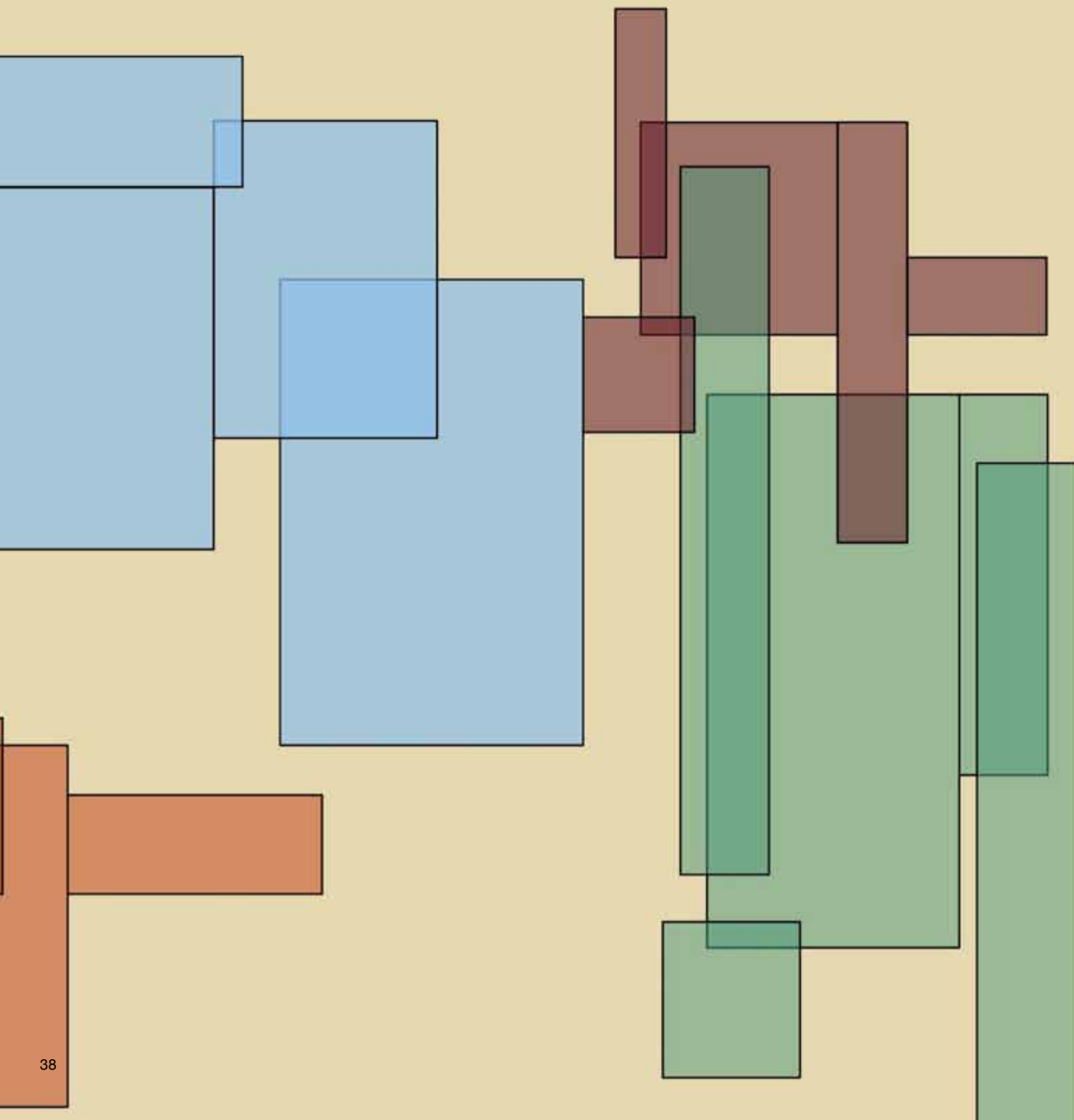


Recomposing knowledge management

Dr. Pavel Kraus, President Swiss Knowledge Management Forum



This article analyzes experiences from successful knowledge management projects. Such projects bring an accepted added value for companies. How does this happen in detail? It happens through effective knowledge management activities, which in turn are based on activities and techniques. In selecting these activities, tasks and techniques, the special characteristics of 'knowledge' must be understood and taken into account when composing the solution. Knowledge management practitioners will need to embed a better understanding of these relationships within organizations in the future.

