

# Personal Knowledge Management (PKM): Are We Really Ready?

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## ABSTRACT:

This paper examines the new and emerging branch of Knowledge Management (KM) called Personal Knowledge Management (PKM). While KM is regarded as the parent of PKM, some proponents seek earnestly to distinguish PKM from KM in practice and application. In this paper the author asks an important question with regards to the emergence of a personal knowledge management (PKM) philosophy and branch of study based on arguments that KM itself is evolving and thus, still in a developmental and systematization process, especially as asserted by writers such as McFarlane and Onions, as opposed to the assertions and treatment of KM as a mature branch of management science by Jones, Corner, and Hamalainen, among others. The author explores the philosophical bases of PKM, mainly from the body of knowledge and ideas in *Personal Knowledge Management: Individual, Organizational and Social Perspectives* and KM theories. The author identifies similar developmental gaps and makes recommendations for PKM practice and progress.

**Key words:** *Personal knowledge management (PKM), Knowledge management (KM), Knowledge management body of knowledge (KMBOK)*

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## Introduction

Knowledge Management (KM) as a field of study is fairly recent in management science and literature. The idea of knowledge management (KM) first emerged from Nonaka (1991) in a *Harvard Business Review* article titled “The Knowledge-Creating Company” and was further given substance in another titled work “A Dynamic Theory of Organizational Knowledge Creation” (Nonaka, 1994) in the *Organizational Science* journal. KM gained its full recognition in 1995 with the publication of *The Knowledge Creating Company* by Nonaka and Takeuchi. However, it can be argued that the ideas and philosophy for KM had long been around, but Nonaka and Takeuchi partially systematized its study by demonstrating the role of knowledge as more than a productive resource in organizations. While writers such as Jones, Corner, and Hamalainen (2011) regard knowledge management as “well established as a field of research” (p. 79), writers such as Onions (2010) and McFarlane (2008, 2010) treat knowledge management as evolving and developmental in terms of its ideas, systematization, and application. Thus, McFarlane (2008) remarks:

“The field of knowledge management has enjoyed a luxury that most disciplinary studies and branches of management science and practice have not had the privilege to embrace. It has developed in an era where all the positive driving forces are in place to enrich and support its rationale, theories, ideas,

and philosophy. At the same time, this rapid development without having suffered the heavy scrutiny and criticisms that other branches of studies have undergone has created some rich bases for debates and thoughts, especially in the philosophy of knowledge management practices and ideas as they are used in developing practical frameworks for organizational systems, processes, and structures” (p. 1).

Here, we can see where the major issue emerging is one of framework encompassed and demonstrated in what McFarlane (2008, 2010) refers to as the Knowledge Management Body of Knowledge and Knowledge Ecosystem.

Onions (2010) also communicates this issue of KM philosophy and framework concern most succinctly:

“Knowledge management researchers and practitioners seeking a solid theoretical foundation for their work are likely to be challenged by the field’s breadth and scarcity of universal frameworks. The diversity, or variety, of knowledge management theory has been acknowledged, many domains and disciplines have claimed territory in this field, and knowledge management theory has been criticised as being vague, broad, incoherent, an ill-defined term and with activities all over the map. Some see this diversity as problematic, detrimental to research and leading to uncertainty in practice; whereas others see diversity as natural, essential and should even be embraced” (p. 1).

Until KM can find that unified or universal framework which Onions advocate, any ideas or debates, or offshoots such as PKM will also face the criticism of lacking a coherent and cohesive conceptual framework agreed upon by practitioners and scholars alike. Onions (2010) argues that KM is best seen as an umbrella, an encompassing term for a diverse range of theories, approaches, solutions and activities that concern the organization and idea of knowledge and its management across organizations. McFarlane’s KMBOK and Knowledge Ecosystem concepts or frameworks are certainly ideal steps in this direction.

While we must value KM as it stands and continue to develop the field, the acceptance of PKM is both sensible and viable in terms of the existing frameworks and our established understanding of the role of knowledge and knowledge workers in today’s organizations. Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) has at its foundation in all the branches of knowledge and science from which KM has emerged and thus, the frameworks and theories of KM are sufficient to make PKM a viable approach to addressing individual, organizational, and social problems and challenges.

### **Definition Of Personal Knowledge Management (PKM)**

Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) is not really difficult to define in and of itself as a term or concept. However, when one dissects the term and thinks about the ideas of “knowledge” and “knowledge management” and “personal management” as separate and their individual definitions, some philosophical questions can emerge that lead to debates as to the scope of PKM as a field of study and as an approach to

knowledge and value management in individual and institutional domains. Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) is indeed a value management philosophy or approach since the idea is to add value to performance, well-being, and outcome through understanding and applying knowledge which has been effectively treated and efficiently applied in a systematic format to achieve personal and non-personal goals. When the definition of individual terms such as “knowledge” becomes an issue, we will find ourselves returning to the primogenitor of both branches of study. That primogenitor is the idea of knowledge, especially as a subject of philosophy and the many debates that have occupied us over the centuries in distinguishing types of knowledge, knowledge and beliefs, beliefs and ideas, among related concepts. However, for the sake of forwardness on the subject of this paper, we will go straight to the existing and understood definitions and meanings of personal knowledge management (PKM).

