

Why Knowledge Management Is a Red Herring

My friend, [SJ Klein](#), recently wrote a provocative essay where he made the case for [knowledge as a social infrastructure](#) rather than a commodity. He starts by noting:

For ages, learning was assumed to be social, interactive, oral. Written knowledge, where available and somewhat portable, was a specialized complement that few scholars, recordkeepers, explorers and other specialists used or needed.

He goes on to explain that while the cost of creating texts dropped, knowledge about the world remained scarce. As a result, “even basic information about the shape of the planet was bartered and sold like any other good.”

SJ is a long-time Wikipedian, and he’s passionate about the potential societal impact of simply recalibrating our worldviews about knowledge:

Today we both have bounteous knowledge and pressing problems that better global education can address. The opportunities that could result from a more broadly educated world society are far greater than the short-term opportunities of a commodity market for practical texts.

In other words, this pervasive paradigm of knowledge-as-objects prevents us from thinking about what really matters: How can we *learn* more effectively and collectively?

I’m excited about the societal ramifications of this question, but I have a much smaller interest as well. At an organizational level, our biases around what we think [knowledge management](#) is interferes with what

organizations should really be thinking about. Most people equate knowledge management to storing, organizing, and retrieving knowledge in digital form. These are useful and challenging questions to answer, but they should not be given the primacy that many people give them.

What really matters is figuring out the learning part. If we frame our challenges around learning first, then we might realize that our questions about information management might not be as important as we think they are.

At Groupaya, we've developed sophisticated internal information management processes. We have detailed documentation about everything stored in a single place where we can all easily find it. We continuously synthesize what we're thinking and doing into snapshots of understanding, so that we don't have to pile through a stack of meeting notes or emails to figure out the current state of a project. We have an internal activity stream that keeps us all connected and that helps make the mountains of information that we all generate manageable.

There are huge benefits to the way we interact with and manage our information, and I am justifiably proud of all of those things. And yet, when I think about the high-leverage activities that have made us better at *learning* as an organization, those information management practices are very much secondary.

The things that have made us most effective have been structures and practices that encourage us to review and reflect, that help us embody what we learn into something that's actionable. They include things like [joyful funerals](#), a trick we stole from [Mom's Rising](#) that encourages us to experiment aggressively and to celebrate what we learn, regardless of whether the experiment succeeds or fails.

I am a big believer in how digital technology can make us more

effective at the things we already do and create new opportunities to do things that we never previously imagined. But I've found that most organizations – especially smaller ones – who are grappling with knowledge management would be better off reframing their challenges around learning and starting there instead.