From the sideshow to the 'crux of the matter'

Two writers discuss how they should present their novels more effectively in order to be more memorable to the audience. Their publisher's advisors have a clear opinion: Instead of a notepad and ballpoint pen, writers should now use either a Montblanc or a Caran d'Ache fountain pen to write. This is guaranteed to promote innovation and work performance, they claim. Does this line of argument sound familiar? I always think of this story when conversations turn to the use of, for example, Slack, MS Teams, or Mural or Miro.

The general discussion about knowledge management (KM) unfortunately often revolves around the use of this or that tool. What is the best tool for knowledge sharing? What is the best knowledge management system? Should we introduce design thinking? Which agile method is the best? This should be more about the content in and of itself and only marginally about the tools. After more than twenty years in the 'KM arena', I have seen so many discussions that have missed the crucial core point. However, the focus should be on answering the following points: What exactly is the added value we want to create through our knowledge management efforts? What benefits do we want to derive from improved and simplified business processes, agile methods, project management, etc.?

Illustration left: Score for a musical composition - graphic design of the editorial office inspired by the strongly visual scores of the Swiss composer Hermann Meier (1906 - 2002), who notated his composition plans for orchestral and electronic music as large-scale, multicolored sound surfaces.

And how do we need to change the way we work because of it?

Knowledge management - position it more attractively

Any discussion around knowledge management should start with identifying the effective added value we expect from all KM activities: What brings about a noticeable change, how exactly does it happen, and how do we communicate the benefits?

A working group was formed around this question at the Swiss Knowledge Management Forum (skmf.net) in December 2020. It dealt in particular with the definition of knowledge management. It was based on the formulation in last year's DACH-KM glossary: "Targeted design of framework conditions and processes in an organization, with special consideration of the production factor 'knowledge'. The focus is on creating and networking individual knowledge and applying it in value-creation processes."

The focus of the SKMF working group was aligned even more strongly with the goals of a company. But what does that mean in concrete terms?

- Managers should immediately recognize and understand the benefits of knowledge management, be it profitability, productivity or clearly defined goals in non-profit organizations. The added value must be communicated quickly and credibly.

- Every organization defines its focus differently. What they have in common are measurable positive results or the achievement of set goals. The application of knowledge management must lead to activities and actions that are designed to bring tangible added value in practice, or in day-to-day business.

We know a formula for this added value in profit-oriented companies as "FBC". This stands for "Faster, Better, Cheaper". Knowledge management will therefore have an effect on this "FCB".

In non-profit organizations, where knowledge management has already gained a broad foothold, this measurement is more difficult. But here, too, one could take the speed of response to a disaster, the number of lives saved or the number of dwellings built as a possible indicator.

Thinking from the end result

When thinking about the KM definition, the above-mentioned working group has, so to speak, started from the goal, end result, or value creation. By better handling its 'knowledge', a department or team must increase its performance.

Here are some examples from completed knowledge management projects:

- Employees can make decisions faster with the help of the right experts
- Projects start faster and at the same time save dozens of working hours for each project member.
- A new business model based on digitalization is developed, accepted and profitable.
- Competitor monitoring is easier than before and leads to more competitive products
- Unstructured office documents on unorganized shares or SharePoint sites are efficiently and quickly accessible for new employees to make decisions.

Following this basic idea in the definition, the next step was to identify 'KM activities' that can contribute to better performance in order to achieve the upper results. Only those activities that contribute to the added value have a right to exist in the KM portfolio.

