

Chapter Five

DISCUSSION

Introduction

When I began this study, the relationship of thought leaders and their passion looked like what is represented in Figure 14(a). After developing and working with the basic framework for the study, that relationship looked much more like what is represented in Figure 14(b). Not only is passion a larger part of the whole, but there is a continuous connection to both internal and external inducers as well as what we have defined in our framework as externally observed and internally felt elements and self correlates.

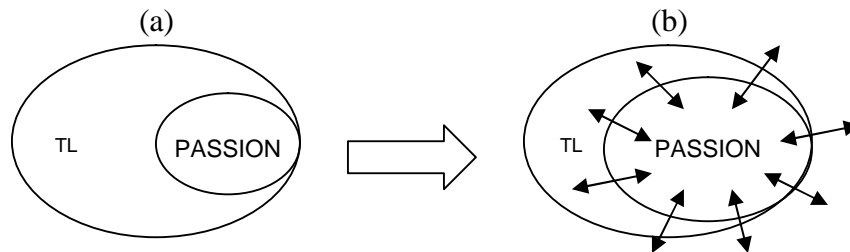


Figure 14: Relationship of thought leaders and their passion

In like manner, when beginning this study it was assumed that the aspects of KM that excited passion in its thought leaders could be considered a subset of KM, with some of those aspects (such as knowledge itself, since knowledge is created within people) residing outside the KM field. This relationship is represented in Figure 15(a). After exploring the rich response, it became clear that the aspects that excited passion in KM thought leaders were *much larger* than KM in terms of individual drivers (such as needs and goals and values), external relationships (such as organizational needs and goals and values), and environmental factors (change, uncertainty, complexity, and so forth).

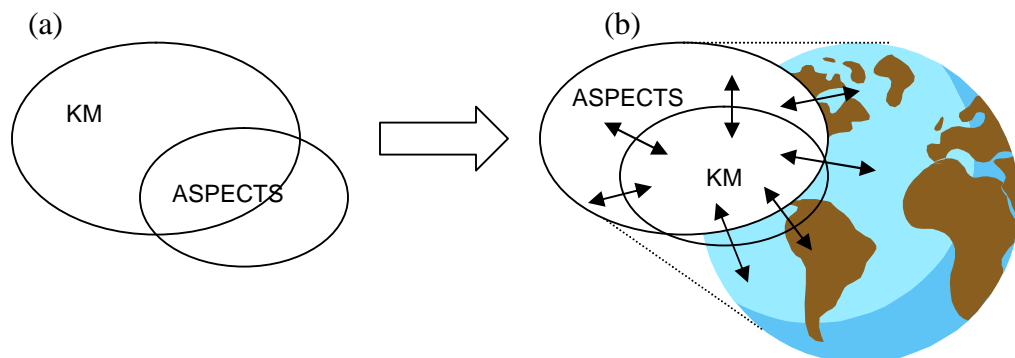


Figure 15: Relationship of KM and the aspects that create passion.

The field of KM, and what it represents in terms of external events and stimuli (knowledge sharing, networks, improved performance of organizations, and so forth), is in the words of thought leaders a tool *for living in the world and with the world in a more human and humane way*. As such, the field of KM is not only smaller than the aspects that participate in the passion of its thought leaders, but in addition to its role as a subset of these aspects it is also highly interactive and engaged in the workings of the aspects that are outside of KM. One way of thinking about this is by considering a focus area of KM such as knowledge sharing. Certainly in an organizational setting, sharing knowledge associated with the work at hand through community and team structures has a direct impact on organizational efficiency and effectiveness in terms of such things as solving problems, creating new and better ways to work, and preventing repetition of previous mistakes. However, this knowledge sharing also builds relationships and facilitates learning and understanding, which connotes larger engagement of the individual in the world in which they live, going beyond the work environment. This translates into a larger impact of the individual in and on society and, in an autopoietic system, feedback to the individual, thereby promoting growth. From this viewpoint, the relationship of the aspects surfaced during this study and KM is represented in Figure 15(b). This new perspective, or in the words of one thought leader “the grinding of a new pair of lenses,” sets the stage for discussing our results.

The Primary Question

What have we learned about those aspects of knowledge management that foster passion in KM thought leaders? Certainly this response is rich with insights and full with passion, but how can we further explore and make sense of the response?

It is not surprising that thought leaders themselves have passion. In the literature review, it was confirmed through well-grounded studies that reason and passion are both critical to our ability to make proper decisions, and passion was linked with intellectual pursuits, leadership, and creativity, all clearly part of thought leadership. Passion was also identified in the thought leader response as an attribute of being a thought leader. For example, when describing thought leaders, one responder noted, “They all have a passion of one sort or another. I think that fuels continuous thought and desire for clarity . . . that’s the way it is for me.” Another responder affirms, “You can tell it in any of them . . . in the tone of their voice, and their excitement, and you know it’s contagious.” This passion was described in many ways. For example, “If you believe it you try to show it to others” and “I guess they all have a sense of mission, and this is sometimes even close to religion or emotional feeling that you have a mission to achieve and that you need to open the eyes of the people.” This latter responder goes on to explain, “This is also the reason why so many people in this field are so involved in educational projects or supporting this at the societal level.” These insights are not isolated in the response and clearly agree with the literature review. So it is forwarded that passion is a natural aspect of thought leadership.

So what are those aspects of knowledge management that thought leaders connect with the passion they express about knowledge management?

I used a framework (repeated at Figure 16) developed from the literature review to cluster those aspects that thought leaders specifically expressed when responding to the question, “What about KM excites your passion?” The aspects mapped from thought leader response to this question span the field of KM. Thought leaders also *specifically call out the field itself* as one aspect to which they connect their passion. Additionally, not only do the aspects *closely match the meaning* of the descriptive terms in the passion framework, but many of the *words used to describe the meaning* are the same. Thought leader responses also span the entire sphere of the framework. This mapping, and comparison of the elements and aspects mapped, would appear to demonstrate the validity of the framework in terms of the thought leaders’ perception of aspects of KM that excite their passion. This mapping also presents a first cut at those aspects about KM that thought leaders connect to their passion (see pages 48-50). Recognizing

