Are we missing the importance of
creativity in knowledge management?

PAUL LAUGHTON

Information Science, University of Pretoria,

Lynwood Road, Pretoria, South Africa
E-mail: paul.laughton@up.ac.za

Creativity is no stranger to knowledge management and has helped drive innovation and break new grounds in the management of knowledge. Organisations in general see creativity as a highly desirable outcome and strive to develop it further. This conceptual paper looks at a number of academic writings to identify the role of creativity in knowledge management. A number of common themes are identified, while highlighting the need for further research into the importance of creativity in knowledge management.

1. Introduction

The absence of creativity in any task may lead to under performance, and inability to improve (Elsbach & Hargadon, 2006). These outcomes can be limiting and restrictive. For organisations to run at their highest potential, creativity needs to be a focus or a core value. Egbu, Botterill and Bates (2001) identified the need for continuous innovation to have a competitive advantage over those that missed opportunities for innovation. This emphasis on creativity as an enabler for innovation should apply when one looks at knowledge management. By design knowledge management is a fairly abstract concept, as it regularly works with explicit resources, requiring some thoughtful creativity and innovation to be effective.

The notion of increasing the use of creativity in knowledge management may cause one to be self-reflective, asking ourselves how we currently apply creativity and where can creativity be further explored in our knowledge management efforts? Gurteen (1998:6) wrote "…. the term 'management' is inappropriate is in its relation to tacit knowledge -
the knowledge in people's heads....................... knowledge management - in its creative sense - is more about nurturing than managing". To effectively manage a resource such as knowledge, creativity is required.

As knowledge management becomes increasingly popular and new technological resources are readily available for knowledge managers to use, the role of creativity should not be understated in the effective management of knowledge. This conceptual paper looks at previous works on knowledge management and creativity, as it seeks to better understand the role creativity can play in knowledge management while identifying strategies for increasing the use of creativity in knowledge management. A literature review was conducted to identify academic writings that feature both knowledge management and creativity together. Some of the findings are dealt with in the following section.

2. Creativity and knowledge management in academic literature

It is common a concept that the practice of knowledge management and creativity are very important factors for organisations working in this volatile, unstable, complex and ambiguous (vuca) world, where accelerated change is certain. Creativity and innovation involve the process of creating and applying new knowledge. This being the very epicenter of knowledge management (Gurteen, 1998). Knowledge and creativity are key resources that support those in positions to make decisions that could have significant impact in our current complex conditions (Giampaoli & Ciambotti, 2016).

While facing new challenges and obstacles, people and organisations may have to go beyond their tried and trusted knowledge maps and find a new path, potentially enabling them to find new solutions. Together knowledge and creativity are not only complementary but also synergic in the problem-solving process (Giampaoli & Ciambotti, 2016). The foundational elements of knowledge management (KM) (socialization, internalization, combination, & externalization) impact on an organisations ability to be creative (Rahimi, Arbabisarjou, Allameh & Aghababaei, 2011). While other humane aspects of knowledge management such as intuition may also contribute to the creative process (Akinci & Sadler-Smith, 2012). According to Gurteen (1998) "Knowledge Management needs to fundamentally focus on creativity and innovation".

The source of creativity is the ability to create something. Creating, from a psychological perspective, refers to the production of something unique from other things. This encompasses the reduction or enhancement of a phenomenon, along with the transformation and combination of a phenomenon with other phenomena, objects, or things. Creativity also refers to the creation of something new (a product, a solution, a work of art, etc.) that has some kind of value (Pir Khaaefi, 1999).

Creativity is a desired behaviour in an organization, and highly valued (Baer & Oldham, 2006), as it brings into existence something which did not exist before, either as a product, a process or a thought (Rahimi, Arbabisarjou, Allameh & Aghababaei, 2011). According to Moorhead and Griffin (1989) creativity is the process of creating original perspectives and imagination on a given situation. Along with these definitions, creativity is also popularly seen as the ability to apply knowledge to solve problems.

Often, we do not need new information to form new ideas, but rather focus and think about the information and knowledge that we already have in abundance. Aligning with this, new thoughts and ideas come from a kind of thought-play of the mind (making it fun) which may involve concepts such as daydreaming of what could or might be (Gurteen, 1998). This aligns with Saulais and Ermine (2012) writings where they describe creativity "as an evolutionary process of an existing knowledge capital".

People were born to be creative and the need to create is a common driving force in human beings (Smilkstein, 2004). Gurteen (1998) questions this notion and asks "why do we not see more creativity in our world, why are only a minority seen to be considered to be 'creative and innovative'?" He answers this question with the limitation and impact on our perspectives and ways to think (world view).

