

This is a section of [doi:10.7551/mitpress/14908.001.0001](https://doi.org/10.7551/mitpress/14908.001.0001)

# Principles of Knowledge Auditing

## Foundations for Knowledge Management Implementation

By: Patrick Lambe

### Citation:

*Principles of Knowledge Auditing: Foundations for Knowledge Management Implementation*

By: Patrick Lambe

DOI: 10.7551/mitpress/14908.001.0001

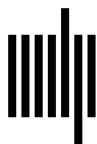
ISBN (electronic): 9780262373166

Publisher: The MIT Press

Published: 2023

### OA Funding Provided By:

OA Funding from MIT Press Direct to Open



The MIT Press

# 9 The Battle for Standards in Knowledge Management

“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.”

—Moore (2018)

## Knowledge Audits: Fragmentation of Audit Types

Although heavily influenced by information management in many undocumented ways (for example, the migration of information management professionals into knowledge management), the KM tradition has followed a slightly different path from the information management tradition. In information management, information managers have tried to contain a plurality of models under the single label *information audit* and have made several unsuccessful attempts at developing an integrated approach. In KM, the audit models have partially stratified into three distinct activity areas, each with its own label:

- **Knowledge audits:** As we have seen, in the research literature the term *knowledge audit* has referred most often (but not exclusively) to inventory audits and discovery review audits of different kinds.
- **KM assessments:** The assessment audit model came to be referred to as *KM assessments*, often on a benchmarking model and focusing on the effectiveness of KM activities and processes with a series of determined but often frustrated forays into the development of KM standards. Some, such as David Skyrme (2007, p. 2), very clearly distinguish between practice-oriented “KM assessments” and asset-oriented “knowledge audits” (cf. also Lee et al., 2021, p. 72). Others, however, use the terms

interchangeably (Hylton, 2004, p. 1). Handa et al. (2019, p. 56) argue for a distinction between tight (summative) audits on a management accounting model and looser, less formal “assessments”, but this does not represent common usage in the literature or in practice.

- **Intellectual capital measurement:** The intellectual capital (IC) measurement movement largely oriented itself around a value audit model, with some side-glances into intellectual property valuation and exploitation. Handa et al. (2019) have attempted to integrate knowledge audits, KM assessments, and intellectual capital measurement into a single intellectual framework, but again this is not characteristic of the literature or of practice.

While the stratification between knowledge audits, KM assessments, and intellectual capital measurement has produced much less immediate confusion than in information management, such stratification is not necessarily a good thing. In information management the information audit so transparently encompasses many different types of potential activity that it has forced a much more explicit awareness within the profession of the variety of audit models contained in that term, and information management practitioners have therefore made efforts to map and make sense of those models.

The adoption of different labels for different types of audits in the KM sphere has meant that their respective practices have evolved in silos, each claiming ownership of its own definitions and methods and resulting in a much more fragmented view of the variety of audit models available. This has contributed to

- a greater fragmentation of knowledge audit practice,
- a lack of common language to describe what are closely related practices, and
- competition for primacy between different practice communities about the legitimacy of the labels and methods they use.

The resulting lack of clarity about the full range of knowledge-related audits is compounded by the fact that though these distinctions between knowledge audits, KM assessments, and intellectual capital measurement emerge pretty clearly in the literature, they are not widely understood distinctions among practitioners, as we saw in chapter 4 (table 4.1). And the labeling remains fluid in practice. KM assessments and value-oriented audits continue to be labeled *knowledge audits*, along with inventory and discovery review audits. It is never completely clear whether knowledge audits or KM assessments are considered to be the same thing or distinctly different things.

There is such a wide variety of meaning in the term *knowledge audit* as to make it virtually useless without some means of clarifying what is meant by it, what are the target phenomena, and what is its expected outcome.

In this chapter we will focus on the assessment audit model for knowledge auditing, specifically relating to standards, which will conclude this section of the book and our systematic examination of different models of audit in KM.

The next section of this book will move from our consideration of how audits are framed and described to how knowledge itself is framed and described. Chapters 10–11 will discuss the sometimes unanticipated effects of the metaphors we use to describe knowledge. Chapters 12–14 will explore the particular risks and ambiguities that arise from the notion that knowledge possesses intrinsic value and how this can easily distort the metaphors and language we choose to describe and measure knowledge. We will address the challenges posed by our choice of language to describe knowledge resources, knowledge assets, and intellectual capital, and we will discuss what this means for the conduct of value-based knowledge audits. Chapters 15–20 will return to the most significant challenge we face in conducting a foundational inventory-based audit of knowledge assets or resources—the need for a typology of knowledge resource types that is practical and easily reported and covers the full spectrum of forms in which knowledge appears and is used in organizations.