KM activities, education and training

If we now list some possible World Cup activities from this point of view, we find some old familiar things:

- Keeping discussions focused, goal-oriented and rhetorically good
- Coordinate discussion rounds in such a way that knowledge loss is avoided
- Solicit votes from all participants and visualize them at the same time
- Recapitulate what has been said in a timely manner to avoid loss of thought in workshops.
- Consciously adopt alternative perspectives
- Question and discard what has been achieved to make room for something new
- Document richly to be able to reproduce thought processes and arguments later on
- Rework captured knowledge to a high standard of quality
- Record contexts in the documentation
- Store saved documents and information in a way that makes them easy to find
- Structure information storage so that uninitiated people can find their way around
- Make any information findable from the context
- To make 'knowledge' a beloved asset for decision makers through high information quality

In order to successfully master the above KM activities, education and training are needed in, for example, the following competencies:

- Conversation management or moderation
- Visualizing conversations
- Active listening

- Improving the quality of information
- Comprehensible readability of texts
- Structuring and filing of information
- Taxonomy development and cross-linking of information
- Contextual access to documents
- Development of user-friendly software environment (UX)

The list of activities and competencies shows that they are the responsibility of several different corporate functions. This makes knowledge management at the same time a political and diplomatic task in companies. These points must also be embedded in a corporate culture that takes the above into account, demands it and promotes it. So you have to make changes on several fronts.

All these considerations played an important role in the work of the SKMF working group. On February 24, 2021, after a critical input by Dr. Manfred Bornemann, the result was presented to a broader audience for discussion at an SKMF Online Roundtable. The many and diverse opinions will flow into the further work..

Synergies between business units

It becomes apparent that the role of some areas of the company must be looked at anew from the KM point of view. Many of the relevant tasks are the responsibility of HR, organizational development, process and project management, leadership, QM or information management. Although these tasks are important for the overall knowledge management, they should be the responsibility, payment and execution of the corresponding areas. In many cases, these tasks are performed too little or not at all. For this and other reasons, knowledge management was established as a discipline (in the 1990s) and also for triggering KM projects today.

The different signatures (circles, stars, rectangles etc.) in the graphic below, inspired by Andreas Brandner, indicate the different KM tasks of the respective areas.

At the beginning of a KM project, these tasks are first identified in the KM analysis. Then their maturity level in the company is checked. Next, these tasks are optimized and networked.



This results in synergies that make the respective areas more effective and efficient (middle picture). This is the moment when we can start to talk about systematic knowledge management. When the divisions work together in this way, they strengthen the company as a whole. If the company's goals are constantly in focus, knowledge management projects will not fail.

Role of adjunctive activities

Adjunctive activities are essential in successful collaboration, communication and knowledge sharing. They form the backbone of good 'knowledge work' for an individual, a team or an entire organization. When knowledge management is implemented well, they become an integral part of daily work and an important aspect of business processes. These are so-called auxiliary activities or 'adjunctive activities'. They allow successful interface management, which is part of effective knowledge management (see Kraus 2015). They connect work steps of different areas and act like oil in the gearbox. Examples are:

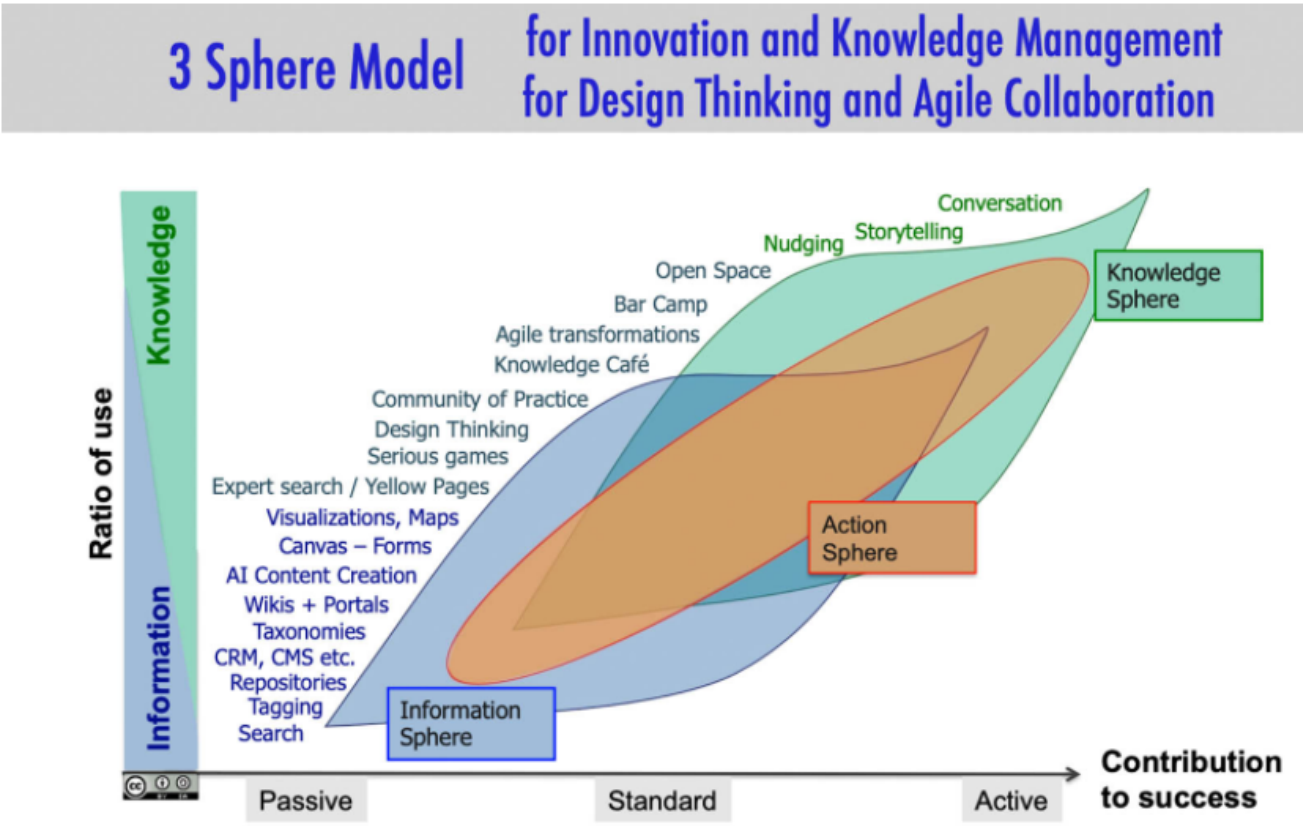
- A visualization that fits the topic
- Audio transcripts of important decisions
- Disciplined use of templates
- The integration of metadata in documents
- The proof of integration of lessons learned as a prerequisite for a project start.

These activities seem inconspicuous, but in their overall effect and their interaction they are unbeatable. Depending on the selection, combination, context or purpose, they are marketed, branded and positioned on the advisory market under different names. This includes formats and methods such as Open Space, BarCamp, Knowledge Café, World Café, Working Out Loud, Scrum and agile approaches. Further also New Work, Communities of Practice, Design Thinking up to information-heavy methods like AI, Content Curation or Collaboration Software.

Let's take design thinking as an example. A Design Thinking process consists of a sequence of steps that all build on each other. The choice of steps, the activities and supporting activities make it 'Design Thinking'. If the steps were changed slightly, it could be called an 'Open Space' or a 'Future Conference'. These two formats are also about innovation, questioning the existing, customer orientation, involvement of all stakeholders, idea prototypes, project proposals, etc. However, the basic activities (components) always remain the same, only the mix is changed. The name of the format or the brand can change and is irrelevant for success. For effective knowledge management, it is crucial that the execution of the knowledge-intensive activities and their networking leads to a quick result.

Three spheres model

The 3-sphere model clarifies the contribution to business success that different techniques and tools can deliver. It also exposes the fallacies of technology-driven knowledge management and clarifies the considerations about which methods should be used and how. The 3-sphere model is based on the DACH-KM glossary definitions of knowledge and information and was developed at SKMF in 2018. The latest simplified 2021 version shows the contribution of different methods, formats and tools to success. Besides, it helps to categorize them. The active and knowledge-intensive methods are at the top of the knowledge sphere, followed by the interaction-related ones, and at the bottom left you find the more passive, information-heavy tools. The activities within the sphere of action are decisive for success.



