longitudinal case studies of several organizations. The empirical foundation for this particular article draws, however, almost exclusively on one longitudinal case study: a study of a management consulting firm. The fieldwork started in September 1999 and is, as I write (February 2002), still on-going.

The project team have conducted 52 interviews with 45 persons, as well as participated in several organizational gatherings. We have closely followed a team for two workdays. We have participated in training sessions. We have take part in various setting where organizational members have communicated internally, as in competence group meetings and the yearly meeting for everybody in managerial positions, and externally, as when presenting the company for students.

People from all parts of the organization have been interviewed: the CEO, partners, people in managerial positions, support staff, newly recruited organizational members and so on. We have had a bias towards the upper echelons in the company: We have, in relative terms, focused more on experienced people with a couple years in the firm than on fairly junior people, which, in numerical terms dominate the firm. Thus, our sample is not representative, at least not in a demographical sense. However, we claim that our approach is better equipped for generating relevant and insightful material than a mechanical body-count representative sampling procedure would, since suchg a procedure would force us to include more people with arguably lesser experience and insight into the firm.

Field -work has been conducted through an open and emergent approach (Alvesson & Deetz 2001). More specifically, this means that we have not restricted us to a strict interview protocol. Instead we have based interview questions on a set of common themes, which consequently have been adapted to the particular developments of each interview. As our understanding of the field has developed, our lines of inquiry have followed suit. For example, findings and understanding from our first 20 interviews was organized in emergent themes that were used as input in new interviews, both in terms of questions asked and whom to talk to. In this way we have been able to refine our understanding of the themes that have emerged, without provide excessive a priori closure to fieldwork practices.

Knowledge management emerged early as a theme during fieldwork. Our interest was partly stimulated by current debates in academia. More importantly, it was also stimulated by the fact that the idea of knowledge management was a high profile issue in the company. The company did not only claim to be talking about the importance of knowledge management. They also claimed to have implemented knowledge management, at least to a certain degree.

Before we describe the knowledge management system at the company, allow us to introduce it in brief terms.

## **The Case**

Alfa, Inc, is a large multinational IT and management consulting firm. Its Swedish subsidiary, which is the primary object of study, is situated in Stockholm and employs approximately 500. It caters all consultancy market niches, but claims to be particularly strong at implementation. Almost everybody working at Alfa has higher academic education. Consultants are mainly recruited directly from the Swedish Universities. Degrees in business administration or engineering are mandatory. Alfa attempts to profile itself as an elitist, demanding but richly rewarding place to work. These efforts seem to have paid off: Alfa consistently ranks high in polls over most attractive employer among students in business administration and engineering.

Alfa is growing rapidly. It also has, at least until the recent downturn in the business cycle, a rather high employee turn over. To sustain growth and to fill vacancies created by employee turn-over. Alfa has increased efforts to hire people with prior experience, internally known as 'experienced hires'. Just recently they also have to broaden the criteria to include people with other academic background than business administration and engineering.

Alfa is, and has for a long time been, highly profitable. Since Alfa essentially operates as a partnership, the exact financial performance is not a matter of public record. However, everybody seems happy with the firm's financial performance. The Swedish subsidiary has double-digit growth in sales, and has been growing at that rate since it was inaugurated in 1985.

### *Knowledge management in Alfa*

The idea of knowledge management is highly visible within Alfa, a fact that have prompted external observers, such as the business press, academia and other consultant companies to use Alfa as an example on how knowledge management can be implemented. Such stories have, of course, caveats: while actually being more or less interesting interpretations, they easily become objective facts, at least among audiences less sensitive to the epistemological uncertainties that faces knowledge claims than, perhaps, the academic community. I wish to refrain from the possibility of being interpreted as telling it like it is. Thus, I am going to use two different points of view when telling our story about knowledge management at Alfa. This approach will remind the reader that facts are produced within perspectives, and that the perspective used is as, if not more, important as the facts themselves.

The perspectives that we will use are, of course, constructions and interpretations. They are our interpretations of sources that claim to know things about knowledge management at Alfa. There are other possible voices, but, from our perspective, they either tell less interesting stories or are less trustworthy. I have chosen to describe knowledge management via the voice of knowledge management managers and the voice of the knowledge management users. The voice of KM managers consists of those in charge of developing and maintaining knowledge management systems within Alfa. The voice of knowledge management users consists of those who use, consume and take advantage of the knowledge management system. The reader might wonder why the voice of knowledge producers is omitted. This is partly due to the fact that all members are expected to contribute, which makes it difficult to talk about a single voice of knowledge producers, and partly due to the simple fact that knowledge management at Alfa is heavily biased towards consumption and maintenance. There are, of course, voices speaking from a knowledge production perspective but, empirically speaking, their voices are muted and fragmented. We will touch upon

knowledge production/creation aspects in the analysis, but will not put them together as a particular voice.

