

Review by Dr. Toby Pearlstein

Would you characterize your organization as “smart” or “dumb”? Is it a “learning organization”? While seemingly simple questions, how a CEO, a department head, a team leader, or, for that matter, any other employee (i.e. knowledge worker) answers is anything but. At its core, the aim of this excellent book is to provide a very practical and pragmatic road map to help figure out the answers. Having helped you find the answers, however, the authors don’t just leave you to struggle with what to do next. Rather they share their inside (read “real world”) experiences to help guide you further toward the destination of making your organization both smarter and able to learn from past events. After all, the competitive edge that any organization seeks can only be found by getting smarter not dumber and recognizing that the lessons of past successes (and failures) must not be wasted.

One strength of this book, across its various authors, is the theme that “one size does not fit all.” There is no one model of knowledge management (KM) that can simply be taken and implanted in your context with its unique challenges and be expected to succeed. Another strength is the theme throughout that KM is not an easy proposition even with the greatest of upper management investment and commitment. That is the ubiquitous value of the lessons shared here; KM is most beneficial and sustainable when it fits your situation (not some unrealistic ideal model) and works to contribute to the bottom line.

One of the real advantages of “Knowledge Management Practice” is that a novice in the world of KM can begin at the beginning and follow a logical flow of chapters that build upon one another to help you move from the generalities of myriad real challenges in creating a knowledge management culture to a variety of workable ways in which to adapt the insights shared to any given organization. The bibliography, suggested readings, and glossary following each chapter and at the end enable the reader to delve further into each facet of KM while simultaneously mastering the lingo involved.

For those building a business case for the introduction of KM or for expanding its reach, every chapter offers insights that can be modified into checklists for your particular setting and need (including some really useful graphics such as the chart in Chapter 6, “Building Smarter Organizations...” that clearly and sometimes painfully highlights the differences between Traditional Leaders and Collaborative Leaders), even to the language you consider using. A good example of this is Chapter 3’s “Theory in Practice” segment describing the author’s decision about using the word “audit” when proposing an information or knowledge audit. One client was adamantly opposed to using the term because of its financial connotations and its associations with restriction or change. A much more palatable moniker (for this firm at least) was *Information/Knowledge Resources Study*. Yet another client, who happened to be the Chief Financial Officer of this medical diagnostics company, loved the term “audit” and wholeheartedly became the project’s champion.

For the reader whose organization is already “smart” about knowledge management, several chapters provide usable examples for becoming even smarter. There is much to be learned through recognizing and exploring the opportunities offered by experiences gained in corollary

settings as well as from emerging technologies that support the growth and sustainability of KM and thereby foster successful outcomes (e.g. better customer relationship management, selling client engagements and getting up to speed more quickly, cutting down bench research time, cutting product to market time, etc.)

Chapter 9 discusses why using an external consultant in some organizations can be beneficial. Turning to an external third party for help framing a KM project and guiding it forward can be an opportunity for kick starting the initiative and also leveraging such an engagement. As with the other chapters in the book this provides several transferable examples of how to craft a business case and evaluate the pros and cons of this approach including finding a pool of potential consultants and ensuring they understand what you expect of them. The expertise such a consultant can bring to the table can enable all concerned to rise above the noise and see what needs to be done more clearly.

Thankfully, a caveat relating to technology as a KM tool is covered in the book as well. The lesson of “just because you can doesn’t mean you should” in terms of chasing new technologies is emphasized, and actual less than successful experiences are discussed, and suggests that plans to use a new technology must be tempered with the reality of business needs and available budget as well as with the input of other stakeholders such as IT. That there is an entire chapter devoted to “Tools for Talking” reminds us that sometimes the simplest KM tools, those that open a dialogue, should not be rejected because they lack the allure of a technology solution.

The value of the experiences shared throughout this book on how to become a knowledge management thought leader in your organization - the “watch outs” and important considerations - can not be overemphasized.

If the book has any weakness, and it is a small one indeed, I am not a fan of the two column layout of its pages, especially when read as an eBook.

Summary:

This book is highly recommended for those who want (and need) to understand how and why knowledge management is integral to an organization’s success and what a commitment to KM requires. Readers at all levels, including non-IS/KM managers, will certainly benefit from the practical, pragmatic, and highly adaptable guidance the authors provide. This is more than a one-time read. It is the kind of book we keep on the shelf next to our desk that is reserved for the sources we refer to often.

LIS and business students will find this book of great benefit. The nitty-gritty varied insider experiences, supplemented by extensive and up-to-date literature reviews, are not typically part of the standard MLS or business curriculum. Regardless of the type of setting in which the student hopes to work, understanding the realities and value of knowledge management and

how it could contribute to the mission of a prospective employer will significantly enhance their skill set.

You may not qualify as a KM expert by the time you finish this read, but you will have become someone who can intelligently discuss, participate in, contribute to, and even lead the evaluation and planning of knowledge management policies and activities. You will also thoroughly understand the challenges involved and the breadth and depth of your own and the organization's commitment required to be successful.

In the Postscript and Summary, the authors and a range of leaders in the IS/KM field share what they believe are the most important soft as well as hard skills one needs to be successful at KM and why a holistic approach is key. This plain talk and pragmatic advice sums up the greatest strength of this book; the sharing of hands on experience by those who have been in the trenches, reinforced by a thorough knowledge of the literature. The road map could not be more succinctly laid out; now it is up to the reader to make the journey their own.

Reviewer Information:

Dr. Toby Pearlstein is retired Global Director, Information Services, Bain & Company, Inc. a strategic management consulting firm and co-author with Jim Matarazzo of Special Libraries: A Survival Guide (Libraries Unlimited, April 2013). Her expertise is in the area of globalization of corporate information services and vendor portfolio management. She has served as Chair of the Special Libraries Association (SLA) Business & Finance Division and the Transportation Division, as well as holding various other positions on SLA Committees. She has published articles in *Online Searcher Magazine*, *Library Journal*, *Information Outlook*, and *Portal* among others. She holds a doctorate from Simmons College Graduate School of Library and Information Science and is an SLA Fellow and an inductee into the SLA Hall of Fame.