According to Gorman and Pauleen (2011), Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) is “an evolving set of understandings, skills and abilities that allows an individual to survive and prosper in complex and changing organizational and social environments” (p. xvii). This is a good definition and the idea of “personal” in knowledge management (KM) suggests the main focus is on the individual and his or her understanding of knowledge, and how to classify and systematize that knowledge for personal and professional growth inside and outside of organizational settings. Thus, personal knowledge management (PKM) encompasses a broader understanding of the idea of knowledge applied to individual tasks and needs, whether those are related to personal or professional life. Before application or optimized usefulness, this knowledge must be acquired, internalized, categorized and classified, stored meaningfully and efficiently, and must be able to be accessed readily and retrieved to be applied to address problems and challenges, while creating opportunities and reducing the threats that affect individuals’ growth, success, and well-being.

The only great question that emerges in the idea and definition of PKM proposed by Gorman and Pauleen (2011) is: “Are we really ready?” This question, what could become or be seen as a framework or conceptual problem stems from the existing debates as to whether we are still an information society (Jones, 2011) or a knowledge society (Wiig, 2011). Furthermore, whatever perspective a scholar takes on the issue, there is still the question concerning to what degree we can be regarded as an information society or a knowledge society. This is based on the understanding that society is a collective as opposed to the domain of individualized knowledge and knowledge acquisition and usage. Clearly, we are living in a globally diverse society where individuals and even organizations are at differing levels of information and knowledge use. Thus, the philosophical legitimacy or appropriateness of us charactering an entire society as a “knowledge society” is suspect. Furthermore, even if we can be regarded as a knowledge society, we are not sure as to whether we are a “beginning knowledge society”, a “developing knowledge society” or a “mature knowledge society”. Perhaps some scholars will argue based on collective literacy statistics and global comparative literature and use of knowledge that we are really just an information society. These very fundamental considerations affect the degree to which we can really elaborate on and practice Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) in today’s society and organizations. Clearly, we still have illiterates and semi-

literates among us in all settings. Only a very small percentage of any population across the globe thus far, is able to understand the ideas and philosophy of knowledge much less knowledge management (KM), and now, personal knowledge management (PKM). Thus, there is a chasm within our organizations and institutions concerning who possesses knowledge and who possesses enough understanding of knowledge to be able to manage it, and also, who knows he or she possesses knowledge and even more so, the ability to directly manage that knowledge in such a way as to create and add significant value to self and the organization for which he or she works.

### **The PKM Framework: Individual, Organizational, And Social Environments**

Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) is regarded by Pauleen and Gorman (2011) as a concept that has grown out of a combination of fields, and is the “child” of knowledge management (KM). Some of the fields out of which PKM has grown include personal information management, cognitive psychology, philosophy, management science, education, communications, organizational studies, among other disciplines (Pauleen & Gorman, 2011). Gorman and Pauleen (2011) regard PKM as “a form of sophisticated career and life management” (p. 1). The conceptual framework that has been proposed for PKM is extensive enough to create the same concerns communicated above by Onions (2010). The rationale provided for PKM is a sound one which seems to be an important need in today’s complex organizations and turbulent environment: “PKM may be one way of helping individuals survive, and prosper, through turbulent, complex and changing organizational and social environments” (Gorman & Pauleen, 2011, p. 1). PKM aims to help individuals become more effective in their personal, organizational, and social environments. Thus, the proscenium upon which PKM is applied consists of these three areas: (a) individual environment, (b) organizational environment, and (c) social environment.

While the place of PKM can be easily defined, the conceptual framework or theoretical philosophy (intellectual setting) underlying the study and practice of PKM is extensive. PKM emerges as a “management” approach to individual knowledge, but this approach will depend highly on what knowledge, whose knowledge, how much knowledge and the ability of the individual knowledge worker or entity to understand the purpose of that knowledge and how to effectively apply that organized knowledge in solving problems and developing ideas. Personal knowledge management (PKM) is treated from the perspective of an applied field of study via strategic approach, or what Pauleen and Gorman (2011) call “PKM Strategy” especially enacted on the first two levels: individual and organizational. Consistent with PKM as strategy, Pauleen and Gorman view PKM strategy on the individual level as underpinning three fundamental questions: : (i) How do I view my knowledge and how have I come to own it? (ii) What is the role of a social network in PKM? and (iii) How do I (and/or my network) maintain knowledge currency in rapidly changing environments and anticipate the inevitable changes in environmental conditions? From the practitioner approach, consistent with a leadership or organizational view, the following three questions guide application and practice: (i) How do knowledge workers rise above the role of mere information processors or knowledge processors? Can they become knowledge forecasters, ‘conglomerates’, brokers and creators? (ii) Can the often seemingly clashing motivations between organizational KM and PKM be harmonized so that the

‘enlightened self-interest’ of both parties can be realized? and (iii) What is the role of government in providing PKM skills to its citizens in times of extreme discontinuity such as we are currently experiencing? (p. xviii).

