The Adoption Of Knowledge Management Standards And Frameworks

In The Australian Government Sector

Sally Burford, Stuart Ferguson, University of Canberra, Australia

ABSTRACT:

Knowledge and its management require significant attention within the majority of twenty-first century organisations. One approach to managing knowledge is to use traditional management strategies of frameworks, policies and standards. In line with this approach, an Australian Standard for Knowledge Management was published in 2005. This research paper reports an investigation of the use of standards and frameworks for knowledge management in the government sector and finds that their use is sporadic, fragmented, discerning and opportunistic.

Keywords: *Knowledge management, Standards, Frameworks*

1. Introduction

This paper reports an investigation of how Australian government organisations use overarching policy, models, standards and frameworks to facilitate the management of knowledge in organisations. The study focuses its enquiry on the role of the Australian Knowledge Management (KM) Standard within the environments and contexts of organisational knowledge endeavours. It examines whether the Australian Standard and other frameworks or policies are in use and, if so, how they are incorporated within the organisation to support the knowledge work and interventions of the enterprise.

KM has emerged as an important focus for organisations over the last two decades and an increasingly important management lens or framework (Koenig, 2008). The interest in KM reflects the view, first, that over recent decades there has been a fundamental shift from a society based on capital, land and labour to one for which the primary resource is knowledge (Drucker, 1993) and, second, that in order to remain competitive a modern organisation must attend to knowledge as a key competitive asset. Prusak (1999) suggests that there is no sustainable advantage other than what a firm knows, how it can utilise what it knows and how fast it can learn something new.

KM has gone through various phases of development and maturity, with writers presenting diverging perspectives of what constitutes knowledge and its management. When knowledge is reified and considered reducible to artefacts that can be captured and stored in information systems, there is a case for conventional approaches to management that include standards development and 'best practice'. Pre-defined frameworks and processes may be less applicable, however, when knowledge is viewed as a human activity, a situated practice (Tsoukas, 2005), a complex responsive process (Stacey, 2007) or an interrelationship (Snowden, 2002).

Standards Australia (SA) published its standard, Knowledge Management: a Guide, in 2005. Standards Australia is an independent company which prepares and publishes many Australian standards after a process of consultation and consensus that involves many of the stakeholders and experts in the relevant field. The KM Standard followed an earlier SA guide (2001) but unlike that publication it was issued as a formal standard and was described as the first nationally endorsed KM standard in the world (Halbwirth & Sbarcea, 2005). Unlike other standards, however, it is described in its opening pages as a 'non-prescriptive guide' and a 'flexible framework' (Standards Australia, 2005).

Standards bodies in other countries have developed KM guides without labelling them standards. In 2002 the British Standards Institute's position was that at 'this point in the development of Knowledge Management, it is too early to attempt to impose too rigid a framework or too narrow a view of this rapidly developing field.' Its approach was to provide 'globally applicable documents and other resources that acknowledge and build upon, rather than constrain the richness of the Knowledge Management discipline' (Farmer, 2002, p.6; italics added). A European study raised a similar point, listing as one of the objections to the development of any standard one that spoke directly to the KM standardisation project: 'one of the most critical points concerning

standardisation is the question: "what is a sensible degree of standardisation of a soft subject like knowledge management in a detailed and structured, but still useful, manner?"' (Weber et al., 2002).

The authors of the Australian Standard, on the other hand, believed it would assist individuals and organisations understand KM concepts and 'the environment best suited for enabling knowledge activities', and '[o]ffer a scalable and flexible framework for designing, planning, implementing and assessing knowledge interventions that respond to an organisation's environment and state of readiness' (Standards Australia, 2005, p.ii). It was hoped that organisations that followed its recommended practice would become more productive.

This research sets out to establish whether the Standard has been adopted and has benefited the government sector in the five years since its publication. Within specific organisations, it explores whether the intentions for the KM Standard meet the needs of knowledge managers and workers.

