



ISO 30401: Knowledge Management Systems - what does it mean for KM professionals and for organizations implementing KM?

Patrick Lambe – 10 December 2018

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*Informal community (volunteers)
Quarterly sharing and networking
meetings*

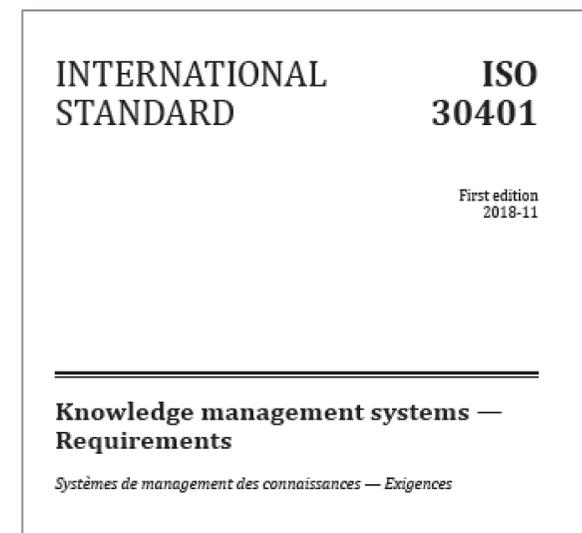
*Annual one day conference “KM
Exchange”*

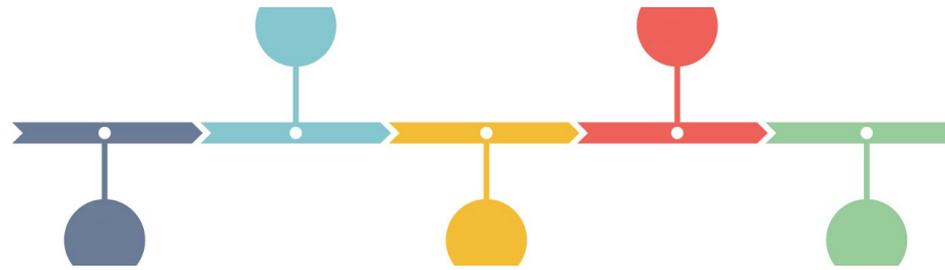
Let your KM contacts and colleagues know!

Agenda



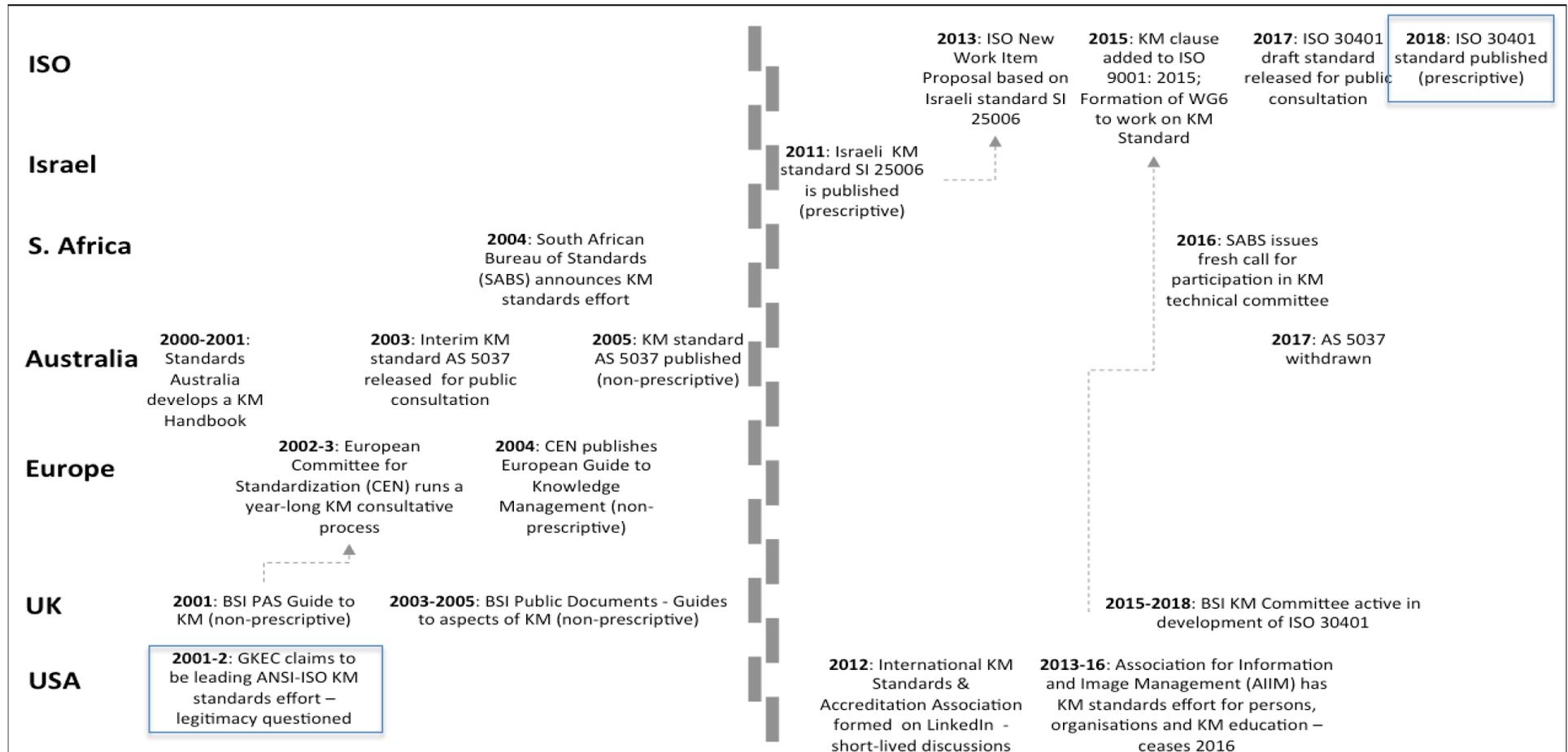
- Timeline of standards development in KM
- Why are standards contentious in KM?
Arguments for and against
- ISO 30401 – why did it succeed?
- ISO 30401 – structure and requirements
- Limitations of the standard
- How can you use it?