The multiple conceptual or theoretical frameworks attached to PKM include those highly rooted in philosophy and its theories. One such is Stoicism which Case and Gosling (2011) apply in their perspective of viewing PKM in terms of how we have come to define and understand “knowledge”, and how we use this understanding to value personal knowledge. According to Case and Gosling (2011), the role of “person” or “individual” is important in our understanding of PKM and the application of KM as we contextualize knowledge in terms of diverse inputs and outputs to develop our approach as personal knowledge managers. They argue that definitions and changing ideas concerning key concepts such as knowledge and wisdom help to determine how we treat of and categorize our knowledge as potential knowledge and evolutionary or realized knowledge. Furthermore, PKM strategy on an individual basis involves the idea of Phronesis or “the ability to make judgments about ‘what matters’” (p. 32). Murphy (2011) uses an information approach to PKM by assigning importance to the relationship between information and imagination and the role that factors such as intuition, visualization, pattern recognition, and other processes play in knowledge acquisition and application. The management of what he calls “personal digital libraries” becomes the way we really develop a PKM in a digital information age; what could be called “information architecture” in which we design and build structures to manage knowledge.

The framework for PKM must clearly be based on individual ideals and understanding of knowledge as both an applied and possessed value. Wolfe (2011) sees the individual as the “locus of knowledge” (p. 59) and views PKM as a construct of understanding knowledge management (KM) and its ideas as “Personal knowledge management... recovers the person as the locus of knowledge” (p. 74). Thus, the individual is the basic unit in PKM whether practices are gauged to operationalize knowledge workers’ skills and abilities at the organizational or broader social levels. Here, we see PKM as an organically-driven process wherein the individual is the center of all ideas and practices (Jones, Corner & Hamalainen, 2011). PKM practices require understanding not only how the individual relates to the knowledge he or she possesses, but also to the centrality of the individual in determining how that knowledge evolves and is applied in addressing needs in the changing organizational and social environments. The actual process that goes into managing personal knowledge is also part of the framework for PKM strategies and philosophy and Prusak and Cranefield (2011) believe that, “As individuals, if we are to effectively manage our personal knowledge, we need to continually seek out and capitalize on opportunities – inside and outside our workplace, day by day and minute by minute” (p. 11). There are four methods that Prusak and Cranefield see as necessary for managing knowledge between individual and organizational needs: 1) scanning and reinvention, (2) vetting and filtering, (3) investing in one’s networks, and (4) getting out of the office. This links to the understanding of the “social knowledge network” concept which Snowden, Pauleen and Vuuren (2011) propose as part of managing personal knowledge in the domain of the three PKM framework places or settings: individual environment, organizational

environment, and social environment. Snowden, et al, (2011) believe that social knowledge networking is the dominant stream of personal knowledge management.

Some theorists view PKM as best fitting within systems and processes designed to facilitate information-knowledge flow and connectivity. Kolb and Collins (2011) believe that “knowledge is created and maintained within a duality of connects and disconnects” (p. 130). Their “connectivity perspective” on personal knowledge management (PKM) and creation is underpinned by the following three premises: (1) personal knowledge is seldom, if ever ‘stand-alone’ knowledge; (2) we need to be connected to create knowledge; and (3) we need periods of regenerative disconnection in the process of managing and creating PKM. Kolb and Collins (2011) also believe that we discover and manage connective flow by engaging in five practices: (1) think and create when we are at our best; (2) saying no to hyper-connectivity; (3) ensuring that no means no (most of the time); (4) respecting others’ reflective space; and (5) expecting and managing our connectivity emotions. Thus, these are the essence of PKM as a form of career and life management. Davenport (2011) views the knowledge worker as the chief knowledge manager when it comes to PKM as the capabilities of knowledge workers in relation to ideas of acquisition, personal documentation, knowledge search, and networking and knowledge sharing determine the outcomes of applying KM on any level, whether as functionalists, cube captains, nomads, global collaborators, or tech individuals.