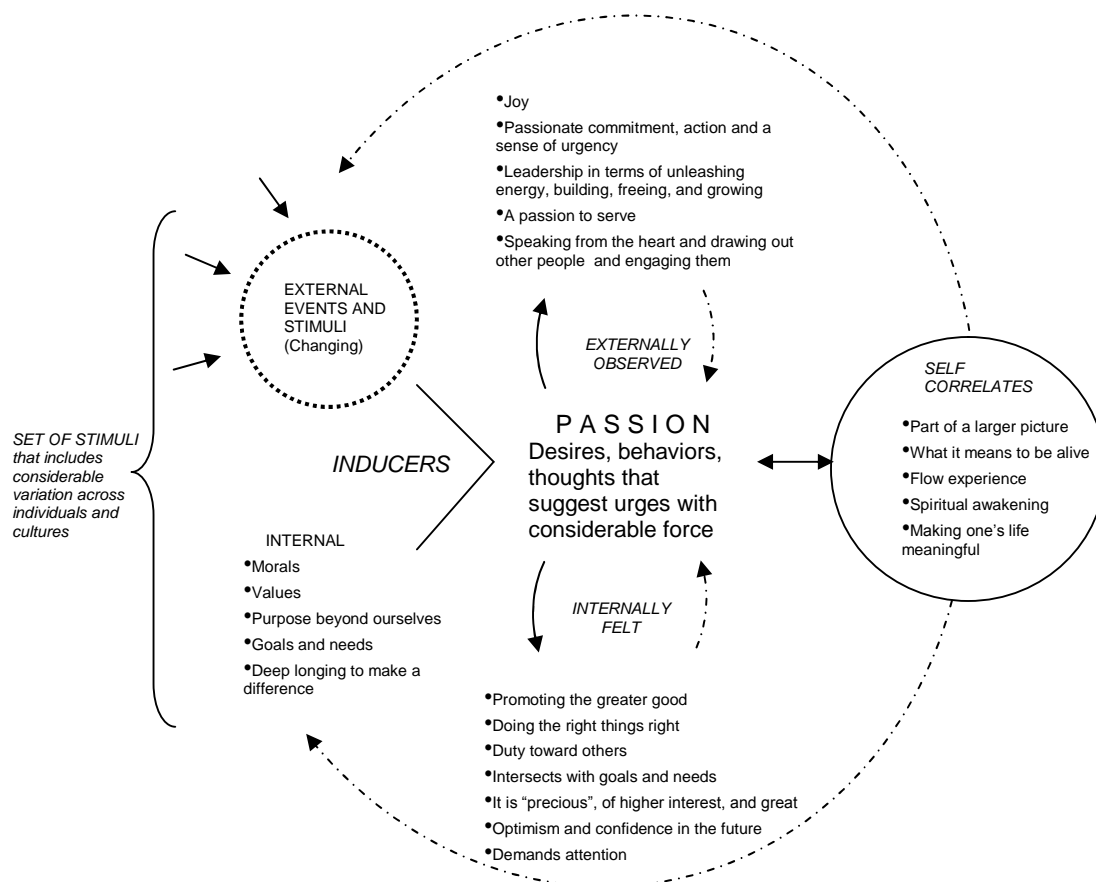


Figure 16: Framework repeated.

that many thought leaders consider the field itself as an aspect they connect with passion, I then looked across the response in terms of the framework.

In exploring the aspects of knowledge management that thought leaders connect with their passion, it appears that the knowledge management field affects an entire spectrum of aspects that are connected to passion, that is, there is not one single aspect (or a group of aspects, or several groups of aspects) but a plethora of aspects that include both internal and external inducers, externally observed behaviors, internally felt emotions, and correlates to a larger picture, offering the opportunity for us to make a difference, promote the greater good and make our lives meaningful, moving us through our own goals, values and needs to a purpose beyond ourselves. The pattern that emerges is the *tremendous diversity and multidimensionality among these aspects*.

The field of knowledge management appears to have a magnetic attraction. One interpretation of these intense connections between knowledge management and its thought leaders—and, according to responders, students coming into the field and most people who work in the field—is the resonance of the field with the best of what it is to be human. This is not surprising since the “best of what it is to be human” could be defined in terms of our framework built around those internal and external elements contributing to passion. The results of the interviews clearly showed a close relationship between the elements of the framework and the aspects thought leaders connect to their passion. This is discussed further below as we look at the nature of passion and the relationship of thought leaders to the aspects.

Recognizing that all elements of the framework are presented in overall thought leader response, it is forwarded that all the passion elements of the framework contribute to thought leader passion at some level; however, this does not mean that all these elements are always present in every thought leader. To fully understand the aspects that contribute to thought leader passion, it then falls to us to look at the external events and stimuli that are a part of this framework. Loosely clustered into eight areas these aspects are: the field, the breadth of the field, the changing nature of the field, value/results, new thinking, knowing, and the challenges and opportunities (see pages 47-48).

This set represents the external events and stimuli specifically called out by thought leaders, those things that fall within the context of the field that are contributing to thought leader passion. Exploring why the field itself is called out again and again as one of the aspects that contribute to thought leader passion, the nature of the field itself is discussed on page 218. I now focus on the secondary questions.

The Nature of This Passion

The thought leader passion that came from specific aspects of the knowledge management field was considered an additional reward by many thought leaders. Thus the passion felt by these thought leaders is very positive, and helped fuel their personal

energy, their personal satisfaction, and the love for their work. Although some of these leaders admit they were passionate people, a number of responses gave support to the claim that as part of that passion there were values and aspirations of a higher order of meaning. For example, in thought leader words: “nourishment and cultivation of the future;” “the richness of multidimensionality of experience;” “value of knowledge and what it can do for society, for individuals, for interactions between individuals;” “the creation of new ideas;” “overall human value;” “I’m not wasting my time;” “I’m making a contribution;” and “work really worthy.” Such responses as these—and many others—indicate that thought leader passion was not just for their work but also for the higher good to which their work contributes. This overall response would indicate that *thought leader passion is derived from a higher order.*

Another aspect of the nature of thought leader passion is the energy level changes over the years they worked in KM. As Figure 12 (page 171) indicates, of the thought leaders who responded in terms of level of energy, 38% thought their energy had steadily increased over the years while 54% saw it as varying up and down during their time in KM. This large percentage of thought leaders with vacillating energy may be the result of, among other things, changes in personal effectiveness, or in the image or reputation of the KM field. Since higher order values and goals are usually stable, the variations in energy would indicate that thought leader passion is also dependent on other aspects than just higher-order ones. But even this is confounded by the observation that when you are high in passion, the most likely future will be one with less passion. Since an individual’s passion at a specific point in time may be for a particular domain of KM, for example a technology or strategy, their passion may vary with the success or popularity of each domain. Still another possibility is the oscillation between high passion from action and low passion from reflection shown in Figure 13 (page 120). Clearly, since each thought leader creates their own unique path through the world in their part of the field, living their own sequence of events in life, any or all of these interpretations—as well as others—may apply.

Thought leader passion for their work even changed their ontology. For example, in thought leader words: “it’s kind of like building a whole new set of dispositions on how we see the world;” “suddenly we see the world differently;” and “our passion for this work changes aspects of who we are.” To these thought leaders, their passion was considerably more than energy. *It crept into their being, their basic existence, and influenced how they saw themselves in the world.* To some thought leaders this passion is contagious, easily transmitted to others, and building upon itself. For other thought leaders, passion drives the work they do.

So our data indicate that passion, as related to knowledge management thought leaders, plays a spectrum of roles dependent on each thought leader, their higher level values and goals, and their knowledge management context. Although its fundamental role is undoubtedly in raising the thought leader energy levels, there seems to be many side shows taking over center stage, that is, other aspects reflecting the elements of our

framework appear to be coming into significant play with different individuals in different contexts.