1. KM Standards: A Timeline

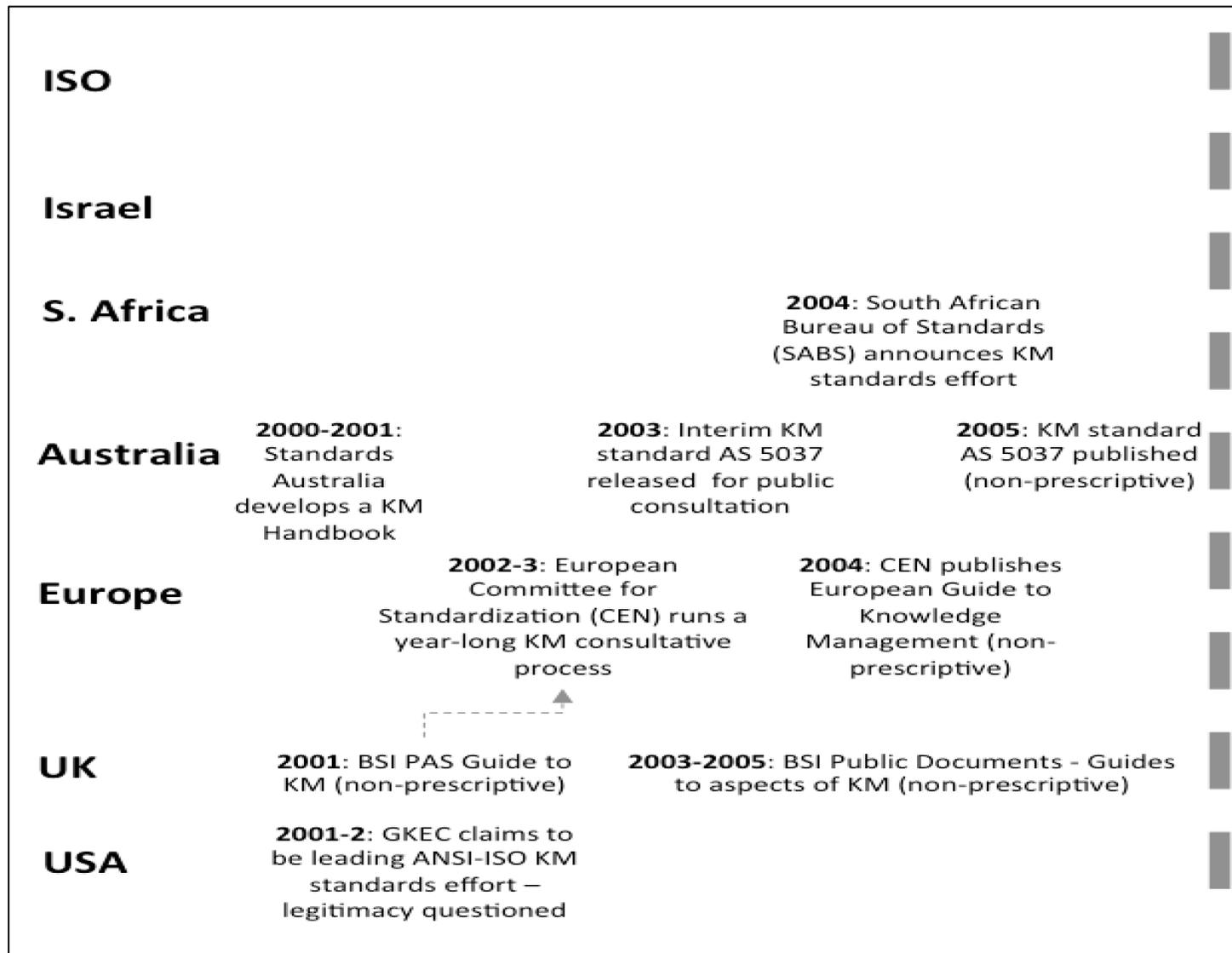
Timeline



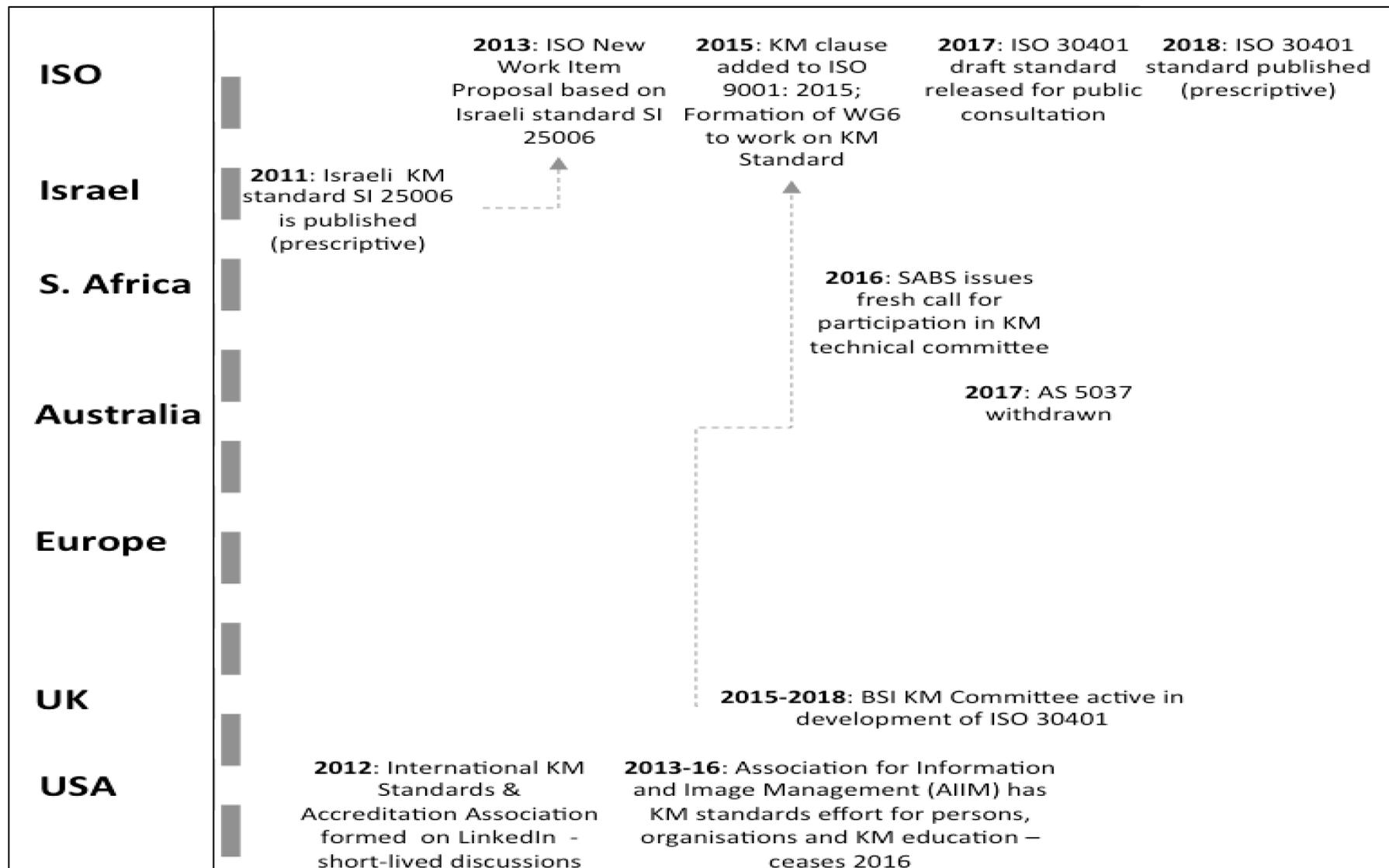
← 2000-2005 "Struggle" →

← 2011-2018 "Success" →

2000-2005



2011-2018





2. The Battle over KM Standards

“So this ISO KM standard, how’s it going then?”

“It’s pretty much what you’d expect. There’s lots of people accusing each other of crass commercialism, being wrong, not recognizing each other’s genius. Everyone really seems to hate each other in this group.”

(Matt Moore – SIKM Leaders Forum)

Emotional Critiques



Edward Swanstrom

- KM Certification Wars 1998-2006
- Fear of commercial bias
- Lack of trust or active mistrust
- Fear of loss of freedom
- Competing affiliations to models of KM

Emotional Critiques



Helen Hasan

2003: Interim AS5037

“too simplistic,” “too rigid,” “too mechanistic,” “too linear,”

it would “reduce KM to the lowest common denominator,”

“it would exclude legitimate approaches to KM,”

“it would be compromised by the commercial activities” of Business Excellence Australia (the commercial division of Standards Australia),

“too much jargon”

(Hasan 2004; Ferguson 2006).