2. The Literature

Wong and Aspinwall (2004) suggest that organisations struggle with KM and that in order to reach their full potential they need a strong theoretical foundation in the form of a framework to support their knowledge-based activities. They define framework as 'a set of basic assumptions or fundamental principles of intellectual origin that forms the underlying basis for action' (Wong & Aspinwall, 2004, p. 94). They also warn that the development of a KM framework may be problematic for individual knowledge managers and that a flawed framework will lead to sub-optimal guidance. Maier and Remus (2003, p. 62) argue that commonly agreed frameworks, methods or procedures are required in order to avoid KM initiatives that 'seem to absorb all kinds of theoretical approaches as well as practical activities, measures and technologies without thorough consideration as to its strategic or business value'.

Knowledge managers have a range of models and sets of guidelines on which to base their practice. Nonaka and Takeuchi's model of knowledge conversion (1995) is typical of what Shankar and Gupta (2005, p. 260) call 'knowledge category models'. 'Socially constructed models' (Shankar & Gupta, 2005, p. 260) are process driven and include knowledge life cycle models (McElroy 1999; Bukowitz & Williams, 2000). Wong and Aspinwall (2004) believe that these isolated theoretical contributions represent snapshots or particular aspects of knowledge activity in organisations and require greater integration and cohesion if they are to provide a clear guide to productive action for KM practitioners.

In a global study of 160 KM frameworks, Heisig (2009, p.16) concludes that frameworks both have an 'integrative effect' by fostering 'a basic understanding of relevant aspects and terms' and 'offer guidance in order to purposefully and systematically plan KM efforts'. Heisig follows Rubenstein-Montano et al. (2001) in outlining three types of KM framework: 'prescriptive frameworks', which spell out ways in which 'to engage in knowledge management activities'; 'descriptive frameworks', which identify KM attributes that are critical for the success of KM initiatives, and, finally, 'hybrid frameworks', which combine the two (2009, p.5). The Australian KM Standard is an example of a hybrid framework.

Internationally, the European KM Forum adopted the goal of creating common ground in KM terminology, application and implementation and stimulating 'the definition of open standards and common approaches for KM across Europe (Weber et al., 2002). This goal culminated in the European Committee for Standardization's 2004 Guide to Good Practice in KM, which is formally presented as a 'workshop agreement' rather than a standard. Based on their research in Europe, Weber et al. (2002) propose a 'sensible degree of standardisation' for the holistic practice of KM, with a range of 'standardisation' instruments including best practice, common approaches, reference frameworks and, what they call, 'real standards' (2002). They identify three tiers of standards in their discussion of the role of standards in KM: first level standards, which are designed to describe the overall concepts and approaches of KM; a second tier, which focuses on elements of KM such as topic maps and ontologies, and a third category consisting of allied or supporting standards, such as those for XML.

Noting the push for KM standards at the time, Firestone and McElroy (2003, p. 332) claimed that KM 'standards formulation efforts are premature at best and seriously misguided at worst'. They see the premature formulation of standards and patterns of behaviour as harmful to innovation and adaptation in the formative years of KM. Until a greater awareness of 'what KM is' and a phase of 'competing and discordant ideas' about KM stabilises, Firestone and McElroy (2003, p. 332) claim that this knowledge cannot be codified and rigidified into place. They warn that consensus reached among stakeholders about KM at a

particular point in time does not guarantee its veracity and quality and that standardisation will retard the emergence of new knowledge claims about KM.

Stacey (2007, p. 231) warns that the dominant management paradigm is consistently and continually applied to KM in the form of 'organisation-wide intentions' of strategy, standards and best practice and that orthodox and rational management theory predominates in organisations. Snowden and Stanbridge (2004, p. 142) express their concern about a strand of KM that endorses 'economics of knowledge packaging' and ongoing scientific management.

Increasingly, however, writers apply the lens of complexity to the situated practice of knowledge work and management (Stacey, 2007; Kennedy, 2006; Snowden, 2002; McElroy, 2000). Indeed, Snowden and Stanbridge (2004, p. 140) claim that KM was a pioneering management discipline in its acceptance of complexity thinking and that the uncertainty and ambiguous nature of 'human acts of knowing lends itself to complexity based thinking'.

Complex adaptive systems theory holds that coherent patterns emerge from the local interactions of agents that adapt in response to the action of other agents in close proximity (Cilliers, 1998). Management paradigms of external design and control that use strategies such as planning, blueprints or programs are inconsistent with complexity theory (Stacey, 2007, p. 237). Stable, linear, repeatable, cause and effect relationships have no role in complexity theory and without them plans and blueprints for activity are of little use. This casts doubt on any KM intervention that relies on standards, frameworks or policy.