The Relationship of Thought Leaders to the Aspects

In terms of intangibles, the response shows thought leaders have: “a sense of mission;” “integrity, consistency and persistence;” “the courage to stand by what you believe;” “the humility to realize that it may not be right;” “an openness for listening and seeing new signals;” “a sincere desire to help people in organizations;” “passion of one sort or another;” “an expanded set of sensibilities;” “a true interest in improving the system;” and “a social dynamic.” In addition, thought leaders have a more “full-blooded understanding” of what it means to be human, what it means to be a worker or employee, and what learning really means in these complex settings. They also have an openness for listening and seeing new signals, and balancing that openness with personal wisdom and a very humble approach to moving along what one thought leader called the rhythm related to applying wisdom. They also “become endlessly prolific.”

This is an admirable set of attributes for anyone, much less for people with influential roles in their field. The list indicates what thought leaders think of each other, clearly showing the *mutual respect in the KM field* and the *strong value system that has become embedded within the field*. Since many responders have tied themselves to lofty goals and values, and they have given other thought leaders high marks of character, we conclude that the knowledge management field, or at least this subset of its thought leaders, are indeed a special group of talented individuals working towards a higher purpose. This does not, of course, imply they are without the human frailties that plague us all.

An important attribute of the knowledge management field is that it *offers a win-win playground with high moral, social and economic payoff for players*. This may well be the most powerful force in its favor, and certainly serves as a precursor for changing the nature of competition. KM has a large domain with few guidelines and rules. This is partially due to its youth, but more likely due to its scope and nature. In contrast, some fields of inquiry (physics, engineering, psychology, and so forth) are disciplines with relatively clear—albeit changeable—principles, guidelines and procedures.

In general, thought leaders are excited to see their ideas accepted and implemented by others. This is to be expected from professionals who write books and give talks in new areas. In terms of ownership, some thought leaders are happy to have others use their ideas even if the originator receives no credit. Several thought leaders consider their ideas as children, growing up and leaving home. Ideas were seen to be the focal point of their work, sometimes thought of as seeds to be planted and nurtured in the fertile field of knowledge management. Some thought leaders give ideas a life of their own, to be sent out into the world, tested, and ignored or improved. Overall, the relationship between thought leaders and their ideas is a very close and endearing one. However, since thought leaders often create ideas from the ideas of other thought leaders,

they generally recognize and respect all good ideas and are aware of the social nature of ideas—that ideas beget more ideas, possibilities explode, and everyone benefits. Thus the importance of knowledge sharing to thought leaders and to the field.

From the viewpoint of its thought leaders, KM is value laden. *The nature of KM work brings out and builds on values and value systems.* Knowledge, together with its progenitor learning, is considered by many thought leaders to be a value, something worth doing for its own sake. Creativity, value creation, creating extraordinary results, and building a well-functioning organization all lead to fulfilling something worthwhile in people's lives. Living networks and solving difficult problems also have inherent value unto themselves. In Appendix D, 65 thought leader values are identified, explicated, and their relation to KM described. A cursory review of appendix D clearly shows the close ties that exist between the value, the thought leader and the knowledge management field. When personal values are reinforced by a field of work such as KM, amazing results can accrue. Forwarded by the data, there is energy, personal growth, loyalty to the field and long term personal satisfaction. And to paraphrase one thought leader, there is a direct relationship between values and passion.

One responder who was successfully implementing a collaboration process for harvesting and restructuring relevant knowledge that could be reused, said that people seemed to be able to identify with this process very easily and recognize value in it. It was rewarding to him that a large number of people as well as management in this large organization were really demonstrating some passion around this approach. As this thought leader reflected, "I haven't quite figured out why, other than I think they really believe it's the right thing to do. Somehow I've matched up a large group of people's value systems with a process." This is clearly the resonance of the field with the best of what it is to be human described on page 144.

The deep relationship thought leaders have with the field is clearly connected to their passion, a relationship grounded by their research, experiences, relationships, networking and values. The potential offered by knowledge—at the core of the field—simultaneously intersects with the self and humanity, the internal and the external, in such a way as to offer the potential to make a difference for individuals and organizations. These thought leaders learn, share, teach, lead, and make sense of the world, moving toward what some of them refer to as a state of wisdom. While almost half of the responses could easily support this model, this intersection has been briefly visualized in Figure 17.

From a knowledge management perspective and as mapped in the results, the field possesses many characteristics that encourage flow states in its thought leaders. In the results (pages 137-139), thought leader responses were mapped to the conditions of flow (Csikzentmihalyi, 2003). In addition, many aspects of the field have been identified by thought leaders as being the objects of their passion. I have also noted in the literature

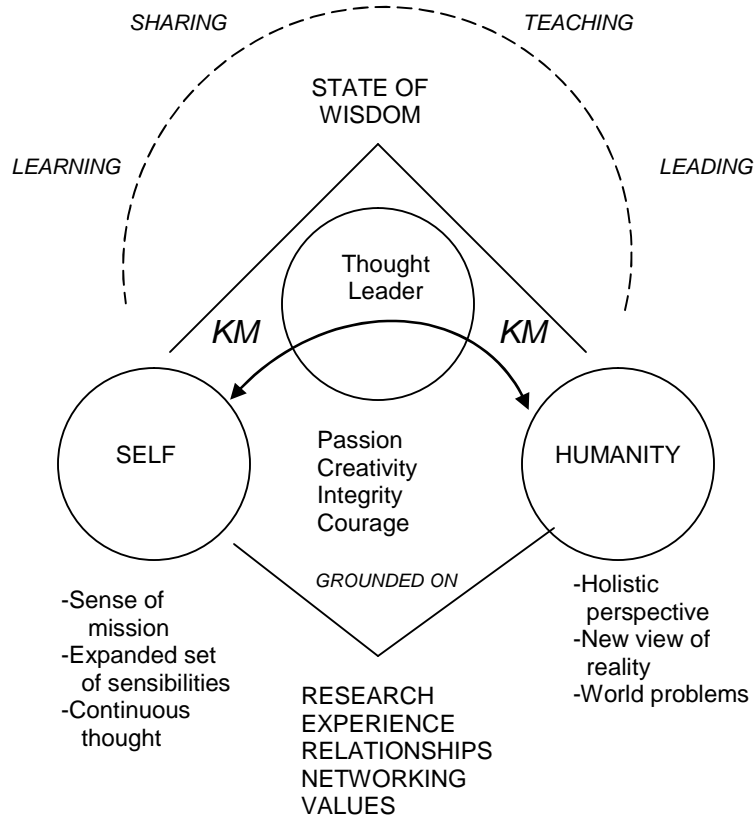


Figure 17: Thought leaders operating at the intersection of self and humanity.

review that passion engenders flow. From these observations can it be concluded that KM thought leaders work in flow states? No, because only the thought leaders can provide that information. However, it is reasonable to conclude that there are many indicators raising the likelihood that thought leaders working in the knowledge management field frequently *operate* in the flow state. In fact, it may be that working in flow states reinforces their passion. This connection suggests the potential for further research and study as we seek to more fully connect our organizations and workers in a knowledge age. Further reflections on flow and autotelic work are included below as we take a closer look at the field.