Giampaoli and Ciambotti (2016) empirical research results confirm knowledge sharing increases organisational creativity, while having a direct and positive impact on an organisation's ability to solve problems. These findings should encourage organisations to rely on their knowledge and creativity to achieve what others have not done before, key ingredients in the recipe to success. It is widely accepted that "knowledge is a key component of all forms of creativity" within the confines of modern innovation management (Chapman & Magnusson, 2006).

For creativity to exists, knowledge must not just be shared, but also be used and recombined (a transfer and processing of knowledge is essential). In some instances, the distinctions between knowledge creation and usage seem to be obscure, especially when facing complex systems such as creativity (Rahimi, Arbabisarjou, Allameh & Aghababaei, 2011).

Creativity is an outcome of the combination of existing knowledge and new knowledge (Kogut & Zander, 1992). The recombination of new and existing knowledge depends on the creation of knowledge and its use. More recently, the importance of knowledge creation and usage has been substantially supported for the creation of value and establishing them as crucial factors in the creativity process. According to Gurteen (1998) "creativity and innovation are at the cutting edge of knowledge management".

Establishing knowledge creation and knowledge usage in the meta-model of knowledge management for creativity requires the following considerations (Rahimi, Arbabisarjou, Allameh & Aghababaei, 2011):

- The creation and usage of knowledge are two activities so closely related, one cannot be present without the other.

- The creation and usage of knowledge in the creativity process often cause a spiral effect, reciprocally functioning as cause and effect.

- The natures of the two activities are unique for creativity. For knowledge creation, the creativity of human beings, tacit and specialization of knowledge are keys for the novelty of creativity; for knowledge use, the harmony amongst users and the shared understanding, codifiability and diversity of knowledge are important for the success of creativity.

Findings from Giampaoli & Ciambotti (2016) confirm that elements such as work design, organisational culture and organisational structure that promote increased
creativity have the ability to enhance an organisation's ability to solve problems. Their findings also suggest that to successfully exploit opportunities and achieve what no one else has done before, people need to rely on both their knowledge and creativity (Giampaoli & Ciambotti, 2016).

The working environment has a significant impact on creativity, even if employees are very creative they will not be able to express their ability in a restrictive organizational structure or culture (Sawyer, 2006). Similarly, Liebowitz (1999:39) identified the importance of appealing incentives and a healthy culture for the encouragement of knowledge sharing and innovation. According to Vicari (1988) tolerant culture means creative culture. Scholars have begun to discover the importance of a firm's capacity to
put creativity into practice and not creativity itself (Klein & Sorra; 1996; Weinzimmer et al, 2011; Giampaoli & Ciambotti, 2016). Aligning with the concept of the organisation's culture, Gurteen (1998) identifies the biggest hinderance to creativity is the paradigm of an organisation. This concept of a paradigm relates to the way things are perceived, communicated and the way the world in interpreted. This concept of paradigm is often referred to as a worldview or mindset. A key factor to understand about a paradigm is
that it works at the subconscious level, "it's a bit like thinking the whole world is coloured red not knowing we are wearing rose-tinted contact lenses".

3. Contextual analysis of creativity and KM in academic literature

Creativity is not a new concept to knowledge management, and ultimately a desirable and natural outcome if knowledge is nurtured within your organisation. Based on the work of Gurteen (1998); Giampaoli & Ciambotti (2016); Rahimi, Arbabisarjou, Allameh & Aghababaei (2011); Chapman & Magnusson (2006) and Saulais & Ermine (2012) the following observations were drawn:

Value of creativity and knowledge management: all the authors had a high regard for creativity and viewed creativity has a desired outcome of knowledge management in an organisation. Creativity seems to be a critical feature for thriving in a competitive environment.

The relationship between knowledge management and creativity: knowledge was considered to be a pre-requisite for creativity to occur. Focus was placed on how creativity stems from existing knowledge and information. New ideas and creativity stem from things that currently occur in society, often it is the application of existing knowledge in a new context or scenario that generates creativity.

The role organisation culture plays in the support of creativity: the culture of an organisation plays a significant role in the nurturing of creativity. Organisation cultures that allow people a safe space to try something new with little judgement are best suited for creativity. Cultures that promote play and fun are more likely to generate creativity.

Creativity as a focal point within knowledge management: only one of the authors (Gurteen, 1998) focuses on the role of creativity within knowledge management. This finding seemed significant and lay the foundational motivation for challenging knowledge managers and researchers to put more emphasis on creativity when managing knowledge. Creativity was viewed by other authors as a complementary outcome when knowledge is freely shared and nurtured. Little is published on the use of creativity within knowledge management or how KM can incorporate more creativity to achieve it's desired objectives.