As a complex adaptive system, a knowledge-intensive organisation has emergent properties and patterns and requires a management approach that seeks to strengthen or disrupt these patterns. The actions and intentions of management will gain a response from others within an organisation but, according to Stacey (2007, p. 322) such a response cannot be predicted with certainty nor be controlled. Stacey (2007), along with Snowden (2002, 2003), question an organisation's ability to attend to knowledge and its activities within a traditional management framework. Thus new paradigms of managing knowledge are needed.

According to Snowden (2003, p. 4), standards, frameworks and best practices are only partial representations of what we know. Humans always know more than they can say and write down. He argues (2002) against global, prescriptive and documented ways of practicing KM. Best practice, he states, is contrary to natural practice and 'an attempt to impose an idealistic structured process onto the natural activity of learning and knowledge transfer' (Snowden, 2003, p2). He also warns that best practice is often entrained past practice and will not therefore serve innovation and creativity. Weber et al. (2002) also acknowledge the perception that 'standards are mostly seen as a barrier for human development in terms of creativity and flexibility'.

This review of the literature suggests seemingly irreconcilable approaches to KM and highlights the difficulties in approaching organisation-wide KM interventions. At one extreme, true to management orthodoxy, national standards bodies in Australia, UK and Europe have attempted to provide clear frames for the practice of KM. At the other extreme, Snowden and Stanbridge (2004, p. 142) warn 'knowledge management is in danger of backfiring as a result of an approach to knowledge management that amounts to large corporate militancy'. With these extremes in mind, this study sets out to explore the place of the Australian KM Standard in specific organisational contexts.

3. The Australian KM Standard

The Australian KM Standard of 2005 is an attempt to codify an area of theory and practice that is noted for its complexity, multi-disciplinarity and contentiousness. The Standard claims from the outset that its intentions are to:

- assist individuals and organisations understand KM concepts and 'the environment best suited for enabling knowledge activities' and
- provide 'a scalable and flexible framework for designing, planning, implementing and assessing knowledge interventions that respond to an organisation's environment and state of readiness' (Standards Australia, 2005, p.ii).

The Standard's authors refer to the use of specific tools, techniques and activities, 'either individually or collectively, to implement knowledge management' as 'knowledge interventions' (Standards Australia, 2005,

pp.1-2). This is an ambitious claim and the research presented in this paper is a preliminary step in establishing whether the Standard has lived up to the promise.

There have been many attempts to define KM – one review by Hlupik et al. in 2002 identified eighteen distinct definitions of KM (Bouthillier & Shearer, 2002). For the authors of the Standard, KM is:

> *A trans-disciplinary approach to improving organisational outcomes and learning, through maximising the use of knowledge. It involves the design, implementation and review of social and technological activities and processes to improve the creating, sharing, and applying or using of knowledge.*

Knowledge management is concerned with innovation and sharing behaviours, managing complexity and ambiguity through knowledge networks and connections, exploring smart processes, and deploying people-centric technologies (Standards Australia, 2005, p.2).

The KM Standard emphasises the social sources of information and knowledge in organisations, the role of these in knowledge generation and the complexity of human knowing. It acknowledges the integral and supportive nature of well applied technology in knowledge management.

The reader is asked to consider the organisation 'as an ecosystem that consists of a complex set of interactions between people, process, technology and content' (Standards Australia, 2005, p.8). The knowledge ecosystem model is intended to provide an organisation with insight into the 'knowledge flows' within the networks and relationships of the model (Standards Australia, 2005, p.5). Like many other KM frameworks (Heisig, 2009, p.5), the Australian Standard uses a pictorial representation to aid KM implementation in an organization – see Figure 1.