### *The voice of KM managers*

Knowledge management at Alfa is managed from a particular department within the company: the research department. In Sweden the research department employs 6 persons full time in 2001. The research department has more duties than managing KM system. In fact they usually put more time on other duties, such as data collection and intelligence gathering. However, knowledge management is an important part of their work. Knowledge management is primarily seen as a way of taking advantage of the scale and scope of the accumulated experience generated within the firm. Another key aspect is to diminish the importance of the individual and of personal experience. The premise is that experience can be codified and rationalized in a way that suits database storage and retrieval.

The knowledge management system at Alfa is basically a large number of databases and websites organized around so-called competence groups. A competence group consists of a group of consultants with particular interests or competencies, such as database management or organization design. Competence groups are voluntary but consultants are expected to take part in at least one of them and it is common to take part in a number of different groups.

Knowledge management is typically perceived to deal with IT systems such as databases and Lotus Notes discussion forums. However, it is not unusual to hear voices that articulate a broader view on knowledge management:

“There is not one single day here, when you meet people, when you are not exchanging ideas. That’s not codified [in databases] but it still involves the exchange of information and experiences.” Consultant (formerly working at the research department)

As we will see later on, this broad conception of knowledge management is, while not dominant or typical, not unusual. It also points to a particular quality of the way knowledge management is implemented at Alfa: that it tends to emphasize ‘management’ rather than ‘knowledge’. This is, to a certain extent, visible in what knowledge management managers consider being their main problem.

“The systems and the infrastructure is not the problem. Today you can use off-the-shelf solutions that work well. The difficult thing is to make people to contribute with their knowledge to the systems. That’s what’s most problematic with knowledge management, in particular in knowledge-intensive firms where much of one’s organizational prestige and possibilities for promotion are based on one’s knowledge: how fast one delivers, and how good one is a salesman, and so on. ...There is a contradiction between common principles for compensation and promotion, and an effective knowledge management.” KM manager

Knowledge management is, from the KM manager’s perspective, based on synergies that come from orchestrating and organizing experience and knowledge in large consultancy organizations. From this perspective, knowledge management primarily deals with highly structured and easily accessible codified experience that is stored and retrieved through various information technology solutions. The main problem is not technical. It is human and social: to extract the knowledge and experience from individuals that gives them a comparative advantage in the pursuit of their careers.

### *The voice of KM users*

Knowledge management is a buzzword within the company so most users (i.e. consultants) have a fairly elaborate conception of it. In contrast to KM managers, KM users typically have a broader conception of the term :



“Knowledge management has three aspects. First, it makes me aware that there are enormous amounts of information that I know can be useful for me, stored in databases in a relatively structured way. There is an awesome lot of information, so one of the most sensitive and difficult areas of knowledge management is to find a clear structure so you can find the information you looking for fast. That is one aspect of knowledge management. It makes me aware that there is a lot of information. Second, I am part of it and consciously contribute to extend this mass of knowledge. And you do that, not because you are forced to, but in a natural way through the processes that are constructed for it. Third, I know that I can approach anyone in the company and ask a question without the risk of being denied help. Everybody is there for each other.”  
Consultant

In a way the excerpt above iterate what KM managers mean with the term, but if one looks closely, it also converts knowledge management to something that displays significant cues about the workplace culture. Knowledge management tells me how to operate in this environment: I use what is already there. I contribute with what I know. And I am allowed to interfere with questions, because we share. The way knowledge management is implemented at Alfa may not be the only thing that provides such cultural cues, but it, at the least, operate as an integrative mechanism for cultural messages of this kind.