Reasoned Critiques

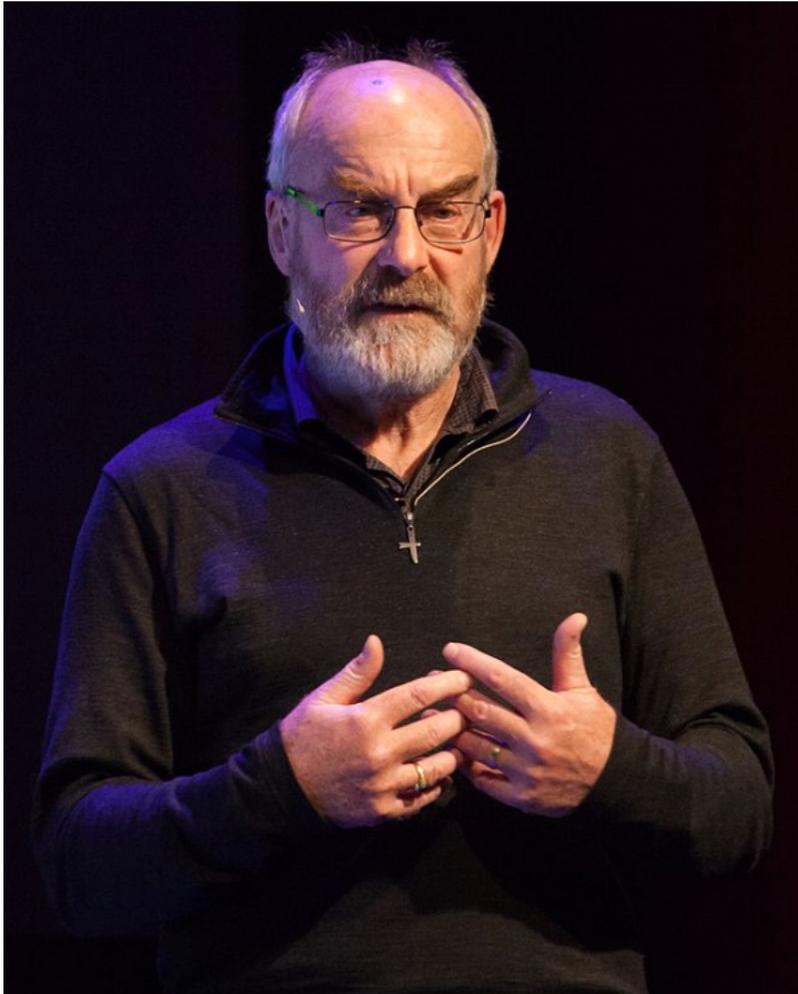


Joseph Firestone

Complexity of KM

- KM as a field is too broad and complex to be captured in a single standard (or certification)
- It is possible to hold equally justifiable but opposing views on KM decisions
- KM is still evolving
- There is no consensus on KM (and insufficient trust to reach consensus)

Reasoned Critiques



David Snowden

Complexity of Organizations & Knowledge

- Organizations are complex adaptive systems – future oriented
- Standards assume predictability and consistency – past oriented
- It's not possible to be prescriptive in KM, which is led by variable contextual needs

Responses

Complexity of KM

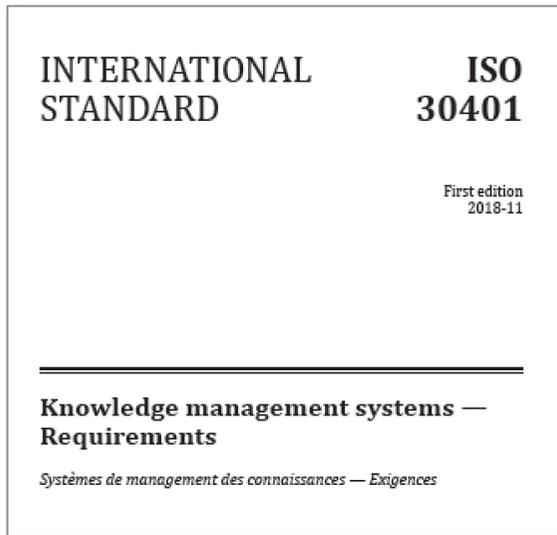
- KM as a field is too broad and complex to be captured in a single standard (or certification)
- It is possible to hold equally justifiable but opposing views on KM decisions
- KM is still evolving
- There is no consensus on KM (and insufficient trust to reach consensus) – except at a very general “common-sense” level
- It should be possible to map the landscape at least at a high level, leaving scope for variation and adaptiveness
- Not to capture whatever consensus exists leaves innocent buyers vulnerable
- In-principle resistance is a self-fulfilling prophecy but standards development process can nudge a field towards common reference points and add stability
- What is obvious common sense to practitioners may not be obvious to others – e.g. senior leadership teams

Responses

Complexity of Organizations & Knowledge

- Organizations are complex adaptive systems
- Standards assume predictability and consistency
- It's not possible to be prescriptive in KM, which is led by variable contextual needs