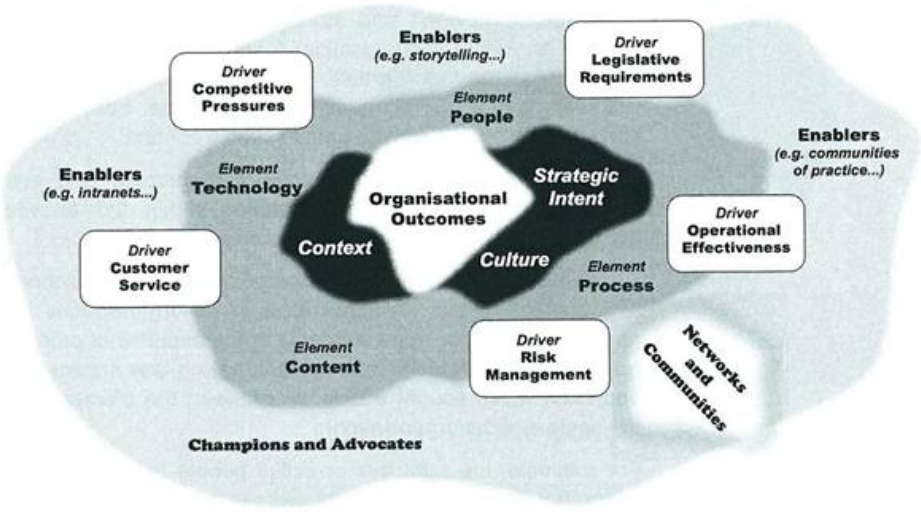

Figure 1: The Knowledge Ecosystem (Standards Australia, 2005; pp.9)

The knowledge ecosystem is made up of a number of elements – people, process, technology and content – as well as:

- drivers, such as competitive pressures, customer service and legislative requirements
- the enablers, or 'tools, techniques and activities through which knowledge management is implemented in an operational environment' (Standards Australia, 2005, p.1)
- organisational outcomes, which are at the core of the ecosystem

- context and strategic intent', which also lie at the core of the knowledge ecosystem (since knowledge is shaped by these factors)

- culture, which refers here to 'the combination of an organisation's skills and competencies'.

The range of 'tools, techniques and activities' represented in the section on enablers highlights the trans-disciplinary approach represented by KM. More than half are management related, most focusing on human resources and highlighting KM's primary endeavours: leveraging the organisation's intellectual assets, fostering innovation and change throughout the organisation and developing the required organisational culture (Ferguson & Hider, 2006). Some of the enablers represent standard management theory and practice, such as after action reviews and mentoring and coaching, while others focus on communication: for instance, communities of practice, social network analysis and storytelling. Information management enablers such as content management and document management are noted as well as information systems and technology. Specific to the emergent field of KM, knowledge auditing, knowledge mapping and knowledge literacy are listed as enablers of KM.

The Standard provides a central framework 'for designing, planning, implementing and assessing knowledge interventions' (Standards Australia, 2005, p.7). The framework is a cyclical one comprising three main phases, labelled Mapping, Building and 'Operationalising', each of which can be supported by appropriate 'enablers' and each of which can be revisited 'according to the demands and needs of [one's] organisation' (Standards Australia, 2005, p.11). One of the strengths of the framework is that, as well as providing managers with a workable set of guidelines within which to develop knowledge initiatives, it contextualises the process by providing, for instance, examples to assist organisations get started with appropriate enablers for different phases of the cycle. This feature helps to provide some practical advice and give some substance to what would otherwise be an abstract account of a model of organisational complexity (the knowledge ecosystem) and a generalised process of knowledge intervention.

The sections of the Standard that cover evaluation and measurement tools, however, are not well developed. The link between standards and performance measures is a strong one. 'To be recognized and accepted as quality standards, a rigorous process of requirements must be met' (Krell & Wiseman, 2004, p.3). Ferguson (2006) suggests that if performance measures cannot be defined then perhaps the norms provided in the KM Standard lack definition and rigour.

4. Research Design

Yin (2003, p. 13) defines case study as an empirical inquiry that investigates a contemporary phenomenon within its real-life context, which is particularly useful when 'the boundaries between phenomenon and context are not clearly evident'. Becker's definition (1968, p. 233) of the purpose of a case study is particularly appropriate to this research. It is twofold: 'to arrive at a comprehensive understanding of the groups under study' and 'to develop general theoretical statements about regularities in social structure and process'. In a case study approach, this research used large Government organisations as cases or units of analysis. A case study approach to knowing more about how organisations are using frameworks and standards for KM revealed contextual insights and patterns by examining the situated activity of KM. Large knowledge-intensive government organisations are not unfamiliar with standards and regulatory environments.