### **The Knowledge Management Pushback: KM Assessment, KM Standards, and Antiprescriptivism**

So far we have seen that the communication audit tradition has been primarily formative in the way it approaches audit assessments and that the information audit tradition has attempted, with limited success, to be summative in nature. In many cases the failure to define clear standards for performance has meant that information auditing has tended to fall back into formative evaluations and, usually, on the discovery review model (Ellis et al., 1993).

The knowledge audit tradition inherits aspects of both audit traditions, and this contributes to the plurality of operating models and consequent confusion surrounding the knowledge audit.

Assessment audits have had a mixed history in the KM literature. The earliest-known explicit reference to knowledge audits comes from a 1981 article on the development of quality productivity measures in the public sector. Based on feedback about the impact of poor policy understanding upon the effectiveness of employees, one of the proposed measures was a “knowledge audit to evaluate policy communication effectiveness” (Adam et al., 1981, p. 55). The audit was designed to measure the congruence between the content of the policy and an employee’s understanding of the content.

This was quite clearly based on an assessment audit model in which there was an external, objective measure not influenced by contextual goals or objectives. This kind of comprehension check audit is also, by the way, a typical activity you would find in a communication audit, which was occasionally used to check on the effectiveness of corporate messaging and information transfer (both internal and external), although in this case the authors seemed unaware of that connection. However, this was a rare usage in knowledge management, and it does not widely appear as a knowledge audit model elsewhere.

In general practice, knowledge audits over the past twenty years or so have been on the inventory audit and discovery review audit model, frequently but not always in combination. This is not to say that knowledge managers have lacked interest in assessment (whether formative or summative) and in the valuation of knowledge resources. But there has been resistance.

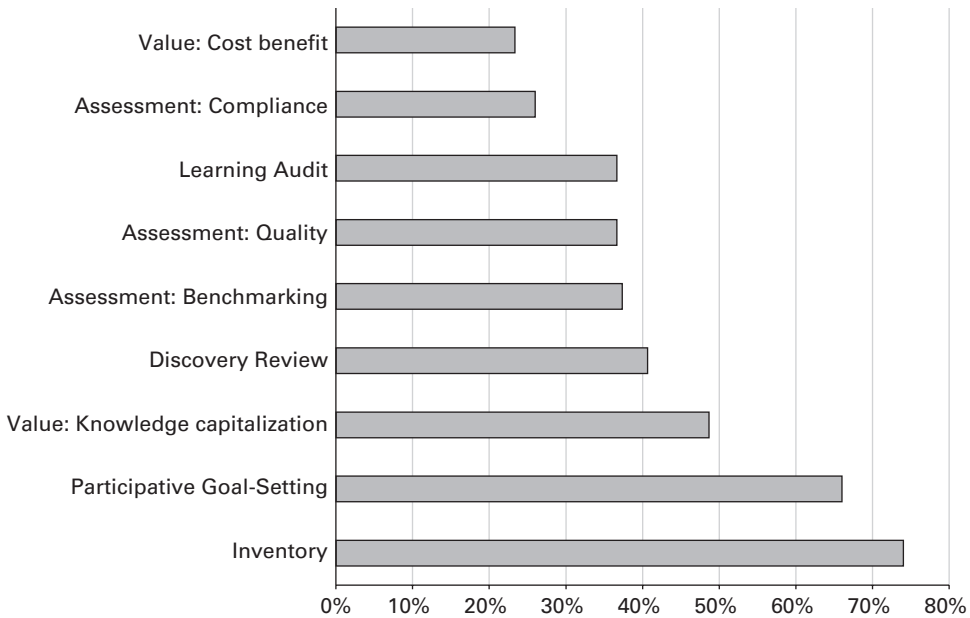
The 2019 book *Knowledge Assets and Knowledge Audits* by Pawan Handa, Jean Pagani, and Denise Bedford presents a sophisticated argument for applying the assessment audit and value audit models to KM, but as we have seen, on close examination it looks to be closer to a participative goal-setting audit than a true assessment/value audit, and it remains to be seen whether it provides a practical model for widespread adoption. It lacks application case studies (Handa et al., 2019).

While communication auditing has persistently wanted to become more scientific and information auditing has aspired to greater rigor and authority, knowledge managers have, on the contrary, often pushed back against the notion of assessment-based knowledge audits and particularly against summative assessments of knowledge management, and they have done so with surprising regularity and force.

Our global survey found that the three types of assessment audit (benchmarking, quality, and standards compliance) were the three least frequently encountered types of knowledge audit among knowledge managers experienced in knowledge audits. Of those, compliance audits were the least frequently encountered as figure 9.1 illustrates (Lambe, 2017).