A Closer Look at the Field

When introducing this study, I reflected on the cognitive, tangible field of KM, with pragmatic actions coupled with intellectual theoretical directions, and its relationship with passion, both emotional and intangible. I forwarded the belief that *there is a strong emotion—a passion, an excitement—that emerges in thought leaders of knowledge management, and grows, as there is recognition of something greater*. This has clearly been supported by the response. I further queried, in terms of KM what are the

ideas that grab hold of us and push us beyond a job, beyond our organizations to try and make a difference in ourselves, our organizations and the world?

I explored the aspects, looked at the nature of thought leader passion and the relationship of thought leaders and those aspects. Now I move beyond the direct results of the study, tap into intuition based on a myriad of life experiences including 30 years of professional experience (10 years in the field of knowledge management), a rich set of past and present relationships and a full belief and value set, all partnering with an aging body and (for the most part) a learning mind. Engaging all of this, what new ways of looking at and thinking about this field are suggested by this study?

About KM Thought Leaders

Thought leaders create, learn, enhance and help others understand and apply KM to their organizations to achieve high performance. They write books, publish papers, give presentations at conferences, teach, consult with clients, and do original thinking and research. Although the interviews covered specific questions, a sense of thought leader perspectives can be gained by considering what they did *not* say as well as what they did say. For example, consistent with my own experience in the field, other than some differences in approach, there were a very small number of negative remarks (by two responders) from thought leaders about other thought leaders, and minimal mention of competition (once again, two responders). At the same time, there was considerable praise for the work of other thought leaders, even to the point that 82% of those interviewed cited at least one other participant in this study as a thought leader they look to for new ideas. In addition, the discussion around networks and developing ideas surfaced mentoring relationships and thought leader idea partnering in both formal and informal relationships across the field. Several thought leaders voiced their appreciation of other thought leaders and practitioners in the field who help them learn and create new ideas through dialogue and other interactions. This collaborative approach to developing and sharing new ideas has moved the field to a focus on intellectual capital and social capital which is clearly overriding earlier concerns regarding the dominance of technology. Those responders who discussed the KM life cycle in terms of a new focus on people, and those who indicated a rebirth appear to have recognized the morphing character of the field.

Grinding another pair of lenses. Another way of understanding the effect of KM on thought leaders is to consider the response in terms of the four sources of energy that come from working with knowledge and people: cognitive, experiential, social and spiritual. From the cognitive aspect, thought leaders solve difficult problems, create and answer questions, generate new ideas, work across multiple disciplines, learn, and increase their own knowledge. From the experiential aspect they gain new insights, satisfy a hunger for learning and personal growth, and get pleasure from helping others to make a difference. They also enjoy recognition and fulfillment from publishing, lecturing, teaching and collaborating with others. Socially, thought leaders get rewards

from networking, developing relationships, sharing knowledge, working in communities of practice and interest, and traveling and meeting people from around the world. Spiritually, they tap into the energy of creativity, help others to learn and grow, and in the process develop new perspectives and personal awareness which they share, thereby moving the world a small step toward the greater good. Along with this comes a personal sense of responsibility relating to how knowledge is used and what underlying values guide its application, that is, with the thrill of birthing a new idea comes the parental feelings of responsibility for its future and how it is used by others.

Such activities as the above, coupled with the context and nature of the KM field, help us understand the sources and intensity of thought leader passion for their work and the field. Knowledge, understanding, sense-making and interpreting the world around us underpin the basic nature of the human species—it is what makes us human. Knowledge management, because its content lies so close to our fundamental nature as human beings, contains the seeds for passion itself, whether we are involved with routine accomplishments or higher-level personal activities that lead to Maslow's self-fulfillment. As Zohar and Marshall suggested, "Knowledge and understanding are passionate things which cause us to engage deeply with the world around or within us." (Zohar & Marshall, 2000, p. 240) To people who follow the path of knowledge, KM provides an ideal challenge, giving them the opportunity to simultaneously engage deeply with their colleagues, their world and their inner self.

About Knowledge and Knowledge Management

Knowledge management is an embryonic field that gives visibility and focus to an awareness and appreciation of knowledge. Knowledge, the foundational concept, is best understood as the capacity to take effective action. Such capacity requires information, sense-making, understanding, context, theories, rules, insights, intuition and judgment. However, KM primarily works with meta-knowledge or knowledge about knowledge. It also is concerned with people, organizations, technology, networks and knowledge about knowledge processes. Finally, it is concerned with knowledge about designing, developing, leading, managing and changing organizations to improve their performance in a knowledge economy.

Knowledge management has a name problem. Twenty-four of the thought leaders interviewed (71%) did not like the term knowledge management. This concern generally comes from the industrial age interpretation of management as control coupled with a strong belief that it is not possible for an organization to control knowledge because it exists only in the human mind. Despite this dislike for the label, thought leaders used the term 1,701 times during the course of the 34 interviews. This is: (a) because the words are used widely throughout the community and the general interpretation is that it represents a field of activities related to knowledge and organizations; (b) because it is difficult to find another term that denotes the same group of philosophies and activities; and (c) because the interviewer used this term as a generic term when it was acceptable to

the thought leader being interviewed, so it was natural for the interviewee to respond in like manner.

While the term knowledge management (KM) might be considered a useful bridging term left over from the industrial age psyche of most bureaucratic organizations, it was also a term before its time. As it became popular through the early and mid 90's, it was linked, particularly in the United States, to information technology (IT), and vendors rapidly applied the label to their new systems in an effort to gain competitive advantage. At the same time, thought leaders at every level of organizations in the U.S., and increasingly abroad, struggled to figure out what this focus on knowledge really meant to organizations. Thus, a new way of thinking about knowledge and organizations was emerging even as the first hype of KM and its tight relationship to IT began to dissipate. Little wonder that many thought leaders who entered the field before and during this turbulent time tried to separate themselves—and the thoughts that were becoming a new way of life for them—from the industrial age concept of management via control. It was and is clear that an organization cannot manage/control knowledge.

The goal of KM is to enhance human and organizational performance through the creation, sharing and application of knowledge. But as evidenced by the thought leader responses, a focus on knowledge management for the individual is just *beginning* to emerge. Using Edvinsson's favorite expression, "ah ha!" (representing an insight), individuals *can* manage their own knowledge, just as communities (people) *can* manage the social phenomenon of creating new knowledge. With this recent focus on KM for individuals, the term knowledge management has finally come into a time and place where it makes sense.

While I entered this study fully determined to henceforth use the term "knowledge strategies," I have now reached a comfort level with the term knowledge management, and an understanding that this is where we were headed from the beginning, each and every one of us, as individuals learning to manage our own knowledge for the good of ourselves, learning to work with others to manage our knowledge in groups for the good of our organizations, and learning to connect and share internationally to manage our knowledge for the good of our world.