- Not all aspects of organisational life are complex – some are well structured and predictable
- Even in complex adaptive systems, some practices become habituated and stabilise over time, and become normative

KM standards are likely to work as high-level framing and orientation devices for KM practice, and they are likely to work best for those aspects of organisational life that are stable, routinized and relatively predictable. They are less likely to be useful to structure or govern more complex, emergent and adaptive practices and contexts.



3. ISO 30401

Why did it succeed?

What it says

Limitations

Why did ISO 30401 succeed?

- ISO as an institution – separation of the standard from commercial exploitation (e.g. certification)
- Imposition of a consistent management systems standard template – “framework-free”
- Committee work was disciplined and planned
- The standard is principles-based rather than rules-based
- Debate was channeled into public comment

ISO 30401 Principles



1. **Nature of Knowledge:** intangible and complex; created by people.
2. **Value:** knowledge is a key source of value for organizations to meet their objectives.
3. **Focus:** KM serves the organizational objectives, strategies and needs.
4. **Adaptive:** there is no one knowledge management solution that fits all organizations within all contexts. KM adapts itself to particular needs.
5. **Shared understanding:** For shared understanding, KM should include interactions between people, using content, processes and technologies.
6. **Environment:** knowledge is not managed directly; KM focuses on managing the working environment, and nurturing the knowledge lifecycle.
7. **Culture:** culture is critical to the effectiveness of KM.
8. **Iterative:** KM should be phased, incorporating learning and feedback cycle.