Cheong and Tsui (2011) believe that effective PKM strategies are built around personal learning and organizational learning and the ability to link the two. They believe that the highest value and purpose of PKM reside in the ability to align personal and organizational learning goals and objectives, and this is a major responsibility of knowledge leaders and managers. Cheong and Tsui propose the following three strategies to bridge the gap between individual and organizational learning in developing effective PKM: (1) align the individual and organizational learning objectives; (2) understand both individual and organizational learning factors; and (3) embed the individual learning process into the organizational learning process. This relates highly to understanding of PKM as a “citizen-based” developmental approach in organizations and broader social contexts, and is consistent with Wiig’s idea that “The root objective of PKM is the desire to make citizens highly knowledgeable” (Wiig, 2011, p. 230). These citizens can be viewed as organizational citizens or societal citizens. The major aim of PKM from this perspective is to ensure that these citizens, whether they are operational knowledge workers, tactical knowledge workers, or strategic knowledge workers are equipped with broad personal competences which allow them to deal with “knowledge-related globalization pressures” (p. 231) that influence how society and the individual deal with knowledge.

## **Discussion**

The major questions concerning PKM as a field of study and applied KM approach to individual career and life management stem from philosophical ideas and debates underlying KM frameworks and theories, and consequently, emerge as an issue in defining the scope of PKM. These questions and debates range from those proposed by McFarlane (2008, 2010) and Onions (2010) regarding the need for an organized and

agreed upon body of knowledge, whether encompassed in the development of a KM BOK or Knowledge Ecosystem, to connectivity theory (Kolb & Collins, 2011), philosophical understanding as in stoic approach to PKM (Case & Gosling, 2011), social knowledge network perspective (Snowden, Pauleen, & Vuuren, 2011), and citizen-based conceptualization (Wiig, 2011), to organically-driven ideas about PKM (Wolfe, 2011; Jones, Corner & Hamalainen, 2011). The fact is that PKM will experience all the deficiencies or shortcomings of KM as an organized body of knowledge. Thus, questions or concerns raised about KM regarding its approach, philosophy, theoretical underpinnings and similar issues are very legitimate when we consider that KM is the parent of PKM and owing to the fact that systems and their structures mirror the variables of their foundations.

PKM is a concept which is both powerful and innovative, and the promises which this body of knowledge holds for individuals, organizations, and broader social institutions are awesome. In order for this to become fully realized, however, there needs to be further research and development in PKM, especially regarding application as strategies to individual and organizational problems and challenges. Because PKM is new and developing, there is a paucity of available literature. Thus far, the most authoritative source seems to be the book *Personal Knowledge Management: Individual, Organizational and Social Perspectives*, which is exclusively dedicated to the treatment of PKM, and which consequently consists of majority of understanding and theoretical frameworks from its authors for PKM study and practice. Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) will perhaps grow slowly, at least much slower than KM because the available bases of applying PKM to organizational and social environments require deep consideration of individual uniqueness as knowledge workers with varying capabilities and needs.

Based on the above ideas and understandings concerning PKM, collectively, we are not fully ready to practice PKM since the variations in individual knowledge (both tacit and explicit knowledge), experience, education, appreciation and knowledge of KM, abilities and skills make it very difficult to operationalize common practices that can meet the needs of workers based on technical, interpersonal, and conceptual capabilities and the degree to which these faculties are engaged in their varying positions of responsibility. PKM can however be fully applied on an individual basis because it has the individual as “the locus of knowledge” (Wolfe, 2011). Furthermore, we are yet to understand fully what constitutes a Personal Knowledge Management Body of Knowledge (PKMBOK) and how we will apply these at the three levels: individual, organizational, and social environment levels. Whatever the case, PKM is very interesting and there are more and more ideas and theories emerging as PKM becomes more cemented in current and emerging literature in management and across other fields of study.

## **Recommendations**

Personal Knowledge Management (PKM) represents progress for Knowledge Management (KM) theory and practice, as well as general progress within the field of applied knowledge as far as value, individual, and the organization are concerned. The viability of applying PKM on an individual basis is great; however, on an

organizational basis, applying PKM will prove more challenging. The individual will have to take personal responsibility in acquiring and managing his or her own knowledge for self-growth and professional development. Organizational knowledge leaders and managers will have to rethink organizational and individual alignment as the premise for effectively implementing and applying PKM strategies successfully.

One method for organizations and social institutions to apply PKM is to use the social networking and citizenship approaches. By viewing individuals as parts of systems and valuing knowledge sharing through communication and interaction, organizations will be able to develop and implement strategies consistent with individual professional, personal, and social growth needs. Organizational citizenship behavior is a good perspective from which to view PKM as part of organizational planning and strategy for growth and performance where the knowledge worker is the key resource. Citizenship behavior encompasses both individual and team efforts of knowledge workers to achieve organizational goals (Pearce & Herbig, 2004) and allows leaders and managers to influence how individuals acting alone or in groups apply their tacit and explicit knowledge in meeting organizational and personal professional goals.

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