

Defining knowledge management: Toward an applied compendium

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Abstract

The purpose of the paper is to chronicle the depth and breadth of applied knowledge management definitions penned by researchers and practitioners alike. Once these definitions are part of the body of knowledge they become accessible to academics conducting research, to organizations considering knowledge management, and to other interested parties who wish to learn more about the subject. All of the definitions are freely available from open access sources. Collectively the definitions represent the thoughts of authors in at least 13 countries and from 23 domains. The collection of definitions highlight the truly multidisciplinary nature of knowledge management. The initial analysis revealed the four most common verbs were use, create, share, and manage. The most common nouns were knowledge, process, organization, and information.

Keywords: knowledge management, definitions, applied, KM

*Authors' Note: When we wrote our book *A Leader's Guide to Knowledge Management* (Girard & Girard, 2009) we deliberately did not include a definition for knowledge management. At the time, we believed the tools, techniques, and tactics for creating and exchanging organizational knowledge were much more important than the labels. Since the book's publication we have had the privilege of sharing our findings with hundreds of managers from dozens of organizations. Over the years we have learned that many managers want or perhaps even need a definition. We decided it is not for us to question their motive, but rather to help these managers in their quest. The genesis of this project was a web-based list of definitions; however, we believe a necessary evolution is the publication of a more formal list in a journal. We hope others will add to the compendium and take on value-added tasks of analyzing the collections.*

Introduction

Knowledge management, as a field of study, has now existed for more than 30 years. It has moved beyond an academic theory to an essential component of organizational life. In his seminal essay *Where did knowledge management come from?* Larry Prusak suggested a "good milestone to mark the beginning of the knowledge management timeline is a conference held in Boston in early 1993" ((Prusak, 2001, p. 1003). As Prusak correctly highlighted, "nothing comes from nothing," so of course there had been prior interest in the idea; however, the Boston event was likely the first event dedicated to knowledge management. Almost certainly it was at this event that groups of practitioners and academics met to draft a definition for the new domain. Fast forward three decades when groups of academics and practitioners continue to meet in an attempt to scribe the ever-eluding definition.

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Table of Contents International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management

1. Understanding the eBook International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - The Rise of Digital Reading International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Advantages of eBooks Over Traditional Books
2. Identifying International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Exploring Different Genres
 - Considering Fiction vs. Non-Fiction
 - Determining Your Reading Goals
3. Choosing the Right eBook Platform
 - Popular eBook Platforms
 - Features to Look for in an International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - User-Friendly Interface
4. Exploring eBook Recommendations from International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Personalized Recommendations
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management User Reviews and Ratings
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management and Bestseller Lists
5. Accessing International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management Free and Paid eBooks
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management Public Domain eBooks
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management eBook Subscription Services
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management Budget-Friendly Options

6. Navigating International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management eBook Formats
 - ePub, PDF, MOBI, and More
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management Compatibility with Devices
 - International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management Enhanced eBook Features
7. Enhancing Your Reading Experience
 - Adjustable Fonts and Text Sizes of International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Highlighting and Note-Taking International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Interactive Elements International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
8. Staying Engaged with International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Joining Online Reading Communities
 - Participating in Virtual Book Clubs
 - Following Authors and Publishers International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
9. Balancing eBooks and Physical Books International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Benefits of a Digital Library
 - Creating a Diverse Reading Collection International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
10. Overcoming Reading Challenges
 - Dealing with Digital Eye Strain
 - Minimizing Distractions
 - Managing Screen Time
11. Cultivating a Reading Routine International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Setting Reading Goals International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Carving Out Dedicated Reading Time
12. Sourcing Reliable Information of International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Fact-Checking eBook Content of International Journal Of Applied Knowledge Management
 - Distinguishing Credible Sources
13. Promoting Lifelong Learning
 - Utilizing eBooks for Skill Development
 - Exploring Educational eBooks
14. Embracing eBook Trends
 - Integration of Multimedia Elements

- Interactive and Gamified eBooks

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