The Nature of the Field

Knowledge management is a perspective, a movement, a field (not a discipline) with values and value. While the interviews did not directly address the nature of knowledge management, listening to the thought leaders describe their work and perspectives on the field led to patterns and insights into the nature of the field itself. It is this nature above all that allows—and encourages—the activities and feelings that excite passion in thought leader's feelings and attitudes about their work.

The KM field is inclusive, open minded, and encourages diversity and new ideas. KM as a field is open and inclusive, and appears to offer something for everyone. There are worldwide activities, minimal disruptive politics, and a sponginess or softness in its texture. The diversity of ideas, theories and solutions emerging do not seem to be in competition with each other rather they represent a library of possibilities available to a kaleidoscope of customers, offering the opportunity for widespread participation and contribution from many individuals, cultures, and nations. Such diversity of ideas and possibilities is fertile ground for thought leaders, and KM provides them with an open learning and sharing environment, challenges to their creativity and good feedback.

Thought leaders identified a number of challenges that gave them energy and excitement. These challenges ranged from changing traditional power structures in organizations, to eliminating stovepipes, to the lost opportunity cost of not learning and becoming smarter, to inverting the formal/informal organizational cultures. Other challenges included not getting stuck in a KM rut, applying KM to individuals, balancing recognition with the public good, and the difficulty of learning a new set of behaviors. These challenges provide a sample of the issues facing KM thought leaders and demonstrate their affinity for meeting challenges and their passion for learning and solving problems.

As the scope of KM continues to expand world-wide, there is considerable opportunity for new entry into the field at every level, both internal and external to organizational structures. KM thought leaders often emerge from within organizations since from this position they come into the field with an understanding of the knowledge of the organization they serve. So while there is also opportunity for consultants to share their knowledge about knowledge and KM from an external position, there is a need for close partnering with internal thought leaders who understand the knowledge of the organization. Additionally, this opportunity exists at all levels of organizations.

It is notable that one fourth of the thought leaders interviewed for this study were women. This is not an anomaly of the field; in fact, many of the KM leaders emerging in organizations are women. Recall that major management movements such as total quality management and business process reengineering each had a primary guru in the lead. For total quality management that was Edward Deming; for business process reengineering it was Michael Hammer. These individuals were clearly out in front forging the paths. Now, who would we say forged the knowledge management path? There was not a single guru, nor was it a primarily male-driven management movement. A number of early thought leaders were included in our study; certainly, Debra Amidon, Lief Edvinsson, Tom Stewart, Juanita Brown, Karl-Erik Sveiby, Karl Wiig, and so many others whose names and ideas are very familiar to many working in the knowledge management field.

What is different about this management field? There is wide recognition of the value of characteristics in the field of knowledge management that are generally assumed as characteristics more common to females than males. This is consistent with the

movement of organizations toward valuing intellectual capital—and the sharing of knowledge—which moves the management focus away from positional authority to knowledge-centric relational collaboration. These characteristics suggest opportunities for women to significantly contribute to and impact the field.

KM is self-referential, with reinforcing feedback loops. The KM field has the unusual and interesting property of being self-referential with respect to its own practitioners. The nature of the thought leader's work and the processes involved in sharing that work with others are the same as the content of the KM field itself. All three of these involve learning, creating, sharing and applying knowledge. This self-referencing acts as a regenerative feedback loop in which the results of thought leader's work impacts organizations and other workers which then reinforces the thought leader's learning, knowledge, social interaction and capacity to share further work.

This aspect of KM provides multiple ways in which thought leaders become passionate about their work. For example, in helping organizations learn to share their knowledge, thought leaders learn how to share their own knowledge as well. Another example would be Tom Davenport's description of how his work on attention affected his personal and professional life. Thought leaders are energized not only by their results but also by the learning and practice they gain in the process of achieving results. Being creative, finding new insights, satisfying curiosity, developing different perspectives, and experiencing productive interactions with others fall within this feedback frame that produces strong, personal feelings about the work, the field and its practitioners. Strong feelings that, according to those interviewed, lead to passion.

The KM field encourages autotelic work or flow. Another aspect of KM introduced earlier in this discussion is its inherent ability to offer thought leaders environments and situations that result in autotelic work or flow experiences. This current of energy and moments of high enjoyment, considered over time, is very close to what we have identified as passion in terms of thought leader response. While flow is most often referred to as a flow state, lasting for some nominal time period, the KM field itself and its content supports many of the conditions needed for flow. From the interviews one finds patterns that support a number of Csikszentmihalyi's conditions. For example, the highest goals of KM are clear, and through networks, conversations, communities and symposia there is relatively fast feedback. Thought leaders are in control of their work, choose their own specific goals, receive feedback from workers (and other thought leaders) in the field, are up to the tasks they set for themselves, and there is a widespread (but not universal) pattern of humbleness. The results of their work validate their ability to concentrate, and for much of their work they must be "in the present" to be effective, although the interviews did not address any sense of time. Overall, the thought leaders get a great deal of satisfaction from their work and feel that it is very beneficial to them personally as well as to organizations and society as a whole.

From interview responses, I find that the thought leaders interviewed frequently touched on their feelings and the excitement that came from learning, creating knowledge, helping others, and experiencing the awareness of “what it means to be alive” or “livingness.” Many of the thought leaders interviewed emanate the excitement of being able to help individuals, organizations, and nations—and perhaps mankind—to help them learn, grow and make a difference. The foundation of KM lies at the core of humanity, and this alone creates passion in many. The intent of this discussion is to propose that for the thought leaders actually engaged in the field of KM, very much a model of scholar practitioners, there is a repetitive or long-term state of flow, that is, the autotelic work experience. This offers a potential area of further study.

KM is a complex adaptive system with many possibilities and opportunities. In his discussion on complexity, Ralph Stacey says that the science of complexity considers the basic properties of nonlinear-feedback networks and particularly of complex adaptive networks. Specifically, he believes that complex adaptive systems “consist of a number of components, or agents, that interact with each other according to sets of rules that require them to examine and respond to each others behavior in order to improve their behavior and thus the behavior of the system they comprise” (Stacey, 1996, p. 10). KM does not have a single leader or guru as was evident in earlier management initiatives such as TQM and BPR. Because of this it does not have a narrow objective, a specified process, or a restricted domain of interest. Being flexible and robust, the field can adapt to—and address—issues and opportunities without being constrained by rigid practices or unquestioned edicts. Aided by the breadth and scope of the field and the variety of potential applications, thought leaders are free from imitation and constraints, relatively independent on their focus while simultaneously interdependent in terms of learning and creating new knowledge, pursuing many different subjects that can be brought together to focus on meta-knowledge and its application to individual and organizational performance. Leadership is distributed, self-organizing, collaborative, and natural—just as many KM activities such as knowledge sharing, communities of practice, and networking are. All of these aspects encourage energy and passion in thought leaders.