KM users may also voice the same type of broad conception of knowledge management, as we saw above:

“Knowledge management, for me, is, I don’t know, but knowledge management is very important in our organizations since we change project structure all the time, and knowledge management goes deeper than just conserving information. It is about the meaning of it, too. Knowledge management consist of ... tools ...to provide a common understanding.” Consultant

From KM users point of view, the essence of knowledge management appears to be cultural and symbolic. KM symbolizes important aspect of the workplace culture: it is instructive for how users/consultants/co-workers operate together. It provides a tool for reaching and enforcing a particular common understanding – sharing is important. Users acknowledge that knowledge management includes databases and computer networks, but tend to underscore the norm of sharing that is built-in to the knowledge management system. Ironically, what KM managers see as the biggest obstacle with knowledge management – the sharing of knowledge – is what users value most. However, it is not only the fact of sharing that is valued. It is also the fact that this is clearly and strongly articulated. The knowledge management system thus voices a strong and univocal moral and cultural message.

#### *The KM system and “organizational memory”*

It could be argued that the emergence of the idea of knowledge management and the various technological and social systems for storing and retrieving knowledge in organizations may make the concept of organizational memory more relevant. After all, search engines and databases may be viewed as mechanisms for retrieval and storage that more or less resembles or mimics the individual’s capacity for memory and recollection. However, it is important to point out that in reality, KM systems do not replace or substitute individual’s memory capabilities. Rather, KM systems extend and empower the individual’s memory capabilities. KM systems do not and cannot “remember” or have “memories”, but it can facilitate, empower, enlarge and multiply individual’s capacity for remembrance and memory. KM systems may make organizations less dependant on particular individuals but this is not accomplished by substituting individual capabilities with organizational capabilities. Rather, to the extent it happens, this is due to that KM systems make it easier to publicly account for individual’s experiences, and to access other people and other people’s experiences.

KM systems as facilitators of communication. Although much attention within the field of KM is spent on knowledge creation, maintenance and storage – its memory aspects, so to speak – our case indicates that in practice other aspects of the KM systems are valued more

highly. We have already pointed to the way the system is appreciated because it underscores and emphasise an important organizational norm: the sharing of information and knowledge. The KM system is also appreciated because it stimulates and facilitates discussion and communication more generally:

“ It [the KM systems] has worked fairly well in EDS, much better than in other sectors. There are three databases. One is like a reference library inom, the second is like a bullentin board, and the third includes commercial and marketing stuff. The bullentin board has been used most frequently. It has been quite easy to share your knowledge, since all solutions is founded on SAP/R3. When I worked as a knowledge champion I scanned the bullentin board for questions and asnwered them if I could help. Sometimes ytu know the answer immediately. And I got answers when I asked questions myself. It worked very well. It was extremely accessible. It was like a chat. The reference library was less useful. People just put anything in it.” (manager)

The quote indicates that the perhaps most important aspects of the system is not its capacity to document and codify previous experience but rather enabling people to access the living memories of other people. Thus, KM systems are not particularly appreciated because its capacity to store write-ups of experiences in projects. It is rather appreciated and used as a tool for almost real-time communication, valued for immediacy, accessibility and interactivity, rather than the exact execution of recall.

Having said that, the KM systems are nevertheless also valued because of their capacity to provide storage capacity. However, organizational members rarely, if ever, stress the KM systems potential for remembrance only, or even primarily. Generally, they have understandings and use metaphors that, while acknowledging the capacity for and importance of storage, are more elaborate and specific. In particular, organizational members, when stressing or mentioning the storage aspects, typically either frame the KM systems as enablers for recycling ideas ands experiences, or as a way to gather, accumulate and maintain a valuable resource, indeed as knowledge capital.

KM as recycling. The recycling metaphor occurs frequently when organizational members talk about the use and value of the KM systems. Consider for example, the following comment from one of the organizational members:

“What we remember from the projects is the stuff that we put in the databases. And there is people who work with putting together experiences from various projects thus creating what we call market offerings. And then we take these offerings to customers, when they fit what we bekieve is the solution to their problem”. (Partner)

This is a quite common and typical point of view. The KM system is appreciated, apart from its capacity to facilitate communication, because it makes it possible to use ideas and solutions developed in one context in other contexts. Thus, it has the potential to speed up project work and also provide economies of scale and scope. To understand KM as recycling is, to a certain extent, to emphasise the importance of history. However, it is also to understand history from an economical and industrial point of view. The idea of recycling emphasise the importance of being lean and to economize one’s resources. It underscores history as a resource, and recollection as a principle of production. It is also a metaphor that allows the industrialization of recollection without the associating to the negative aspects of industrialzation. In fact, it can be argued that recycling as a concept is intrinsically linked to positive values that breaks with the heritage of industrialization: balance instead of growth, thrift instead of wastefulness, and sustainability instead of exploitation. It is an open question, however, to what extent recycling, in the proper sense of the word, actually occur. The following qoute suggest for example that recycling has its definite limits:

“I also frequently use it [the KM system] to create structures. The substance in the documents sometimes don’t matter much. You rather used the structure as a template. You spend a lot of time developing structures anyway. “ (Manager)

Again this is a fairly typical response. Most organizational members use KM systems to solutions and documents that can work as inspiration and, at the best, templates for the work at hand. In this sense, the KM system in reality provides a framework for action, rather than genuinely recycled ideas and solutions.

