The Ethics of Knowledge Management

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"In science, knowledge is an unmixed good; in ethics and politics it is bad as well as good"
-John Gray (2003)

INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this article is to suggest why knowledge management (KM) research and practice needs an ethics dimension and to identify questions to help develop that ethical dimension. As such, the article is best classified as a discussion rather than as a research paper.

Although KM has become an important interdisciplinary area of study both within the domain of information systems and beyond, there has been relatively little discussion on the ethical issues, despite its relevance to KM systems and the interaction of actors, processes, and technology in all aspects of KM from design to actual use.

By ethical issues, we refer to the underlying motives for the introduction of KM systems, the way they are actually used and the impact of their use on individuals, the organization, and society. Ethical issues are also relevant to the researcher studying KM, where the subject being researched and the way the research is conducted can raise ethical issues.

KM motivations and behaviour are intertwined with power relations and the self-interests of engaged actors, including researchers, and where during the design, implementation use and research into KM systems, dilemmas, sometimes explicit, but more often tacit, may affect behaviour. The public discussion around the relationship between business organizations and "social responsibility" is a relatively recent phenomenon. The discussion has been a useful one for reminding business organizations, and government at times, of their position, relationship, and responsibility to a social world beyond their corporate boundaries. In doing so the discussion introduces the concept of accountability which is helpful for thinking about the ethical dimensions relating to KM systems, processes and research. Furthermore, the article draws attention to the distinction between the subject matter of Knowledge Management and the much older topic, not specifically articulated within the IS discipline, of the Management of Knowledge. The latter is more concerned with the manipulation (and often distortion) of knowledge to obtain desired outcome (Land, Amjad & Nolas, 2004).

The article draws from examples where the design, implementation, and use of KM systems and processes overlooked questions of accountability — what we have called the

dark side of knowledge management (Land, Amjad & Nolas, 2005a, 2005b) and draws on examples from both business organizations and government. The first part of the article establishes why an ethics dimension is necessary in KM theory and practice and the second section identifies questions on how an ethics dimension could be integrated with current KM research and practice.

WHY KM RESEARCH AND PRACTICE NEEDS AN ETHICS DIMENSION

KM Research

Ethical issues exist in all steps of the research process. Research can be defined as a knowledge-based activity involving the researcher in many choices regarding the collection, distribution, storage, and sharing of knowledge. What we mean by ethical issues can be described with the following example. Action research involves the researcher intervening in the activities of the organization being studied. What are the obligations of the researcher to make clear the possible consequences of the intervention on individuals and the organization? Should the researcher take the role of whistle blower in cases where the researcher comes across dubious or illegal practices? Or should the research take a more distanced approach and just describe the situation?

The first example, with respect to IS research into different aspects of KM, is based on the work of Hosein (2005). According to Hosein, IS researchers, in particular those whose research is closely tied to the design and implementation of systems, have been slow in flagging ethical issues. Certain issues remain taboo – in part because research funding and collaboration depends on the good will of sponsors, partly as a consequence of the IS researcher's relationship to the organizational hierarchy. In other words, it appears that IS researchers by being preoccupied with the management perspective and the managing of information and knowledge, and the impact of the research on their own careers, may "forget" to worry about any of the broader issues.

Another example relates to the research responsibilities of interdisciplinary research such as knowledge management. Some researchers only cite references which support the argument put in their papers, omitting to cite authorities such as Wilson (2002) who contest these arguments or who provide alternative explanations. This becomes a more serious issue in interdisciplinary research because the referees may not know the whole corpus of knowledge relevant to the issues. Citing references is itself an act of knowledge management. In the field of KM there has been some tendency to omit references drawing attention to the political nature of organizational behaviour. Does the researcher have an ethical obligation to make corrections once the omissions have been pointed out?

KM Practices

KM systems provide an opportunity to manipulate and control knowledge in all phases from the sourcing, collection of knowledge, to its storage and distribution (Alter, 2006). Knowledge can be created, omitted or withheld, suppressed, amplified or exaggerated, diminished or distorted. Such activities may arise by accident or mischance (perhaps a virus attack), but often the manipulation is instrumental. Two examples illustrate such manipulations of knowledge in two different contexts: private sector and civil society.

Enron, for example, had a reputation among its employees for sharing knowledge to benefit both of the organization and its employees (Cruver, 2003). At the same time the senior management of the company was engaged in massive fraud engineered with help from the management of knowledge on a vast scale. In its final stages this involved the destruction of information, and hence, knowledge about the affairs of Enron, by means of shredders, abetted by the companies auditors.

In a different context though similar situation, Ebrahim (2003) argues that NGOs must consider how information flows from the local level NGO, up to the level of the international

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