4.   Inhibitors of creativity

Knowledge managers looking to encourage creativity should be aware of common inhibitors of creativity. According to Gurteen (1998), there are a number of common inhibitors of creativity that organisations and knowledge managers should be mindful of:

- Enforcing someone to learn, trying to make them more creative or getting them to do things in supposed disciplined ways, will often backfire and have the opposite effect.

- Fear is one of the more common blocks on creativity. Fear of the unknown, the what-ifs, fear of failure.

- New ideas by nature are extremely vulnerable, and easily destroyed if not thoughtfully nurtured. One should view new ideas as new born babies that require thoughtful attention and input to ensure they survive and become sustainable, giving them sufficient opportunity to develop.

- Due to the nature of the knowledge economy, information overload has become an inhibitor of creativity, with so much information available we can spend too much time trying to figure it out, possibly getting a little lost along the way and losing the initial inspiration.

- Judgement is yet another significant inhibitor of creativity. Often, one is quick to judge others which leads to a form of self-judgement, potentially holding one in a kind of 'creative straight jacket'. To be effective the organisation culture needs to discourage judgement.

- These items together form our paradigm (or world view) which often limits us or confines our thinking. The real limitation of creativity is the stranglehold that our limiting paradigms and mental models exert over us. We are prisoners of our own past - our upbringing, our education and past business experiences. These restrict and constrain us in our ability to think and act creatively.

Knowledge managers should look to reduce or restrict these inhibitors in an attempt to increase creativity. However other strategies can be implemented to enhance or improve the level of creativity, which are discussed in the following section.

5.   Strategies for increasing creativity in knowledge management

There are a number of strategies that knowledge managers can potentially implement to enhance or and improve the level of creativity in knowledge management. The following are discussed in no order of significance.

Creative confidence is the ability to create a safe space for team members working with knowledge management to try new things, adapt current processes and practices with little to no pressure (Sakai-Miller, 2021). This creative confidence can enhance the practice dreaming, which allows people in your team to think without limitations (either technological or resources). When we think past our limitations and dream we can often come up with some very creative ideas, allowing people to entertain ideas that were thought to be previous out of reach (Abazov, 2021).

Learning from failure, requires an organisation to have a spirit of inquiry and a culture of openness and trust. Learning from failure requires thoughtful analysis of and discussion of potentially unwanted outcomes, often resulting as a by-product of experimentation.
Knowledge managers should look to foster this culture and focus on the potentially positive learnings that come from failure (Cannon & Edmondson, 2005).

Incorporate the concept of play at work, people who experience more fun and joy in their work environment are more likely to be comfortable with expressing their ideas and solutions to a particular problem (Ford, McLaughlin & Newstrom, 2003). Knowledge managers could further explore this concept of play in an attempt to unlock increasing levels of self-expression, potentially leading to further creativity and innovation.

The 50-solutions mentality, is a useful approach to challenges. This perspective encourages teams to stretch themselves to identify a significant number of solutions, while opening the door to viewing a challenge from a number of perspectives (Sakai- Miller, 2021). The increasing number of possibilities may be useful in identifying new ways to achieving a desired outcome, which can be of use to knowledge managers.

Set aside time for creative thinking, a positive way to encourages creative thinking is to set aside time for collaborative creative thinking. Often people are too busy or not focussed on creative thinking, but when we ensure we set time aside the barriers to creative thinking are significantly reduced. Regular team interaction focusing on creativity can positively impact the creativity of the team (Abazov, 2021).

6. Conclusion

As the practice of knowledge management continues to evolve and adapt to incorporate changes in our environments and changes in technology, the role of creativity should not be understated. Creativity is highly desirable, but like anything of value it takes special input to make it flourish. The management of knowledge in any organisation is a demanding task that requires creativity and innovation for it to successful, supporting Gurteen (1998) view that "creativity and innovation are at the cutting edge of knowledge management".

For knowledge management to reach new heights greater emphasis and focus should be placed on the role of creativity. The very notion of managing a resource that cannot be seen (tacit by nature) should evoke a number of unconventional and unique approaches. This may cause one to further explore the possibility of being more creative in our practice.

For creativity to abound in knowledge management we need to seriously reflect on our world view and limiting beliefs which keep us from going further outside of the box. One needs to also closely manage the culture in which teams are operating in to ensure freedom of ideas and expression is a reality, limiting the judgement. There is so much potential in knowledge management, it is up to us to take it to the next level, with the help of creativity and possibility.

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