KM as capital management. Another frequent metaphor for the KM system that underscores storage was to see it as a way of accumulating and maintaining a particular capital, much like capital in the monetary and financial sense for the word is accumulated and maintained. From this point of view, KM systems are viewed as a way of explicating, objectifying, and depersonalizing core competencies. It is a way of making the immaterial material, and the imaginary tangible:

“You have material, specific documents from various projects, that you can retrieve, take a look at and use. You have a knowledge capital in these databases. That is the primary thing. And then you can use it for gaining information and a list of contacts, and so on.” (Partner)

The capital metaphor suggests that knowledge is not only a resource that can be used in a productive way. It is also something that has generic value that can be used in exchange for other valuables. In this sense, KM systems are not only ways of facilitating communication, extending individual’s capability for recollection, and recycling ideas and solutions. They are also a way of keeping and managing a particular form of capital. They are like a bank account, a safe or a vault. But the metaphor also suggests other possibilities, such as investment, yield, and profit.

### **Discussion: knowledge management and memory in organizations**

The concept of knowledge management may have several problems and flaws. It may be too IT-centric, cover too much terrain (Ruggles 1998, Swan et al 1999), be ahistorical and thus crowding out and distorting important contributions from the field of organization learning (Swan et al 1999), and be oxymoronic in suggesting that something as slippery, vague and ambiguous as knowledge may be managed, in any qualified and specific sense of the word (Alvesson & Kärreman 2001). These are genuine problems with the term that limits its usefulness. However, when applied in the context of “organizational memory” the idea of knowledge management does bring several important connotations that may be helpful, in particular, in overcoming the conceptual problems with “organizational memory”.

As discussed above, the idea of organizational memory is problematic. It overemphasises organizational unity and integration. It mystifies the social character of organizational processes. It suggests that organizations not only is populated with people who is capable to remember and recollect but also that the organization as such can remember and recollect, much – even more or less exactly – the way humans do.

As a contrast, the idea of knowledge management breaks with such conceptions while conserving the basic idea that organizational processes may frame recollection and remembrance. The idea of knowledge management suggests that memory can and might be managed in organizational settings. From this point of view the issue is not “organizational memory” as in suggesting that the memory phenomena occur at a purely organizational level. Instead, it understands memory as being framed, developed and maintained *in* organizations: as “memory in organizations”. This perspective does not suggest that organizations are person- or thing-like entities that have more or less mysterious cognitive capacities. It rather suggests that organizations are particular contexts where collective memories emerge.

The difference between these two ways of framing is captured well in Deetz (1994) ‘origins of concepts and problems’-dimension. Deetz (1994) contrasts between *elite/a priori* research perspectives and *situated/emergent* research perspectives. The former, admittedly extreme,

position means that the researcher starts with a set of concepts a priori and applies them to whatever field he or she deems suitable for the purpose of testing the theory at hand. It is the theory that matters. The field provides a possibility to test it. Whatever else the field provides are of no significance or interest since the research design only permit the field to say 'yes' or 'no' to the theory. As Deetz (1994:592) points out, it is appropriate to call this research perspective "monological". To view organizations as thing- or person-like necessary means to accept one set of elitist/a priori assumptions or another. Normally, this includes to adopt a less extreme position than the one fleshed out above. The actual type of object might, for example, be an open question, perhaps even to be 'discovered' empirically. But this does not mean that the basic elitist/a priori approach is abandoned. It only means that it is less obtrusive. Ultimately, empirical findings are reconstructed to fit to preconfigured ideas, constructed and maintained among a particular social group – organizational researchers.

The situated/emergent position means to provide "a participatory ethnographic rearticulation of the multiple voices of a native culture" (Deetz 1994:592). In this case, the researcher aims towards hermeneutical translation and clarification of the life-world of the particular group of people under study. The study contributes to the extent it "develop conceptions that display the site community's concepts in a way that makes them available to other cultures" (Deetz 1994:592). Viewing organizations as contexts not only admits for this kind of approach. It encourages and sensitizes the researcher to stay alert for the inhabitant's point of views and to voice them in a fashion understood by others.

