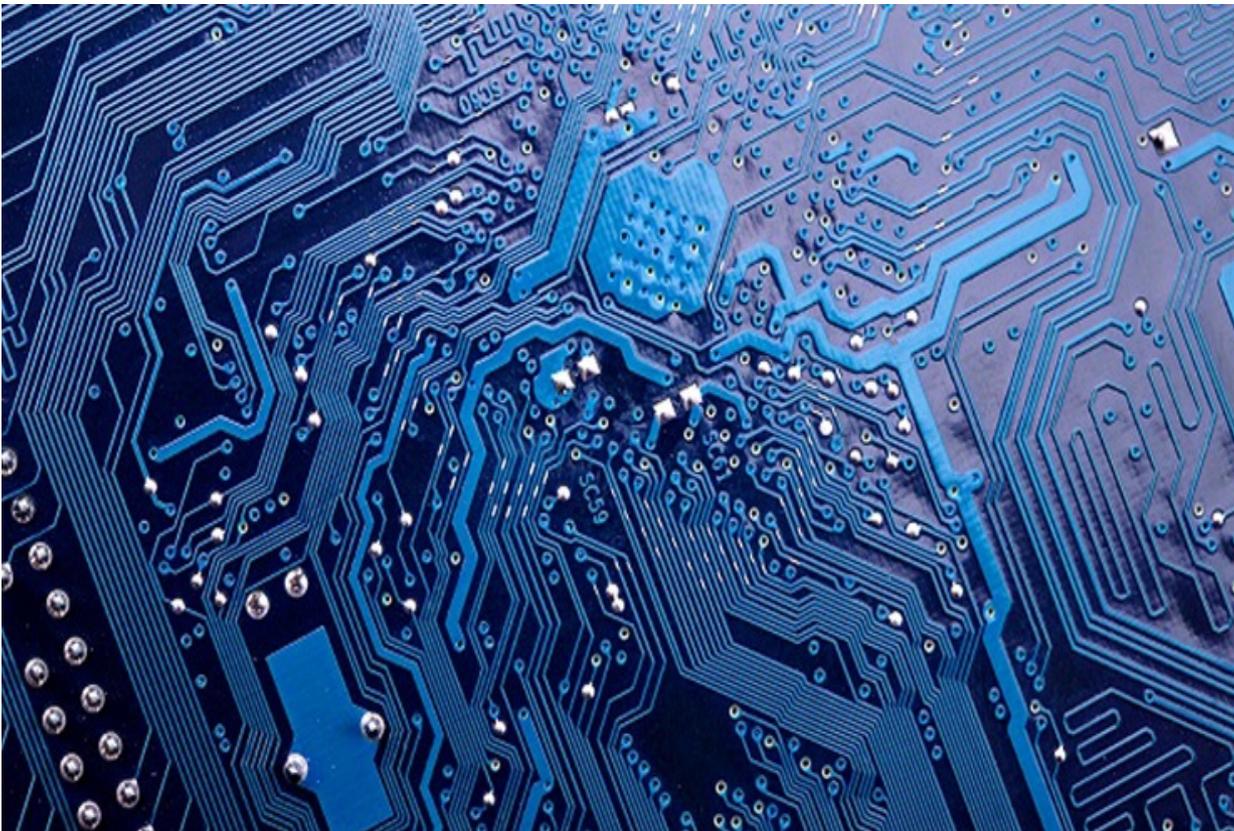


Interactions UTC

1. [Home](#)
2. [Themes](#)
3. [You have the floor](#)
4. Le Knowledge Management

Knowledge management

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Can you tell us how the concept of Knowledge Management (KM) started?

BM – “Well, as you know most human activities rely on the knowledge we have at our disposal. Often, we are referring here to “immaterial” entities. Thus, only a fraction (large or small) of this knowledge can be readily formalised and handed on. Usually this is

scientific or theoretical knowledge than can be formalised and shared with all, in terms of time, space and communication. This indeed is a paradigm largely spread over our present Western world civilisation, and acquiring and using knowledge is one of our traditions. There is also, however, an implicit form of knowledge that can be tacit, factual, procedural ... when it comes to implementing a given task. The key problem in frame KM as it is abbreviated, suddenly transpired when we realised that a great deal of our “practical” knowledge could not be formalised or even theorised.

Is this second form of knowledge important for enterprises?

In order to learn how to do things, you must do things. There is therefore a learning period during which we put our knowledge into practice. The employees every day in their enterprises put various procedures and processes into practice according to the way they have analysed the problem/task to be solved/accomplished and there is nothing explicit or theoretical in this ... The risk, of course, is that Society (first the enterprise) may lose this know-how or acumen and the cognitive capital of the company is eroded. An area of research and engineering was subsequently opened, given the value of the knowledge background at risk, and to learn how to best exploit, stabilise, transmit the tacit knowledge that in fact lies at the core of the activities or the value of the organisation as a whole. KM has become an important economic key to proper management of enterprises and their employees.

What are the possible stumbling blocks when management tries to instil KM practice?

Up to the present, KM has mainly been seen in the context of a “change in format”. Knowledge management can be summed up in

many instances as a changeover from practice to theory and the reverse. Nevertheless, there remain two problems. Even theory is based on practice, for example, practice in reading, understanding documents, charts ... But how are we supposed to make this knowledge last through time? The time factor is indeed crucial. We often are only concerned with contemporary knowledge. Knowledge transmission must cross time. If we look at the example of nuclear power stations we can observe that seventy years down the road, the station will be decommissioned, dismantled and this will require that the demolition engineers can access, read and understand thoughts, written papers that were edited, formalised over half a century in the past. Can the time factor lead to a piece of knowledge becoming incomprehensible to future generations? If “yes” what do we do today to counter the phenomenon?

The global market for service industries appertaining to knowledge management (KM) was estimated to be 13 billion \$US for yr.2005 (source: IDC)

Did you know this ?

There is a double risk: companies losing part of their know-how and thus part of their cognitive capital.