This diversity permits continuous learning and adapting to local needs and contexts as various methods and approaches are tested and evaluated. As Battram said, “complex behavior need not have a complex explanation, and order will emerge from ‘self-organization’.” (Battram, 1996, p. 125) Considering the “self-organization” in the field of knowledge management, we can see that the subject matter (knowledge) and its corollary (learning), coupled with the objectives of improving organizational performance, provide a direction and focus for the field without constraining it. There are no rigid rules, dictums and mandatory processes. In fact, the field has emerged and is continuously emerging rather than being designed or planned. This emergence has come from many people, including thought leaders and organizational practitioners, working individually and through networks in a relatively self-consistent progressive learning path. Thought leaders feel that they are part of a worthy endeavor that has the freedom and potential to make significant contributions to individuals, organizations and society.

As the KM field adapts to the needs of individuals, organizations and the world at large, it will likely continue to take on many forms and functions, as any surviving complex adaptive system does. In other words, the direction and nature of this field will “emerge” over time. Such emergent phenomenon are natural properties of a complex adaptive system. John Casti noted that complex systems often display strange, surprising and counter-intuitive behavior.

More often than not, this surprising behavior is attributable to a phenomenon termed *emergence*, which is just a system-theoretic jargon for an overall system behavior that comes out of the interaction of many participants—behavior that cannot be predicted or even envisioned from a knowledge of what each component of the system does in isolation. (Casti, 1997, p. 82)

The implications of recognizing knowledge management as a complex adaptive system are varied. First, constraining the field as a discipline would both limit and control its potential—offering limited opportunity for thought leading. Second, the flexibility, self-organization and empowerment available to thought leaders and others allow for much innovation and trial and error implementation. The field and its thought leaders can easily change directions, adapt to new surprises and fill opportunities. This gives them ownership and internal rewards that generate loyalty and passion.

Knowledge itself is an emergent phenomenon. There is no direct cause and effect relationship between information and knowledge, rather it is the interaction among many ideas, concepts and patterns of thought that create knowledge. These can be any combination of information, experience, environment, need, intuition, feelings, processes, and so forth. So the creation of knowledge is an emergent process in a complex patterned system, entangling itself with goals and objectives and issues and context and other such information. Looking at knowledge in this light surfaces the importance of living networks—networks that bring people together to create, learn and help each other. This importance is recognized by the thought leaders interviewed, and indeed the concept of living networks is currently emerging as a core focus area of the field.

As a complex adaptive system, KM can be expected to continue morphing as the environment changes, supporting the claim that it will be around for many years to come. Several thought leaders pointed out that knowledge was the best solution to the immediate and future problems of organizations and the world. The amount of knowledge in the world will increase with the complexity of the world in a reinforcing loop. While the implications are that there will be a greater need for KM in order to gain competitive advantage in an increasingly knowledge-centric world, there are also indications of greater opportunity. Should we choose to grind another pair of lenses and view global connectivity from a different perspective, increased knowledge in a connected world built on interdependent relationships offers the opportunity to create win-win situations where competition no longer has a role to play. It is this potential that may truly change the role of organizations in the global market.

The global aspect of KM. Today KM is becoming a global field of inquiry and practice that reaches to the heart of its practitioners. Dealing with meta-knowledge, learning, relationships, ideas, methods, processes and meaning, it helps individuals and organizations improve their capacity to perform well by fostering growth, collaboration, social interaction and the fundamental human values of honesty, integrity, sharing and trust. While these values are essential for knowledge creation, sharing and application in organizations, they are also the values that stimulate growth and achievement in individuals and even nations.

KM presses for a workplace where people can work together, learn from each other, grow professionally and become capable of adapting and responding to the challenges of the modern world, that is, the organization as a living system built around people. As our organizations embrace this new way of being, the potential and scope of KM ranges from individuals to organizations to enterprises to nations to global. Many underdeveloped nations are already picking up on KM's potential value and accelerating their entry into the knowledge world by creating value through intangibles that move at the speed of light. This focus on knowledge and KM helps both organizations and nations recognize and maximize the value of their internal knowledge and capacity to learn to build stronger organizations. With third world countries now open and available to global markets but with limited natural land resources, the concerted effort to develop their natural mental resources provides the opportunity not only to survive, but to thrive in a world economy. This is now occurring. Many other countries have become interested in KM and are using it to accelerate their development and movement into the new world where intangibles are becoming more important and valuable than products. Examples include Spain, Mexico, Finland, Sweden, Norway, Australia, Poland, China, Singapore, Taiwan, Canada, Great Britain, France, Germany, South Africa, South Korea, India, Malasia, and Japan. Knowledge management is becoming global through networks of individual researchers, authors and practitioners who can share information and knowledge worldwide. Many thought leaders offer much of their thinking to the world via Internet websites.

The potential offered by this aspect of KM is exciting to thought leaders; 79% of those interviewed have international practices. At the same time, this potential is threatening to those organizations that insist on continuing operations using industrial bureaucracies based on historical experience. This was particularly apparent through a simple observation made by one participant who resides abroad and works with organizations in India, China and Japan. He shared that when he worked with these organizations as a consultant, he goes in looking for those things that *need to be sustained* in these relatively young, dynamic organizations. Unencumbered by historic models these organizations are open to change and in need of identifying and locking onto those things that provide identity and direction. In contrast, consultants who work within industrialized countries go into organizations looking for those things that *need to be—and can be—changed*, that is, these organizations come with historic precedence and mindsets coupled to past successes that can make it very difficult to accept change. The

implication is that these new global organizations are moving directly from an agrarian mindset into the knowledge economy, skipping industrial age concepts and thereby accelerating their race for global competitive advantage. Fraught with innumerable problems and opportunities, this global situation challenges KM thought leaders, opening the possibility for them to contribute significantly to the greater good. What better reason to be passionate?

The future of KM is uncertain but its potential is great. While to date the impact of KM on the world may be small, its history is short but vibrant and pregnant with possibilities and potentialities for all who take knowledge, understanding, and the greater good seriously. KM promises to fulfill—and may be *able* to fulfill as it churns and changes in response to a turbulent world—a fundamental need of individuals and organizations. This need is to make better use of knowledge to strengthen institutions, increase the competence of individuals and improve the value produced by both.

As the world shrinks in space and time and marches toward intangible value, global competition (and beyond), and the multiplication and entanglement of living networks and artifacts, the need to appreciate and advance knowledge will become a dominant force for growth and survival so long as civilizations remain coherent. Since the Greek philosophers, we have nurtured and sometimes abused the concept of knowledge, while always seeming to make longer-term progress. This upstart called knowledge management may be the beginning of a renaissance of thinking, creating, sharing and applying our greatest human asset—the ability to observe, understand, make sense out of our environment, and act upon our situation. This hope and uncertainty, coupled with a potentially high payoff, presents a magnetic attraction to creative, knowledge-loving individuals looking for ways to fulfill themselves and to help others, a good description of the thought leaders interviewed in this study.

