

# The toddler and the Palm Pilot

*Knowledge management, the noisome younger brother of data management, is growing up. But is it ready to play with the big boys? asks Dr Leandro Herrero*

**W**hen the consumer revolution took place some years ago, the customer became king. He or she was always right, and suddenly 90% of all mission statements focused on customers in one form or another. The focus became interest, the interest became a movement, the movement became a crusade and the crusade became revenue for customer services consultants.

In parallel with the crusade, new corporate structures and titles sprang up: customer relations department, vice-president of customer satisfaction, all-things-customer officer, etc. When the crusade ended, after the world had been convinced that the customer (you and I) mattered, customer care became embedded in company life and took on a rather more ignominious role, as a sticker or a label with a freephone number to call for queries, or complaints, or both. Customer services became

less a VP title on the door of a 45th-floor executive suite, and more a place in the shop where you could return that undersized shirt your mother bought for your birthday.

When the quality revolution took place, similar things happened. The crusaders installed executives in boardrooms with titles such as senior executive vice-president of quality. An army of quality officers invaded R&D, manufacturing, marketing, the maintenance department and the post room. Quality programmes, quality workshops, training programmes and training workshops to train the trainers of quality programmes, consumed a great deal of the month. Quality posters appeared on office walls, in statements, in declarations, in confessions and pronouncements. It was a good time for the manufacturers of quality mugs and cups, because mugs-cum-quality-statements were distributed in their thousands throughout every organisation. The Most Glorious Time of Quality eventually matured to become an integral and prosaic part of the day-to-day running of a business: doing things = doing things with quality (and an ISO certificate).

Knowledge management (KM) is not yet at the

mature stage of its crusade. But, as in the customer and quality eras, you can see similar paths of growth: the attraction of people's interest, a growing movement, conferences, books, semantics, jargon. And over the past few years there have been symptoms of budding puberty: knowledge management directors (KMDs), chief information officers (CIOs) and chief knowledge officers (CKOs) have all appeared in company organisation charts. As with the previous movements, these are necessary stages of growth towards maturity. You can't shortcut life. After birth comes childhood, after childhood comes adolescence, after adolescence comes maturity – this is a universal law with only one exception: those CEOs who have apparently been catapulted to high office straight from kindergarten, who act as if they were born with a fast-track CEO-gene and who forget that a generation ago they would have been one of those middle managers at whose feet they now lay all the blame. But that's another conversation.

## The infant

The KM curve of maturity is going to be slower. It has its own characteristics. Unlike the quality and customer revolutions, KM has created an explosion of IT products – a field growing faster than the conceptual framework for the KM house itself. We are just starting to figure out what the KM 'problem' is, yet the market already abounds with myriad so-called 'KM solutions'. And the abundance of 'solutions' and 'products' continues to expand, needing a bigger and bigger house. KM is like a particular type of supermarket: a big out-of-town building, a cross between an airport hangar and a dysmorphic shoe box, where you can get vegetables, bread, a newspaper, flowers, meat, a vacuum cleaner bag, wine, a low cost microwave and a pair of shoes. Many of these places also have a pharmacy, a dentist, a travel agency. All of them open 24 hours a day. What do all these things have in common? You need them, you actually buy the goods and they are all under the same roof. Other than that, very little.

In the KM supermarket you can find Intranet, extranets, e-learning packages, a portal (particularly a portal), expert systems, search engines, chat rooms, news rooms and much, much more. Anthropologically, supermarkets and KMs have in common the establishment of a unique language, symbols and rituals. The supermarket manager talks about shelf life, just-in-time turnaround and

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**Beware of beautiful, elegant, technologically sexy solutions to the wrong problem**

point-of-sale inventory. KM managers speak their own dialect and talk of content, taxonomy, crawlers, platforms, metatags, search and categorisation. Most of these terms have a simple, plain English translation, but the KM tribe would not be a tribe if it spoke the same language as the rest of us.

As far as maturity goes, KM is the new kid on the block – a small child playing with grown-up toys. He has just started to walk and can hardly talk, but instead of playing with plastic toys he fiddles with camcorders and a satellite-positioning system. He comes into the kindergarten wearing his fluffy rabbit mittens and a CKO business suit.

