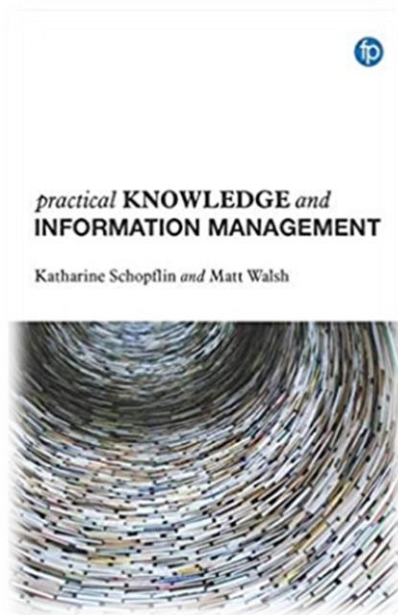


Schopflin & Walsh - Practical Knowledge and Information Management

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This little book packs a powerful punch. Its 120 pages, including references and index, compress a lot of up-to-date advice about how to make knowledge and information management work in a modern setting.

It is a tribute to the personable skills of Katherine Schopflin and Matt Walsh¹ that the technical and managerial details make a compelling read for those prepared to concentrate on the text sentence by sentence and word by word.

The book reads as an intensely thought out life of two experienced Knowledge and Information Managers, with an analysis of all the problems and opportunities that offers. It is fun to guess whose experience is being cited at various stages: Dr Schopflin has held lead information governance roles in local government, and Matt Walsh has been global head of KM and intranet management in the legal and insurance sectors.

The Knowledge, Data, Information convergence

Practitioners can find it awkward and irritating to have to explain to stakeholders the difference between knowledge and information management. And all due respect to Schopflin and Walsh for not dodging the issue. They come up with a practical solution that they use fairly consistently:

¹ I met them both, as many of the readers of this review may have, at their crowded book launch in Clerkenwell Green in January 2019 and later in what was probably the hottest day of last summer at Stationers' Hall in the City of London in July.

‘The former [KM] is considered to be any mechanism that enables the use of tacit knowledge: knowledge held inside people’s heads. The latter [IM] concerns the organisation, dissemination and storage of recorded knowledge.’ (page 2)

The practicality of this solution is apparent throughout the book. The environments in which the authors set knowledge management and information management are those in which the enterprise is interested in both, and therefore where the necessary blurring between the two becomes less relevant and confusing. As most practitioners reading the book will acknowledge, this is pretty realistic.

This resolution, which Schopflin and Walsh develop gently throughout the book, is important to their claim that this is a practical guide. Nevertheless, they make abundant use of rigorous distinctions and concepts to leverage their observations from years of KM and IM experience.

The book is brave enough to tackle, at various stages, Tom Wilson’s early-century crusade against knowledge management², particularly the challenge that capturing knowledge involves articulation which turns knowledge into information, leaving KMers without content to manage. As an aside, knowledge can be shared without being captured and articulated: an apprentice copies what his master does, as well as what he says.

The structure and the infrastructure of the text

The book is rich and compressed so here is a list of recurring themes not signposted in the chapter headings or the index. I think it is the development of those themes throughout the book which bind it together, despite its practicality, as something closer to a thesis, or a complete world view on how KIM should be done.

Interwoven through the chapters on introducing KIM to organisations, governance, knowledge sharing, explicit KM, and knowledge transfer are themes such as:

- Coexistence of centralised KIM systems and micro-services in large organisations and how to make them work together
- The distinction between findability and putability of information (p30) and how to reconcile the two
- Good information behaviour by users, particularly in ‘this rapidly developing post-document world’ (p42)

² Wilson, T. D. (2002) The Nonsense of Knowledge Management, *Information Research*, 8 (1), 144 – 54. And Wilson, T. D. (2005) The Nonsense of Knowledge Management Revisited. In Macevicate, E. and Wilson, T. (eds) *Introducing Information Management: an information research reader*, Facet Publishing, 151-164.

- Subcultures in large organisations, and how they may need different KM strategies
- Liberal versus conservative organisational cultures
- The distinction between hard and soft data, particularly how hard data repositories ‘can tell us information of only limited depth’ (p32)
- The restrictive character of Information Management and the liberating character of Knowledge Management
- Tension between the desirability for autonomous knowledge and information flows inside the organisation and increasing legal responsibility at the organisational level.

Featured case studies

If you find your concentration flagging, seek out the ten featured case studies. The format may be familiar from other textbooks, but this time they aren’t there to take up space and offer a little inspiration: here, as everywhere else, the authors are on a mission:

...to provide advice and best practice on the KIM work information professionals are required to do. (p2)

In the case studies as in the main text, the focus on detail is unwavering, and inspiration comes from the accumulated sense of power that having so many tips, neologisms and detailed practices at their fingertips will give the attentive practitioner.

Humour

The book does read as if the authors enjoyed writing it. They use fresh insights and dry humour to keep the text from getting stale. I particularly like

- Their KIM take ((p11) on Amy Liptrot’s *The Outrun (2016)* - a memoir reviewed on Amazon as ‘a stunning, wild, and gracefully rendered account of life in the Scottish hinterlands’
- ‘[[The intranet] is often considered outside the scope of IM. Yet the authors have both worked on corporate intranets and agree it is a key to good practice. If the right information is on the intranet, then a whole *strafe* of IM is accomplished on employee’s behalf...’. A perfect word to conjure up push strategies of IM practice!

Conclusion

One of the things that make the book so readable is that both its authors are writing from an employee, rather than a consultant viewpoint, so the continuity of experience compared to the snapshot view that some consultancy approaches provide, makes the points richer and easier to relate to. At the same time while the compression of ideas into a literary flow is often very skilful, it can sometimes be difficult to follow the line of argument. As a result, to get anything like the full value it is best to read the book as a whole, and not try to dip into it as a reference book, despite clear contents and section headings, and a very serviceable index.

Star Rating

Content



For the sheer number of concepts per page explained and put into context, it stands comparison with A. J. Rhem *Knowledge Management in Practice*. CRC, 2017.

Readability



Not a book to pick up for a hint on a busy day; more for locking yourself away and focusing on for a few hours

Price



Even with a CILIP member discount it comes out at a stonking £51.95

Overall value



A book that could improve services and careers if read thoroughly, analysed and applied. And with so much home working during the coronavirus emergency, it should be!

Practical Knowledge and Information Management, by Katherine Schopflin and Matt Walsh. Facet Publishing, 2019. £64.95