The researchers conducted unstructured interviews with seven KM practitioners from organisations with knowledge-focused sub-units within the organisational structure were conducted. Participants were asked to describe in broad terms what guides, frameworks or standards were available to support them in their work. They were asked to describe the interplay of any guiding frameworks and their practice and the value that they attributed to frameworks for their knowledge endeavours.

In an interpretive approach to the analysis of the collected data, thematic analysis was used to reveal the findings. Thematic analysis involves identifying, analysing and reporting patterns within data. A theme represents some level of patterned meaning within the data (Braun & Clarke, 2006). At a minimum, a theme describes and organises possible observations and at a maximum a theme interprets aspects of the phenomenon (Boyatzis 1998). In an inductive approach to analysis, the data was coded and used to develop the themes. Thematic analysis was useful in this research because it provides a theoretical freedom to approach a complex body of data and reveal patterns and insights without pre-existing expectations or existing coding frames.

5. Findings

This study found that there was very little use of the Australian KM Standard for its stated purpose in Government organisations. Of the seven research participants only three were aware of the existence of the KM Standard. For the most part, when the Standard was known, it was not used to shape the practice of KM. Rather it was described as 'a very useful compilation of what was the thinking of the time'.

The approach to KM taken by research participants was not informed by a single standard or set of guidelines. Instead KM practitioners sought a range of resources and initiatives and valued leading thinkers and consultants in the field.

Analysis of the data revealed the following major themes: (1) resonant KM models, (2) the credibility and authority afforded by a standard, (3) leadership and the need for executive engagement and (4) organisational coherence and stability as a foundation for KM.

5.1. Resonant KM Models

The KM standard was reported to be out-dated and thus of little value five years after its inception. It has not been continuously updated as the thinking in KM shifted and progressed. One research participant reported that he would no longer rely on it to explain KM to an audience; rather he would:

> *Give them a presentation based probably on it [the standard], but you would have to update it, to talk about other things that have continued to evolve and be introduced into the space.*

Inherent in the reported obsolescence of the KM Standard is the probability that the representation of KM as an Australian Standard in 2005 was not a feasible or suitable undertaking at the time, supporting British Standard Institute's earlier judgement that KM was not sufficiently mature as a discipline (Farmer, 2002). KM was then and continues to be an emergent management focus.

Participants sought explicit knowledge of KM in disparate places and forms. Wikis, discussion groups, blogs, formal publications and other 'very useful artefacts' were all sources of direction for the knowledge endeavours within the organisations. Published models of KM theory and practice were used in the organisations studied to underpin knowledge work. They were drawn from what other practitioners and organisations were doing and from the literature, with an attitude of 'what's out there that we can use?' and 'where can we take advantage of other people's work'. Models and frameworks were discovered, considered and adapted by practitioners to provide a theoretical frame of reference for their practice and their contexts. Practitioners were continually checking for the availability of KM models and evaluating their practical and contextual relevance. KM models in the literature were mapped back to the reality of organisational practice until a resonance was found and a practitioner could claim 'this is what we're about'.

We say, 'well okay, how much of that is applicable to [this organisation], how can we reframe that into our world?' so it's definitely an approach that's focused on looking for the better practice and learning lessons from other organisations, applying what seems to be the most appropriate elements of that and setting that within a context of [this organisation].

It was explained by one participant that KM had never developed a 'core', belonged across an organisation and was 'a way of working'. In one organisation KM principles were inculcated across a large number of staff who were knowledge workers, but not named as such in their organisational role. A KM Standardisation did not fit this environment; it could not be applied to 'ways of working'. It was evident that KM was a deeply contextual management approach in these remarks: 'How do you compare this version of KM with somebody else's version of KM?' and 'Just about every place you go to, it would be done in a different way'. Hence attempts to standardise KM made little sense to practitioners.

