KMCI Position Statement on KM Standards
and "Certification" Programs
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Some individuals and organizations around the world have begun work on KM standards formulation. These include the Global Knowledge Economics Council (GKEC) with ANSI accreditation in the United States, the British Standards Institute (BSI) in the UK, the Comité Européen de Normalisation (CEN) and the European Commission's KnowledgeBoard Framework and Standards SIG on the Continent, and Standards Australia International (SAI). The activities of these organizations have been well-summarized in the past by David Skyrme at http://www.skyrme.com/updates/u65_f1.htm. These efforts all differ in the degree to which they advocate for standards, but to one degree or other, all have committed to the idea that valid standards for the discipline of Knowledge Management can be formulated from processes begun now, rather than at some time in the future or not at all.

KMCI thinks it is important to examine this fundamental assumption, as well as a number of other subsidiary issues related to standards and certification. Let's begin with the proposition that the KM community is ready for standards formulation. After that, we will discuss whether KM standards should be formulated under the auspices of organizations external to KM; whether multiple independent organizations are required, or are even a good idea, for certification training; and finally, whether professional associations offering certification programs need to accredited.

Issue One: Should standards be formulated for the discipline of Knowledge Management? Now? At some time in the future?

A standard, as the term is used by organizations accepting the views of the International Standards Organization (ISO), is a network of knowledge claims about a domain of practice that has emerged with consensus support from ISO-compliant standards development processes. We believe that for a domain of practice or discipline to be ready for standards formulation, it must:

1. Hold the belief that an ISO consensus-based standards process is an appropriate framework for knowledge (i.e., standards) production in that discipline. This requirement is particularly significant for KM, since one of its primary functions is to establish rules for 'knowledge production';
2. Be characterized by a relatively small number of popular alternative formulations in key candidate areas of standards formulation. For example, in KM, such key areas might be:
   (a) Basic terms (e.g., knowledge, knowledge management, culture, beliefs, tacit knowledge)
   (b) Knowledge processing conceptual frameworks (e.g., Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model, KMCI's KLC, etc.)
   (c) Knowledge management conceptual frameworks
   (d) Communities of Practice for maximizing sustainable innovation and knowledge transfer
   (e) Intellectual Capital models
   (f) Models of alternative organizational forms for maximizing sustainable innovation and adaptation
   (g) Methods of knowledge processing and KM modeling and impact analysis
   (h) Knowledge processing and KM metrics
   (i) KM Project/Process methodology
   (j) Techniques for accomplishing specific outcomes
   (k) KM-related IT tools for accomplishing specific use cases supporting KM-related social processes.
3. Be marked by a trust level sufficient to support collaborative formulation of standards, and

4. Exhibit no more than a moderate level of intensity of conflict behavior in standards formulation.

We will explain each of these requirements in the context of KM.

♣ Belief in ISO-sanctioned consensus-based knowledge production process

While such processes have been accepted in other standards domains, Knowledge Management, in part, is about evaluating and reshaping knowledge processing, including knowledge production rules and processes. There is no evidence that KM, as a discipline, has accepted the idea that knowledge (including standards) is the outcome of industry consensus on knowledge claims. In fact, KMCI, and other organizations and individuals as well, oppose standardization and other forms of knowledge production based on the idea of consensus or disciplinary agreement. Our view is that knowledge produced (i.e., standards knowledge) through a process that justifies such knowledge by the criterion of consensus, produces "political" knowledge. It does not produce knowledge that has best survived our attempts to falsify it through testing and evaluation, and which is therefore likely to be closer to the truth than the knowledge claims it competes with. Why? Because the degree of consensus behind a knowledge claim is nothing more than an indication of the proportion of a population that believes in it, whereas the truth of a claim itself under such a criterion goes untested. In logic, this kind of attempt at validation is known as the "appeal to authority" fallacy, a specious claim that suggests an argument is true purely by virtue of who or how many say(s) it is true, as opposed to its own defensible merits.

Instead, knowledge production in KM should be based on continuous testing and evaluation of knowledge claims, including claims that certain formulations are "standards" and should be accepted by everyone. No knowledge claim should be given a pass, even a temporary one, while a periodic "official" standards process decides that yesterday's truth is today's error. While we have no survey data to prove that our view is widespread in KM, KMCI believes that it is much more widespread in this discipline than in others, if only because KM practitioners are more likely to question the rules guiding knowledge production than practitioners in other domains.