ISO 30401 Requirements – “Shall”

1. **Determine:** the org. purpose, business environment and stakeholders to determine goals of KM
2. **Scope and prioritise:** the knowledge domains to be covered
3. **Cover:** processes for knowledge acquisition, application, retention, discarding, human interaction, codification, synthesis, learning
4. **Include and integrate:** all enablers – people, process, infrastructure, governance, culture
5. **Leadership:** values, policy, integration of KM into business processes, resourcing, KM roles and responsibilities, communications, change management, metrics, continual improvement
6. **Planning:** define objectives and outcomes, manage the plan and document outcomes
7. **Resource:** resourcing, competencies, awareness, communications
8. **Monitoring and evaluation:** improvement, internal audit, management review

ISO 30401 Limitations



ISO 30401 is a prescriptive standard and is written in compliance language – “shall”; **BUT because it is**

- principles-led rather than rules-led
- intended to allow for a variety of KM practice and approach,
- lacking in specificity and granularity...

it is highly dependent on auditor experience, interpretation and judgement. This can lead to three audit-related issues:

1. **Ambiguity:** where the underlying principle is so vague or ambiguous that it provides no substantive guidance for action or for audit.
2. **Decoupling:** where the visible things you can document don't guarantee the real (invisible) effectiveness of the practice;

leading to...

3. **Audit inconsistency:** where the same practices may give rise to different interpretations by different auditors.

Ambiguity examples



1. **Nature of Knowledge:** intangible and complex; created by people.

Not all knowledge is in intangible form. It's much easier to measure management of tangible forms of knowledge than intangible forms. There is no guidance on how to audit intangible forms, and the requirements as written would "pass" organizations that mainly manage tangible forms as long as they also manage interactions between people.

2. **Value:** knowledge is a key source of value for organizations to meet their objectives.

Not all knowledge is of equal value. The standard gives no guidance on how to discriminate high value from low value. It just says the organisation shall identify critical knowledge. There is no consensus or clarity on how this principle or its requirements could be audited.

What is Decoupling?



The marks of a decoupled measurement system are:

- a) the use of general categories (or motherhood statements) in place of granular defined outcomes,
- b) the use of ambiguous language that is capable of supporting multiple interpretations, and
- c) a focus on measurement and documentation of observed behaviours, regardless of how well they reflect the real activity of the system. This measurement focus conceals the actual difficulties in measuring effectiveness of complex human systems.

The result is to create an **illusion of measurement** while the actual practice of interpretation and auditing is subject to informal negotiations, dependent on the skills of “specialist” (but opaque) expertise of auditors (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

Decoupling in ISO 30401

Decoupling is a well-known risk in the auditing of management systems (Terlaak 2007). ISO 14001 on environmental standards is an oft cited example. Contributing conditions:

1. lack of consensus on specific best practices,
2. non compliance is difficult to observe or detect, and
3. there is a perceived reward for compliance (legitimacy effects).

E.G. ISO 30401 4.5 : “The organization shall demonstrate that organizational culture has been addressed as a means to support the knowledge management system”. Annex C :

- defining a desired knowledge culture;
- running a gap analysis;
- creating a plan to address the gaps;
- acting upon this plan;
- revisiting and updating all previous steps at defined intervals.

Audit Inconsistency



ISO does not certify its own standards. You can do internal audits or be audited by accredited national standards certification bodies affiliated with ISO.

Ambiguity and decoupling places a heavy burden on auditors' judgment and expertise – the auditor has to interpret what he/she sees using ambiguous guidance.

- a) Knowledge of KM
- b) Knowledge of contextual particularities of the organisation (stakeholders, business environment, structure, culture, history)
- c) Insight into informal, intangible aspects of knowledge use in that org.

BUT – we know that vague standards generally lead to lower (external) auditor effort (it pays to check the boxes, it doesn't pay to investigate ambiguous areas)

Will the Standard Distort Practice?

Tale of two organisations:



4. Discussion



What are the Pros and Cons of having this standard?

How might you use it?