In contrast, the quality movement has reached adulthood. The quality crusaders have achieved their aims – quality has been incorporated into ‘the normal way of doing business’. It is a pass mark, a baseline. If you don’t have it you don’t exist. Quality has homogenised practices, products and services. You probably buy a new car on the basis of cost, design, safety, engine power, or even the colour your teenage daughter wants. But not on the basis of the quality of the brakes – you expect the brakes to brake, the doors to open and shut and the engine to keep going until the next 6,000-mile service. Customer satisfaction is similarly a given. If you cannot offer basic satisfaction, you’re out of the game. The customer will choose one of your 300 competitors.

### The toddler

The big, big difference with KM is that it has the potential to completely reshape the way we do business, in a logarithmic way. ‘Quality’ and ‘customer’ were needed movements that elevated business to a higher level of complexity, to maturity and adulthood. They brought with them significant advances but delivered them in an arithmetical way. Knowledge management is different because, when it reaches maturity, it will become management, period. The management of the modern enterprise is management of knowledge. When fully developed, all the toys in the KM supermarket will be as familiar as the telephone or email are today. It will be impossible not to use them, not to incorporate them. And in doing so, they will completely transform the way we work.

In the meantime, we should nurture that child in the kindergarten playing with the Palm Pilot even though he can’t read. To do this, we must first examine some of the myths found in the early anthropological KM bible:

•**Connectivity is the issue – the sharing of knowledge and information will automatically follow.** Nobody who has ever worked in a company can seriously subscribe to that. The sharing of information does not necessarily take place just because you have a US\$3million portal that connects everybody with everybody else. Sharing (particularly of tacit knowledge) requires a will to do so and organisational conditions that reward it. ‘Knowledge is power’ and ‘sharing will follow



Rob Wilcoxon

connectivity’ are two contradictory statements. One of them is right.

•**It’s a solution – it must be good for our problems.** Beware of beautiful, pristine, elegant, sophisticated, technologically sexy solutions to the wrong problem.

•**Ubiquity – access any time, anywhere, to anything, all at once.** But I’m not interested in having the week’s weather forecast for Tanzania at my fingertips.

•**Fast is beautiful.** So presumably super-fast will win a Miss World contest. But as Intel’s Andrew Grove – hardly a Luddite – observed, speed has its limits. Brains don’t speed up. The exchange of ideas doesn’t really speed up, only the overheads that slowed down the exchange in the first place. When it comes down to the bulk of knowledge-work, the 21st century is no different from the 20th. You can reach people around the clock, but they won’t think any better or any faster just because you’ve reached them more quickly. The give-and-take remains a limiting factor.

•**It’s available, the information is transparent, clear, clean, present – people will use it to make better-informed decisions.** This is the e-enlightenment fallacy, a modern version of The Enlightenment, which banks on rationality at all times. Better decisions do not necessarily follow better or more easily available information. The problem with most decision-making processes is the attitudes of the people making those decisions. We blame the information, available or not, to justify our incapacity to take risks, for example.

•**We can talk KM with no reference to organisational issues.** About 75% of KM-IT initiatives fail not because the technology is badly delivered but because nobody has paid attention to the organisational context in which that technology is implemented.

•**If we ask people what they want, they’ll tell us, and then we’ll know what to do.** This is the Walkman fallacy. If asked about IT needs, people will tell you their laptop is crashing every other

Knowledge management can be seen as a small child in the nursery, playing with grown-up toys.

day. Asked about their position on HR plans to change an organisational renewal programme, they will say they'd like more holidays or flexitime. Nobody asked for a small box to hang from their belt and connect with their ears to listen to music on the bus; nobody asked for a Walkman. Yet KM practitioners seem to think that if they ask researchers what they want, they will get requests for new super-sophisticated ways to screen molecules at the speed of light, and they'll be able to respond overnight. This won't happen. R&D may, however, ask if there's a tool available to talk to people across geographies, and a way to store those 'conversations'. You and I know it's called 'Lotus Notes', and it's a prehistoric product, but you can't believe this is all they actually want.

Some companies suspect KM is the old corporate information system plus an expensive new portal in their machines and a new chief knowledge

officer (who was once the chief information officer, and previously the director of information management, and the chief librarian before that).

### The problem child

We are still talking about KM with no reference to conceptual disciplines such as psychology, epistemology, cognitive psychology, etc. It is like grammar without literature. Or a childhood without effective parenting. I maintain that KM is still in the nursery, and playing with dangerous toys.

We have not seen anything yet. 

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