If this view is correct, KM is not ready for standardization because the consensus-based ISO-sanctioned process of generating the knowledge claims we call standards does not have the degree of legitimacy among practitioners in the KM discipline required to produce successful standards. Before direct KM standards are produced, then, we propose that the discipline of KM must debate the question of a standard for producing standards for KM. This debate should not be carried out by ISO-affiliated organizations, because these organizations have a vested interest in a single standards production process - their own; the current consensus-based process recommended by the ISO. Instead, KM practitioners must form their own Special Interest Groups (SIGs) to evaluate the ISO-based process against other alternatives that might be applied to produce standards. The results of this evaluation could be used to produce standards in KM and also to recommend changes in the ISO's own processes of standards production.

♣ A relatively small number of popular alternative formulations in key candidate areas of standards formulation.

This condition is a necessary accompaniment to the consensus criterion. When few alternative formulations exist in an area of the domain of interest, the political negotiation that builds consensus is possible and perhaps not too difficult. But when many alternatives exist, negotiation is very time consuming and frequently cannot be successful without years of compromise and consolidation among contending points of view (and, incidentally, without any guarantee that such compromises produce knowledge claims that correspond to reality). The condition of a small number of alternatives does not exist in the various domain areas of KM and knowledge processing named above.

In the area of basic terms, for example, many variations of the idea that knowledge is belief have been expressed in KM. In addition, however, the idea that knowledge, in addition to being mental in character, is also expressed in cultural artifacts is widespread. Lately, many have advocated the idea that knowledge is not an outcome, but a process. And still others, that knowledge is, at the same time, both process (flow) and outcome. In short, there is no consensus on knowledge.

The situation is the same with the term "Knowledge Management." Rather than having only a few alternatives to synthesize, KM is blessed with almost as many definitions of the term as there are writers who refer to definitions. Culture is another key term in KM for which many variations exist. Indeed, if Anthropology has not been able to standardize on the use of this term, it is very doubtful that KM should, or will.

Next, there are the concepts of tacit and explicit knowledge. Many who use these terms have departed considerably from Polanyi's original use of them, to the point where there are many and varying uses that would have to be negotiated in establishing a standard -- too many, we believe, to successfully formulate one.

Then there are the distinctions among data, information, knowledge, and wisdom. So many writers have written about these that it is difficult to count. And the variations among their formulations are great enough that consensus is likely to be difficult to achieve, especially when it becomes clear to those contending that most of what has been written about this subject is based on a false epistemological theory, no longer tenable in philosophy since the work of Popper, Kuhn, Lakatos, Feyerabend, and many, many others.

These are just a few examples from the area of basic terms that illustrate the difficulties in the way of those who seek consensus-based standards. The number of alternative formulations is just as great in the other areas of possible standards formulation listed above. Thus, it is much too early to seek consensus in the area of conceptual frameworks for knowledge processing. For these rely on the definitions of basic terms, which, in their turn are beset by too many alternatives to support standardization. Those who desire consensus on such frameworks must first seek consensus in the area of basic terms, if they hope to be successful in overcoming the incommensurability that awaits the comparison of alternative frameworks and attempts to synthesize them.

♣ A trust level sufficient to support collaboration on standards

In other areas where standards have been successfully formulated such as Quality Management and Object Technology, enough trust had developed among the leading practitioners in these fields that international collaborative efforts could proceed with some hope of success in an atmosphere with a measure of disinterested objectivity and detachment. From KMCI's perspective, however, such trust is not sufficiently widespread in the KM field. In addition to splits along regional and international lines, KMCI believes that there exists a perception that some organizations pursuing standards are manipulating the process to gain advantage over others, and that the standards developers themselves may not be neutral. Thus, the present process of standards-making in KM is perceived by many as the opposite of a disinterested, objective process. As long as this perception exists, standards that emerge from this process will be viewed as biased and illegitimate.

♣ No more than a moderate level of intensity of conflict behavior in the standards development process.