'Philosophies' were said to have driven the work of KM and 'model' and 'philosophy' were, at times, used interchangeably. One research participant reported that his organisation had built KM into the culture. Philosophies, cultures or positions of professional service, collaboration, building sustainable relationships and empowering clients were reported. Embodied in these descriptions of KM is a deep owning of adopted theoretical underpinnings and models. 'Philosophy' was used to impart passion and integral personal ownership of the models of practice that were discovered and adopted. One research participant reports the discovery of a theoretical model:

Yes, and I had it in my head and it was only when I found the xxxxx stuff that it was like, 'Oh affirmation. That's what I've been thinking all along'. And I'd been putting it into place but I finally had someone in the outside world who'd put a framework around it. I sort of knew intuitively what I was doing but…

Significant in this theme, is the tight coupling and integration of explicit model and situated practice. The theory was known, 'I had it in my head', before it was located in the external world. It was only when theoretical models made sense and were relevant to practitioners that they were adopted for use. Theoretical models could be affirming and supportive if they resonated with practice. Once models had earned their way into the work environment, a mutual, two-way relationship existed. The models informed and communicated the work of KM whilst the issues that beset the practice informed the evolving theoretical models, which were changed by knowledge workers to keep them relevant.

5.2. Credibility, Authority And Communication

Although research participants reported making very little direct use of the Standard as a framework for KM interventions, some nonetheless saw value in it. One of the recurrent themes was the political value of the Standard, which had sometimes added credibility to knowledge interventions. One participant referred to the use of the Standard as a communication tool, noting the credibility that was inherent in an Australian Standard:

'*Oh, look at this'. And they will actually take notice of that … you have an authoritative organisation putting out a guide and they go, 'Oh, yes in that case it's got credibility'. And that's really what I would be using it for …*

The Standard imparts credibility and authority to knowledge work in organisations and is consciously used for that purpose. KM still lacks widespread acceptance in many organisations and may even be regarded with mistrust. One research participant described, for instance, how a team of dedicated knowledge workers was scorned for 'just collecting stories'. The existence of the Standard indicates that KM has stature and import, with engagement from a leading organisation such as Standards Australia.

One research participant indicated that he did not use the Standard for its intended purpose but that:

it gives you something to say, 'hey, look, Standards Australia have done this'. And they go … 'Oh yes, yes'. So, there's an authority and it really is about giving authority to what you're doing.

There was also use of the Standard's definitions: 'some of the glossary that's in it is really handy and we've added bits of that to documents we've put together', thus enhancing the stature of the local reports. Again, being able to reference the Standard has political value, especially in the government sector 'because they're used to working to some sort of regulatory environment'.

The public service environment was also described as one in which risk is continually calculated and the Standard was seen as a tool to mitigate risk to the organisation and the individual. As one participant put it:

And it really is about the risk because the public servants, senior public servant just live with, 'is it a risk to me? Will the Minister be embarrassed? Will I make a mistake?'

Knowledge work, she suggested, is 'risky work', and the Standard helps to alleviate insecurity about KM initiatives.

One research participant referred to the value of the Standard in explaining KM to people 'who are really process oriented ... the left brainers'. Another indicated that she had used it relatively recently to:

help somebody who was interested in expanding into the area of Knowledge Management area, to give them some idea of the extent of the interactions with other types of disciplines and also to give them some idea of what sort of things that they might be expected to be involved in.

The research suggests that the KM Standard is of significant value in the communication and legitimisation of knowledge practices in government organisations and that it is used for these purposes.

5.3 Leadership And Executive Engagement

Heisig's analysis of 160 frameworks for KM suggests that the most commonly identified set of critical success factors were 'human-oriented factors', comprising culture, people and leadership (2009, pp. 11-12). Research participants made many references to these elements and in particular to the critical importance of leadership, highlighted in the comment, 'but leadership, leadership again, it's leadership!' Embodied in this explicit call for leadership is a need for executive engagement in KM. Executive engagement provides leadership, resourcing, supportive relationships and wider connections within the organisation.