To view organizations as context where memories emerge is not to say that organizational features, practices and processes do not have effects on collective memory. On the contrary, organizations are neither neutral nor innocent when conceptualized as contexts. Recurring routines, practices and processes – core characteristics of most organizational activity – is highly likely to affect collective memory and recollection. Here I want to point out and elaborate three important aspects of the memory-in-organizations perspective: that (collective) memory is socially constructed, culturally maintained and dispersed, and – as indeed is indicated by the concept of knowledge management – a possible target for managerial efforts.

- collective memory and recollection is a social process. Although collective memory may be inert and lasting, this is because such memories are continually socially produced. They are told, retold and remembered in meetings, gatherings, and in other interactive occasions, thus making it possible for individuals to learn them, draw and act upon them, and eventually share them. From a memory-in-organizations point of view, such memories and memory sharing practices emerge within boundaries – thus allowing some discretion and integrity to the notion of organization. However, these boundaries are not fixed or cast in stone. Rather, they are outcomes of continuous negotiations and, thus, in itself products of organizational processes. Hence, the often routinized and standardized character of collective memories is an artifact of recurrent social practices. As such, they are caught up in webs of power relations, traditions, values, meanings, interactions and technologies.

- collective memory cultural, rather than cognitive. Although individuals may carry collective memories, this is a rather unremarkable and uninteresting aspect of how collective memories are developed, maintained, and distributed. Such memories are not primarily 'inside' people's heads, but rather 'between' them. They emerge and exist primarily publicly, in the form of stories, rituals, ceremonies, and routines. As such they are recurrently told, performed and/or displayed in, for example, work group interactions, board meetings, formal procedures, and material objects. In this sense, collective memory is a cultural phenomenon, conserved and communicated through the use of common symbols and meanings. The cultural character of collective memory has further implications. For example, it suggests that collective memory implies a collective (not a person), is 'soft' in the sense that it does not easily lend itself to

quantification, is socially constructed by human beings and historically situated, and, as pointed out above, inert and difficult to subject to intentional change.

- collective memory may be managed. Although collective memories may be difficult or pointless to fabricate and manipulate, it is quite clear that they may be orchestrated, coordinated, encouraged, and/or suppressed. In this sense they are potential objects for managerial intervention. Collective memories emerging in organizational context are likely to be affected by managerial action, if only from the fact that managerial action is likely to occur in organizational contexts. However, as the concept of knowledge management suggests, collective memories may also be a more direct target for managerial activity. This activity may include activities for identifying collective memories of strategic significance. Such ideas may, for example, underpin the discourse of recycling, as discussed above. However, managerial activity of this kind may also include efforts that are less benevolent. From a more critical and sceptical point of view, the ideas and practices associated with knowledge management, – both in general and regarding collective memory – can be interpreted as way for a powerful social group – managers – to enact a particular ideology – managerialism. In other words, knowledge management and the management of collective memories may be interpreted as a way for managers to orchestrate and exercise definitional and executive authority over other social groups, with an edge towards professional groups in this particular case.

## **Conclusion**

Concepts such as knowledge management and organizational memory may be problematic. These problems restrict their usefulness, but may not necessary mean that they are useless. For example, the concept of knowledge management may be too broad, too faddish, to contradictory. It has strong managerialist connotations that may be highly problematic. For example, it may suggest the further instrumentalization of the work place, thus promoting a view of human agency as an instrument and as a mean, rather than as an agent, guided by conscience and practical reason, and as an end in itself.

The concept of organizational memory is even more problematic. The term is problematic from a conceptual point of view: it anthropomorpize the organization, mystifies organizational process, and overemphasise organizational integration. The concept of knowledge management has, despite its flaws, been useful in the context of this paper to overcome some of the problems with the concept of organizational memory. It has made it possible, together with the findings from the case study, to advance from a critique of the concept of organizational memory on mere conceptual grounds. It has thus been instrumental in developing another concept – memory in organizations – that is better suited to deal with collective memory and recollection. This concept highlights that collective memory is better conceptualized as emerging in organizations than being part of it, thus making it possible to recognized aspects that otherwise had remained suppressed, hidden or overlooked. Such aspects include the recognition that collective memory is a social construction shaped in social processes, a cultural rather than cognitive phenomenon, and possible to manage and thus influence through various forms of persuasion.

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