Any process that involves the statement and arbitration among alternative views will involve conflict and its resolution. But when conflict behavior in standards development is too intense, the trust and objectivity necessary to synthesize and reduce the number of alternative formulations

and produce consensus are bound to be casualties of conflict behavior. KM is a field in which conflict between certain organizations has grown intense. In the recent past, two well-known organizations in KM were contemplating legal action against one another, and one of these was heavily involved in the standards development process. KMCI believes it is clear that escalation of public disagreements about certification/standardization issues into the Courts creates an atmosphere that conflicts with the need for trust and disinterested objectivity in the standards development process. After all, how can a standards developer persuade the KM public that it is disinterested and unbiased when it chooses to cope with disagreements by threatening law suits rather than by engaging in rational discussion?

In view of the above, KMCI believes that standards formulation efforts in KM are highly premature and should not go forward at this time. But what about in the future? Will KM ever be ready for consensus-based standards?

The answer to this question depends in part on one's attitude toward the first criterion, the belief that an ISO consensus-based standards process is an appropriate framework for knowledge (i.e., standards) production. If one believes that the knowledge claim on which this belief is based is false, then KM will never be ready for such standards. But if one accepts the validity of consensus-based standards, then the time for standards development will come when alternative formulations in the various KM standards areas are sufficiently few, when trust among practitioners is sufficiently high, and when the intensity of conflict behavior is sufficiently low, to support the political process necessary to negotiate agreements capable of supporting consensus.

Even if one accepts the idea of consensus-based standards, it is not necessarily the case that KM standards ought to be formulated under the auspices of an organization external to the discipline of KM. We will examine this issue now.

Issue Two: Is the authority of ISO and ANSI, or more generally, any body external to the discipline of KM itself, valid in relation to the promulgation of standards governing Knowledge Management including standards for Certification of qualifying persons?

All projected ISO standards for KM and for certifying qualifying persons in KM are knowledge claims produced by the ISO standards making process. This process, however, is itself subject to the professional discipline of Knowledge Management and to KM's disciplinary evaluation of its validity, not the reverse.

The ISO is not an authority in the KM field. It has not developed specific Knowledge Management expertise or capability over a period of years. It has not developed criteria for standards evaluation and validation that are continuously tested and evaluated, but rather has developed such criteria based on mere consensus in the fields in which standards have been adopted and formulated. It has devoted no time or resources to developing a body of knowledge about the scope and nature of Knowledge Management. And its procedures, processes, and validation criteria are not exempt from critical analysis coming from a KM point of view. In the view of KMCI, therefore, it is inappropriate for KM organizations to recognize the authority of ANSI or ISO in setting standards for KM. In fact, it is KM, as a discipline, and through its own organizations that should be setting standards for the processes of inquiry followed by ISO and ANSI in arriving at standards in other fields, and not the reverse.

We are well aware of how the above statement "sounds" in light of the "successes" and prestige of both ANSI and ISO. KMCI is a small organization, and Knowledge Management is a new field. To claim a role in evaluating ANSI and ISO processes and to deny the authority of these

organizations to facilitate standards development in Knowledge Management may seem presumptuous.

But appeals to the authority of ANSI, ISO, or other standards organizations are simply not consistent with the central purpose of KM. Instead, it is the idea of enhancing processes of knowledge production and integration marked by continuous testing and evaluation, all in the service of sustainable innovation, that is central to the KM point of view. And from that point of view, we must insist on KM's disciplinary independence from ANSI and ISO, simply because Knowledge Management and KM organizations must be free to evaluate and critique what ANSI and ISO do and the way that they do it. If, however, we recognize the authority of these organizations to set KM standards according to their procedures, then these very procedures become external to Knowledge Management and fall outside of its purview. This is a contradiction in terms, and denies the integrity of KM as a professional discipline.

To maintain this integrity, then, Knowledge Management and KM organizations must recognize that it is fundamentally wrong-headed to pursue KM standards, including standards for certification, through ANSI, ISO, or any organization external to the KM field itself. To be true to KM, we must police ourselves, and our standards must emerge from our own disciplinary processes of knowledge production and integration, and, in particular, from our own process of Knowledge Claim Evaluation rather than ANSI's or ISO's.

Signed,

KMCI Management