A Potential Follow-On Conversation: Exploring KM as an Intelligent Complex Adaptive System

Sy, a cognitive psychologist recognized for his ground-breaking work on judgment and decision-making as well as creative approaches to internal motivation, sits on one of the burgundy leather couches of the Mountain Quest Institute, reflecting on the research results he has just read. Across from him is Ivan, an international businessman whose specialty is knowledge-based organizations addressing the multicultural challenges of global business. Next to Ivan sits Bianca, a biologist interested in the application of living systems to organizations, and angled into an adjacent chair is Fern, a futurist specializing in global trends at the intersection of technology, culture, economics and management.

Sy looks up at the others and speaks, “I am somewhat surprised—actually, amazed is a better word—that this field, admittedly which I know little about, can contain within itself so many of the key elements that excite us as human beings. We all value

knowledge—that’s core to being human—but the field seems to couple that knowledge core with the characteristics of sharing and creating and acting on knowledge that not only offer the possibility of improving our organizations, but make each of us as individuals feel good about our own personal growth and contribution. As Csikszentmihalyi explains, in the West we have historically thought of ourselves as individuals whereas Asian and African cultures see themselves as nodes in a network of relationships (Csikszentmihalyi, 2003, p. 169). In reading this research I got the sense that many of the thought leaders interviewed saw themselves as nodes in a large—perhaps global—network. Perhaps knowledge workers in knowledge organizations also see themselves that way.”

Ivan nods, “That’s an interesting perspective, Sy, howbeit speculative. But as a global businessman my primary concern has to be how to create businesses that live long, maintain competitive advantage and stay profitable. Relative to those goals, I’m not sure how well knowledge management will be able to contribute, although, of course, intuitively I understand the importance of managing knowledge assets. Now, something I’ve learned about this field from both my experience and what I’ve read is its power to move organizations away from the bureaucratic, control-oriented mindset toward recognizing and giving individuals more freedom, influence, and opportunity to contribute to the organization’s mission and direction. What do you think Bianca?”

“Well, what you say certainly makes sense,” Bianca responds. “But I’d like to propose that looking at knowledge-centric organizations—those organizations that have learned how to empower their knowledge workers, increase innovation and at the same time maintain cohesion—they have done very well. Birkinshaw has recently addressed this challenge in an MIT *Sloan Management Review* article (Birkinshaw, 2004). We should all be aware that there’s a lot of recent work that’s being done in the area of complexity theory that relates to the researcher’s remarks that a KM organization, or more appropriately perhaps the field of KM itself, could be considered a complex adaptive system. For example, to meet the rapidly changing demands of the marketplace requires both our organizations and the KM field to continuously learn and adapt or get left behind.”

Fern breaks in. “Bianca, I think you’re on track. In my work looking at global futures I see a definite trend moving us away from standard industrial age management and thinking toward a much more challenging and uncertain future. I’d like to suggest that the acronym CUCA describes this future, in the sense that our world is one of accelerating *change*, rising *uncertainty*, rapidly growing *complexity*, and increasing *anxiety* in response to that change, uncertainty and complexity (Bennet & Bennet, 2004). As the research points out, information is growing exponentially and knowledge builds on knowledge. These phenomena do not seem to be leveling off and, frankly, I’m seriously concerned about our ability as a species to handle this. Bianca, could you elaborate a bit on just exactly what is a complex adaptive system? This may be helpful in finding a way to deal with this challenging CUCA environment.”

“Sure, Fern, I’d be happy to. The concept originated years ago in biology in a new, closely associated field of study called general systems theory. A complex system is one which has so many interrelated parts that it is impossible to trace causal effects, or detail influences or relationships. As Battram has proposed, a complex adaptive system is not only complex but also self-organizing, continuously learning and, of course, changing its internal structure to adapt (Battram, 1996, p. 82).”

Ivan interjects, “Go back for a minute—are you saying we can’t use logic and detailed information to make rational decisions?”

Sy jumps in, “Let me answer, Ivan. Unfortunately I think you’re for the most part right, although what we think of as rational decisions certainly still has a role in decision-making. Let’s take the field of knowledge management for example. The direction of the field as it evolves is the result of a large number of knowledge workers and thought leaders making rational decisions, acting on hunches, creating new ideas and pursuing possibilities. This is so because no one is capable of foreseeing or even understanding the future and—as chaos theory has taught us—small changes can sometimes lead to extraordinary results (Cohen & Stewart, 1994). In other words, the direction of the KM field emerges from the actions, decisions, creativity and intuitive thinking of many different individuals. But realize that we’re all in the same boat as our organizations become more knowledge-centric and more complex. All of us have grown up from an industrial history which has naturally led us to learn to make decisions—and act on those decisions—from the premise that we live in a deterministic world where the more information we have and the more rational our thought the better our decisions. (Gigerenzer & Todd, 1999, pp. 8-9) And while certainly this is true for many areas of our work—those areas that still function in simple cause-and-effect environments—as Fern points out, as our milieu becomes more complex we have to recognize that it is not possible to use only logic and analysis.”

“That’s a good point,” Bianca says, “Because not only is complexity very challenging to understand, it is essentially unpredictable to various degrees. (Battram, 1996, p. 13) There’s what is called an emergent phenomenon in complex organizations. Examples are culture, consciousness, and knowledge itself that arise from multiple interactions within a complex system and take on characteristics entirely different than the components of the system. The field of knowledge management is undoubtedly a complex system because there are far too many people, too many relationships, too many ideas, and too many organizations involved to ever truly “understand” the relationships among them and the details of what happens. Yet, books are written, trends appear, patterns become clear, and the overall field does have a ‘cone of direction’ even though its path may appear random and is unpredictable.”

Ivan leans forward on his seat. “Bianca, are you saying that the KM field has no leader, no strategy or direction? If that is the case then is it simply a random group of well-meaning people? This doesn’t make sense to me.”

Bianca responds, “This self-organization occurs in many complex adaptive systems! It just bubbles up from the large number of interactions, relationships and goals of the many workers—or we could add the term thought leaders—in the field. Also, recall that knowledge itself, when coupled with learning and sharing, forms a common bond that helps the overall field take on slowly changing patterns. For example, the research mentioned several emergent phenomena such as storytelling, communities of practice, living networks and the current movement toward personal knowledge management.”

“Bianca, does this mean that as a businessman I will no longer have control over my organization? Not that I always feel like I’m in control, but if I don’t have control how can I be responsible for it? Senior executives and government leaders are expected to be in control of their organizations and accountable for them, and now you’re telling me because the future is becoming more complex, more of this CUCA stuff, that knowledge and KM are describing a situation in which there’s no such thing as real control?”