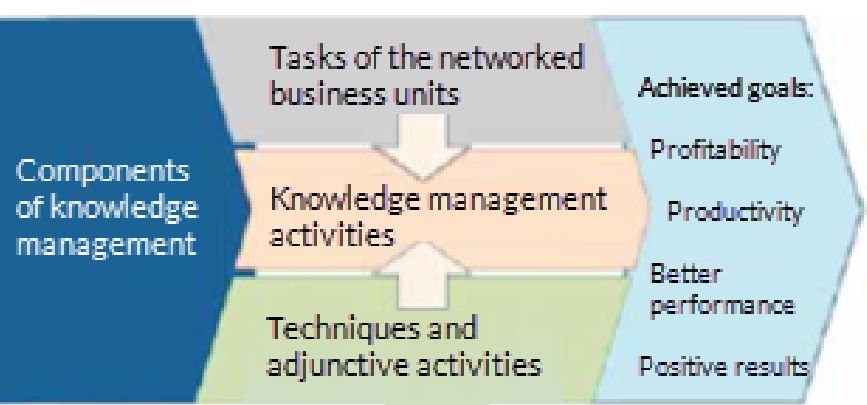
Adjunctive activities and workshop techniques

We find a counterpart to adjunctive activities in workshop designs developed with a focus on the specifics of knowledge work. In workshop facilitation, however, we are talking about techniques rather than activities. Also such workshop designs, like the above mentioned forms, consist at first sight of a series of steps, where these techniques are applied in a defined order and mutual dependence. The difference to traditional facilitation is that in these customized KM workshops, both the context and the documented knowledge is also regrouped

from one step to the next and thus the context is also changed. This visibly creates knowledge gaps that are identified and eliminated in the next step. Gradually, an overall picture systematically emerges. This guarantees that knowledge from the team is generated or provoked in a specific context and documented in a sustainable way.

Another important difference to the classical approach, such as in 'Design Thinking' or 'Open Space' is the use of special techniques that reveal and then close knowledge gaps. The overall picture obtained synchronizes the understanding in the whole team and makes it able to work faster. As a result of the identified and closed knowledge gaps, fewer mistakes are started, time is saved and teamwork is improved. To this end, workshop designs have been developed in the SKMF environment for the following topics, among others:

- Work package definition and budget creation in new product development (3 steps)
- Accelerated project launches in interdisciplinary teams (7 steps)
- Team communication and knowledge transfer between project teams (5 steps)
- Increasing productivity of international sales teams (10 steps)
- Optimization of service design processes for technical field service (5 steps)
- Configuration of MVPs of analytical instruments for in-vitro diagnostics (4 steps)




The future of knowledge management lies in knowing the best and most successful components and applying them in practice in the right and effective combination. The greatest leverage comes from KM activities. These build on the above techniques and adjunctive activities, while being supported by the KM tasks of the networked business units.

However, a comprehensive analysis of the status quo, a deep understanding of the problems of the respective company will still be at the beginning of any knowledge management project. Always against the background of the company's goals, the right components must then be selected and the associated adjunctive activities or techniques practiced and implemented. A

Knowledge management foundation and its components

Various techniques and adjunctive activities support knowledge work particularly well. They are components of effective KM activities. Most of them are known and published. Knowledge management consists of such components and they form its foundation. There are a number of good published compilations. These include, for example, the 'Knowledge Management Toolbox' by Angelika Mittelman, 'Meet Up!' by Martin J. Eppler and Sebastian Kernbach, 'Visual Selling' by Miriam & Marko Hamel or 'Where to Play' by Marc Gruber and Sharon Tal. New combinations and constellations of such components are coming and will soon compete on the market. Some will be successful, others less so. The individual known components that make them up, however, are unlikely to change.

Kraus Pavel (2015). How knowledge management projects fail sustainably. Towards a logic of success. In WISSENSMANAGEMENT inspires: How to activate an unlimited resource. Beier H., Schmidt U., Klett D. (Editors). Akademische Verlagsgesellschaft AKA, Berlin

 Your feedback on this article to author and editor dossier@gfwm.de

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