Potential Benefits of ISO 30401

Benefit	Observation	ISO 30401 Implication
1. Compatibility and interchangeability	Components and practices can be combined without error.	ISO management systems standards – enable org-wide approach not function-based
2. Common understanding and consistent vocabulary	KM practitioners, and management teams will use key KM terms with greater consistency and less ambiguity.	Despite some ambiguity the standard provides a comprehensive and reasonably consensus-based frame of reference for KM.
3. Transferability of learning between contexts	KM practitioners and organisations can compare practices more easily, and learn from each other.	Use the standard as a basis to benchmark and collect examples of KM practices from elsewhere
4. Competitiveness and comparability between suppliers	KM commercial tools and service providers use distinctions in language to confuse buyers, and justify one product or service over another. Partial approaches can't be distinguished from comprehensive ones.	The standard provides a comprehensive suite of hygiene factors for KM against which providers can define their offerings in a consistent and easy to compare way.
5. Quality and safety	Implementers have greater assurance of the likely quality of implementation, and their risk of a poor implementation is reduced.	The standard alone does not bring absolute assurance of quality. Superficial use of ISO 30401 could increase implementation risks - but if there is balanced and pragmatic use of the standard alongside other instruments, quality and risk should be better managed.
6. Enhancing levels of competence among professionals (Skyrme 2002)	Provides a profession-wide approach to describing competencies and skills areas for KM practitioners, identifying gaps, and providing development opportunities.	The standard describes a comprehensive range of activities that KM professionals and top management will need to be engaged in.

Competency Development

Be part of your profession.

KM Chartership

The CILIP Professional Knowledge and Skill Base (PKSB) is being updated to include KM, using ISO 30401 as a reference

CILIP is working with a group of leading international Knowledge Management practitioners to launch the first Professional Registration in Knowledge Management backed by Royal Charter. The scheme is being piloted in Q1 2019 and will be open for registration from April 2019.

Why become a registered KM professional?

Chartership and professional registration offer a range of benefits for you as a KM practitioner:

- Recognition of your skills and experience
- Validation of your professional status by a globally-recognised organisation
- Differentiation from other KM

What level of recognition will be available?

We are launching our new KM Professional Registration to enable members to become a Chartered Knowledge Manager.

Chartership is for more experienced practitioners.

How long will it take?

This depends on how quickly you want to do it. Registration is quick and easy via the CILIP website. Once registered, we will send you a guide to the information you will need to provide. It is up to you how long you want to take to collect and submit this information. Once submitted, most applications are usually assessed within 4-8 weeks.

Review (1)



1. The KM community has resisted prescriptive standards until very recently with fierce debate on both sides.
2. The history of standards development suggests that KM standards are likely to work as high-level framing and orientation devices for KM practice, and will work best for those aspects of organisational life that are stable, routinized and relatively predictable. Less useful for more complex aspects of organisational life.
3. A KM standard could easily be used inappropriately if these limitations are not recognised.
4. ISO 30401 standard for knowledge management systems is presented as a prescriptive standard with requirements that can in principle be audited – but it contains ambiguities, and has possible decoupling effects.

Review (1)



5. Ambiguities/vagueness in the standard create a dependency on individual auditor judgement and experience – leading to audit inconsistencies and a retreat to the easily observed.
6. The standard formalises a number of well-known basic hygiene factors for effective KM implementation but does not capture all the necessary and sufficient conditions. It can guide competency development for practitioners.
7. The ISO 30401 standard might be useful as a framing instrument alongside other knowledge audit and KM assessment approaches.
8. Knowledge audits and knowledge mapping would help organisations to implement KM according to ISO 30401 requirements.

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Call for Participation



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Global Survey on KM Capabilities and Impact

We are running a global comparative study on KM capabilities and impact, and working through our country representatives in selected countries. By participating in the survey you will be able to compare your KM strengths against your peers in your own country as well as in the other participating countries.

The survey is based on a peer-reviewed KM capability framework drawn from a review of major KM maturity frameworks and standards. It covers six KM functions and their underpinning enablers ie *governance, process, people* and *infrastructure*. For a detailed look into the development process of the framework and sources consulted, please read this white paper: [developing_a_km_maturity_assessment_v2.pdf](#)

Any type of organisation is welcome to participate, private or public, small or large. We will only accept one survey return per organisation, however. The survey should be completed by suitably qualified representative(s), such as a KM leader or a senior management team. The survey will take 30-40 minutes for an individual to complete, but can take up to 2 hours if you gather your responses through a facilitated discussion. The second method will give you more reliable responses and can be used to start discussions about improvement areas.

Compare your KM capabilities with peers – free for 2018

<https://tinyurl.com/KMglobalsurvey>



This talk is based on research for my new book

Knowledge Auditing: Principles and Practice (2019)

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