In one case, a highly regarded executive leader was reported to have worked in synergy with his knowledge team in an intentional effort to change practices to include stronger client relationships. His engagement and its value were demonstrated in the way in which he worked across the executive body to communicate and involve them in the knowledge initiatives, resulting in their endorsement of a business relationship model. This knowledge leader was seen as a conduit of knowledge interventions across the executive layer in the organisation:

> *He was already engaging with his peers across the organisation, so he regularly, every couple of months, meets with … the group managers on a one-to-one basis.*

In another case, it was the executive leadership of the organisation that brought about improvements in KM, a fact that the research participant attributed to the governance structure, 'which put everybody at the table and which also insisted on the decision being a corporate decision, not an individual decision.'

Participants linked leadership with access to resources especially where access was political and significant funding was required. As one said of a well-respected leader, 'and he knew there were really big issues and he went in lobbying for this money'. Participants looked for more than 'lip service' in governance and leadership. They saw value in executive support, energy and participation.

And it was his vision and him there for supporting and sponsoring us that made a huge difference - as I said it was sponsorship that allowed us to do some of the most amazing work. It was vision and it was leadership. Without the leaders you just don't get there. I was being supported all the way to do this.

One research participant saw KM leadership as providing a vision and a broad direction within which knowledge practitioners enjoy the freedom to plan and enact the operational aspects of knowledge work:

> *We had some broad guidelines about what were the issues and what they would like to see at the end. But a lot of the operational side of getting this out there and how we would make it happen came out of the team.*

This comment also highlights the view that leadership in the knowledge and information environment is not necessarily the work of an individual – groups and steering committees also provide leadership and points of reference to knowledge practitioners. One participant clearly had great respect for a steering committee, noting 'We kept going back to the steering committee all the time'. The committee provided leadership, communication and confirmation that knowledge workers were heading in the right direction.

Absence of leadership was also raised in the interviews and was seen as limiting the effectiveness of knowledge work. Some participants had experienced ill-informed and damaging actions by those higher up in the hierarchy. The response to non-existent or poor leadership was usually subversive strategy and behaviour. As one participant put it:

> *Without the leaders you just don't get there. You can do it all under the radar … but the point is… it is vision and leadership. Without it you're not going anywhere.*

Where leadership is absent, knowledge worker are typically left to get on with the job. They can operate without reference to a more senior executive in the organisation, with careful politics and attention to regulatory responsibilities and other areas of management. The downside is that in such instances KM interventions and benefits remain largely unknown throughout the organisation.

Leadership is prescribed in the Australian KM standard as one of the 'enablers' of KM. Complexity thinking, however, would hold that leadership cannot be prescribed in this way. Stacey suggests that leadership is constructed in the recognition of others and does not exist in 'autonomous individuals who formulate visions and values to be directly applied to an organisational or cultural system' (2007, p. 352). This research suggests that leadership and engagement should not be relegated to 'enabler', 'factor' or 'criteria' in a KM

framework. The repeated call for leadership is a plea for knowledge work to be acknowledged, integrated and valued within the organisations, and for KM to be a participatory activity, especially with the organisation's senior managers. Executive engagement can be an effective *driver* of the knowledge endeavours of an organisation, more so than the framework that lists it as an 'enabler'.

5.4. Organisational Cohesiveness And Stability

Research participants suggested that government departments face special problems in their KM endeavours because of the reality of 'constant change' in government and government departments. One group of participants referred to the fact that, for its department, each election resulted in either losing or gaining an area of responsibility. It was suggested that some knowledge issues 'are about maturity' and 'being able to grow in a fairly stable environment'. A 'siloed attitude' is encouraged when groups and functions are moved to different departments. There is a preparative separating when change is anticipated and those that move may 'actually maintain their siloed attitude so that they're self sufficient when they get picked up and moved somewhere else'. Knowledge hoarding in that instance is seen as 'almost a survival mechanism'.

It's quite clear that areas that have been integrated for longer periods are less concerned about that and more willing to share and to take a collegiate view, and the areas that consider they have to be more self reliant, because they get moved around more often, exhibit those type of behaviours.

An 'unstable' environment appears to affect organisational KM development among government agencies and it is possible that the phenomenon is repeated in the private sector. There is a long-standing perception among information professionals in the financial sector that mergers and demergers in the sector present them with critical knowledge challenges (Ferguson & Burford, 2009, p.53). This finding also suggests that the complex model of the 'knowledge ecosystem' presented by the Australian KM Standard is too neat, and that, in unstable environments some parts of an organisation do not participate in the knowledge ecosystem.