Sy looks at Ivan smiling. “Well it sounds like you intuitively recognize, of course, that we as individuals are rarely in control anyway. What’s happening now, as we move toward a knowledge society, is that organizations are moving from the highly-controlled organizations of the early 1900s that spurred Taylorism in the auto production lines and generations of simulated sweat shops, toward an environment which will no longer be dominated by organizations. In other words, in this new paradigm if organizations mimic the field of KM and become more like complex adaptive systems, they must scan, observe, interpret and adapt to the environment in addition to, of course, influencing where and what they can.”

Bianca jumps in excitedly. “That is absolutely right, and this field of knowledge management offers a good example. The field must adapt to the needs of its customers, which are organizations and corporations, in the sense that if it doesn’t produce value added it will have to struggle to survive, no matter how self-worthy it is.”

“And what we have seen,” Fern offers, “is a significant movement within the field from its initial focus on technology and information towards knowledge in terms of understanding and the social aspects of knowledge creation as the predominate value contributors. This is an example of its learning and adaptability.”

Sy agrees. “Yes, and that’s exactly why the field of knowledge management is moving us towards recognizing the significance and importance of humans and individuals and learning and sharing to create value added. It is internally and naturally evolving in the human direction: giving the individual the freedom and responsibility needed for success within the vision and direction of their organization.”

Bianca softly exclaims, “Ah, ha! You have just identified a significantly new emergent property of the field of knowledge management.”

“A question,” Ivan interjects. “Does this mean that the field will survive if it continues to offer value to its customers while adapting to the needs of a changing world?”

Bianca nods, “From a biological point of view, every complex adaptive system must have energy and information coming in, and it must be able to continuously create new ideas and change its infrastructure to adapt to the demands of its environment. In the case of the KM field, its energy comes from the passion of its thought leaders—and most likely knowledge workers as well—and the human desire to learn and understand.”

Sy jumps in, “And I think part of that passion is the opportunity to create new ideas, processes and applications, and to better understand the process of developing and exploring our own cognitive limits through personal study, team collaboration and other methods of leverage. Also, I would suggest that the field of knowledge management has an inherent internal growth mechanism which would aid its survival. Since knowledge builds on both exponentially growing information and on knowledge itself, by its nature the field of knowledge management builds upon itself. I guess that’s what is meant by the researcher saying the field is self-referential.”

“That’s certainly true,” Fern offers, “although the researcher was pointing out that what thought leaders were doing themselves as thought leaders and practitioners is exactly what they are helping others to learn how to do. But I think this is also because we know the explosion of technology has reduced the cost of communication, emphasized the creation of networks, sped up transactions, and allowed knowledge workers to confront the challenge of understanding and dealing with complexity.

“Yes, but recognize,” Sy suggests, “that we’re only at the beginning of this transition into the age of complexity, and frankly no one really understands how or what we as a species need to do.”

Bianca offers, “However, this field of KM has helped awakened many of us to the importance of continuous learning, knowledge sharing, and understanding what’s happening. This may be the beginning of a changing world.”

“Well, from my psychologist perspective,” Sy says, “I certainly understand why autotelic work is so frequently found within the field of KM and why the field seems to have a magnetic attraction to many people. It both supports our own personal deep desire for understanding and growing as well as being able to contribute to the broader good of organizations and families, and even the greater good.”

“If it can do all that,” Ivan says excitedly, “and in addition create a new value proposition which improves our economy, our affluence level, and helps developing countries have a better standard of living, then this field should be recognized for its potential.”

Sy laughs. “Well, I don’t disagree, except to add that it’s really people who will do all that, howbeit people who are both more knowledgeable and connected through living networks, and people who are supported by everything this field pushes us to focus on. So our focus is not so much on people as assets, but people as investors, investing time, energy and intelligence” (Stewart, 2001, p.252).

Fern, who has been listening carefully, reflects on the dialogue before saying, “Ivan, I don’t know whether you’re aware of it, but some developing countries are already using the field to leapfrog developed countries by bypassing industrial development and moving directly into the knowledge world. First of all, besides needing natural land resources, industrialization takes a great deal of capital and time, and developing countries don’t have much of either. But because many people around the world have access to satellites, Internet, cell phones, and so forth, they are aware of what other countries have. This creates intense pressures within developing countries to improve their standard of living.”

“Now that you point that out, Fern,” Bianca responds, “perhaps the field of KM as a complex adaptive system is spreading its wings far enough to potentially become a world-wide phenomenon.”

“That’s an interesting possibility,” Sy says. “I do know that if we had world-wide communication and recognition of the importance of learning, sharing and innovation that the knowledge management field promotes, then technology coupled with living networks could help the world become closer and more collaborative rather than so competitive and divisive. In our multinational enterprises we’ve already recognized that our exposure to a wider variety of customers, competitors and technologies stimulate innovation by helping us sense and respond to a diverse array of environmental signals. Then, we have the ability to tap into the resources and capabilities of a rich knowledge-creating network. That means better responses to choose from, and the ability to proliferate certain innovations (Gupta & Westney, 2003). Living networks may well move us toward a win-win world.”

“Living networks would certainly change the global business arena,” Ivan notes.

“What a fascinating possibility,” Fern suggests, “that something as seemingly benign as the field of knowledge management could become significant as a world movement.”

“Well, I can tell you this,” Bianca responds, “historically very few living organisms have been able to survive the test of evolution unless they *were* complex adaptive organisms. As we all know, Darwin learned that many years ago” (Wilson, 1998, p. 190).

“But aren’t we as individuals *intelligent* complex adaptive organizations?” Sy poses with a smile. “So that hopefully when we start working together that intelligence connected by need and a willingness to learn and share can do better than any other living organisms.”

Fern sighs, “Did you notice that the researcher applies the word intelligent to the field? Let me confirm that language.” She flips through the pages in front of her. “Yes, the researcher does say that the field of knowledge management is an intelligent complex adaptive system.”

Sy responds, “I’m not really sure how a field could be intelligent—other than the sum of the individual actions and contributions by its thought leaders and workers are connected sufficiently through communications and the sharing of understanding such that there can emerge a mode of behavior and an intention of force which moves the field in a direction for its survival and contribution.”

Thinking carefully, Bianca responds, “That’s a fascinating idea, Sy. There is a concept called ‘swarm intelligence’ that comes from the amazing ability of ants and some other insects to change their individual behavior when needed so that the swarm, as a whole, adapts to, and takes advantage of changes in its environment. ‘Perhaps the most powerful insight from swarm intelligence is that complex collective behavior can emerge from individuals following simple rules’ (Bonabeau & Meyer, 2001).”

“You know the more I reflect on this field,” Ivan mutters, “the more important I think it may become in all of our futures.”

Fern responds quickly, “I know from my work viewpoint I’m going to follow this with intense interest, and do some serious study to understand it better.”

“That’s a task that it would behoove all of us to take on,” Sy states emphatically.

“Yes, I agree,” Bianca says, “because I think each of us with our own special expertise—and many other people looking at the field from their own experiential viewpoint and areas of interest and work—will help improve our collective understanding of what’s going on, what we need to do, and the possibilities for the future.”

“Isn’t that the concept of a living network?” Ivan asks.