A government 'culture of constant change' was also seen by some participants as a barrier to strategic approaches to KM, which in turn affects departments' capacity to develop their information and knowledge management practices. Research participants saw the value of being strategic and planning ahead – 'what investment do we put in place now to ensure that we're not constantly trying to catch up with what the business needs' – but suggested that there might be little point in anticipating the knowledge and information needs of business units that were anticipated to move from one department to another.

One participant in this research named business purpose and cohesiveness as a powerful motivation for KM. He claimed that in government agencies, the business focus and greater stability allowed KM initiatives to be implemented and to prosper in a way that could not be achieved in government departments that 'are all about policy'. A continuous and purposeful business focus allowed agencies to succeed in knowledge initiatives. Longitudinal stability and attention was named as a recipe for KM success:

> *We found what's worked for us most effectively, I think and we've been quite happy to continue to develop that slowly, or to just continue to leverage it.*

6. Conclusions

These exploratory research findings suggest that Australian government organisations do not become more productive by using 'a scalable and flexible framework for designing, planning, implementing and assessing knowledge interventions that respond to an organisation's environment and state of readiness', outlined in the KM Standard. Most participants in this research had not heard of the Standard. One, when asked how he had used it in his work, replied: 'I was aware of it'. The Standard was regarded as artefact or object but did not feature in a close and integral association with the realities of knowledge management. There is a significant gap between the Standard and KM practice in Australian government organisations.

There are lessons to be learned in the local level adoption of theoretical models that resonate with knowledge workers. This research points to the fact that models are adopted only when they accord with practice and become evolving frames for knowledge work, locally owned and modified without consultation or reference to a 'norm'. They model knowledge work in a deeply contextual manner.

Some knowledge professionals, however, displayed a regard for the KM Standard and found it useful in the social space of knowledge activities. Its existence aided the legitimisation of KM in organisations where it could be referenced in reports and used to enlist support, engender communication and provide authority and

credibility for KM. In practice, it is suggested, a KM framework when owned and promulgated by a standards body such as Standards Australia finds some value. Located under the auspices of Standards Australia, the KM Standard has an authority that can be referenced by practitioners to provide credibility and legitimacy to KM practices. It is a useful tool of communication and influence, as KM practitioners reach out for engagement and participation at all levels within their organisations. There is a perceived need for involvement and a clear commitment to KM and its practices in large organisations and a desire on the part of those engaged in KM practices to relate to people at higher levels of the organisation – the KM Standard becomes a tool in this communication.

The KM Standard finds its place as legitimising artefact, but is not used as an implementation guide in complex, adaptive organisations. However the management paradigm that produces documented standards, frameworks and guides is still dominant in organisations. KM standards and frameworks can be considered as part of the rich complex environments in which knowledge work takes place. The reality is that, in responding to their environment, knowledge workers will creatively use whatever objects are available to the benefit of their practice and their organisations.

7. References

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About the Authors:

Sally Burford is an Assistant Professor in Knowledge and Information Studies in the Faculty of Arts and Design at the University of Canberra. She is the Course Convenor for the Master of Information Studies. Sally's research is specifically in the area of the practice of web information architecture and more generally in the area of all knowledge and information practice. Alongside her research, Sally has considerable industry experience in managing online environments, in particular, online education and large enterprise websites.

Sally Burford, Assistant Professor in Knowledge and Information Studies, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra ACT 2601; Tel: +61 (0)2 6201 5958; Email: Sally.Burford@canberra.edu.au

Dr Stuart Ferguson is an Assistant Professor in Knowledge and Information Studies at the University of Canberra. He has an academic background in Politics, Librarianship and Literary Theory and experience of information practice in Scotland, South Africa and Australia. He teaches in the fields of Information and Knowledge Management and Librarianship. Recent research has been in the fields of Knowledge Management, Information Ethics and Information Organisation. He has published several papers in the KM field over the last five years.

Dr Stuart Ferguson, Assistant Professor, Knowledge & Information Studies, Faculty of Arts and Design, University of Canberra ACT 2601; Tel. +61 (0)2 6201 2042; Email: Stuart.Ferguson@canberra.edu.au

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