The common hesitation of practitioners in relation to the possibilities for summative assessments of knowledge management emerge most clearly in the reactions to the development of standards for KM.

Several attempts have been made to develop KM standards, only some of them successful. All of them have been qualified to some degree upon presentation, in order to soften the implications of summative assessment. This tendency toward the promulgation of “soft” standards is expressive of the widespread hesitation about the efficacy of summative assessment in knowledge management.



**Figure 9.1**

Frequency of audit types in a global survey of experienced knowledge auditors.

*Source:* Lambe, 2017.

The motivation for developing standards for KM is clear, and it is rooted in some of the challenges already identified by Goldhaber for communications practices in 1976—a lack of consistency in practice, improvisations driven by hunch and intuition without clear evidential foundations, and rampant ambiguity in language and in underlying concepts, all resulting in an inability to generalize and compare practices across organizations and industries. The motivation, then, is “to overcome the current unnecessary and avoidable lack of clarity in the discussion, debate and understanding of KM” (Farmer, 2002, p. 5).

To some degree at least, the inconsistency and ambiguity has been commercially influenced. And it has been commercially exploited. In the late 1990s and early 2000s, the field of KM practice was both popular and competitive. There was an evangelizing need to differentiate potentially lucrative commercial services in knowledge management by using distinctive methodology or language—colorfully described by Davenport and Prusak as “theories, fads, nostrums and silver bullets” (1998, p. xix; cf. Scarborough & Swan, 2001; Lambe, 2011a, p. 189).

In a highly competitive but ill-defined environment, common strategies for differentiation can include co-opting language (by coining new language or imposing new meanings on old words) to establish uniqueness and ownership and deprecating continuity with prior or competing art. In such an environment, ambiguities, uncertainties, and fine distinctions proliferate.

We have already seen some gentler aspects of this in the co-option of the knowledge audit into the information audit tradition by library and information science professionals (this was my pathway into knowledge audits), and in chapter 13 we will see the same phenomenon in the co-option of knowledge management by the technology-driven data management profession (cf. Lambe, 2011a, pp. 186–189). This is fairly typical of a novel field or of an older field recasting itself in new clothing (Firestone & McElroy, 2003, p. 332).

With each co-option, meanings are also appropriated to or from the background disciplines of the contestants, and distinctions and oppositions are drawn in relation to competing disciplines. The same terms can be given conflicting meanings. Here are some of the more egregious examples:

- KM is not primarily about technology (Davenport & Prusak, 1998, p. 123). KM is fundamentally driven by technology (Berry & Cook, 1976).
- KM is fundamentally about people (Wiig, 2004, p. 26). KM is about organizations and how they are structured for effectiveness, not just about people (Omotayo, 2015).
- KM is about managing knowledge as an asset (Mentzas et al., 2003). KM is not about managing knowledge as an asset but about managing talent and capabilities (Griffiths, 2018, comment, December 19).
- KM is not about information (Von Krogh et al., 2000, pp. 26–27). KM is about information and what people do with it (Wilson, 2002).
- Knowledge audits are not about KM practices and enablers but about knowledge resources (Skyrme, 2007, p. 2). Knowledge audits are about KM practices and enablers, not just knowledge resources (Frappaolo, 2006, pp. 118–120).

Perhaps because of the competitive drivers behind some of these distinctions and oppositions, there have been both rational and emotional layers to the resistance movement against KM standards.

To function as a standard, a document must resolve oppositions and ambiguities, and it must establish common vocabularies and meanings. A standard, to some degree, is a shared “code book” that enables different parties to work together, coordinate activities, and learn together, building a shared knowledge base (Bénézech et al., 2001, p. 1396).

However, where differentiations reflect politically or commercially vested stances, resistance to the establishment of a shared code book is inevitable and is not always rationally expressed—either because you believe your position will be weakened by a standard or because you depend upon a fragmented field to recruit people to your offering.

The earliest attempts at building standards for knowledge management occurred in the US, in Europe, and in Australia. Figure 9.2 shows a high level time line for KM standards activities in different countries and through the International Organization for Standardization (ISO). This time line shows intense activity in the period 2000–2005, resulting in a series of guides or, in the case of Australia, a nonprescriptive standard, followed by a hiatus until 2011–2018, when a new bout of efforts began, resulting in the publication, for the first time, of prescriptive standards.

In the US, standards development has been both contentious and fragmented. The suspicion and acrimonious behavior around the whole issue of standards development in the KM global community flow, at least in part, from early efforts to gain commercial advantages from the control of KM certification and standards in the US in the late 1990s—the so-called “certification wars.”

---

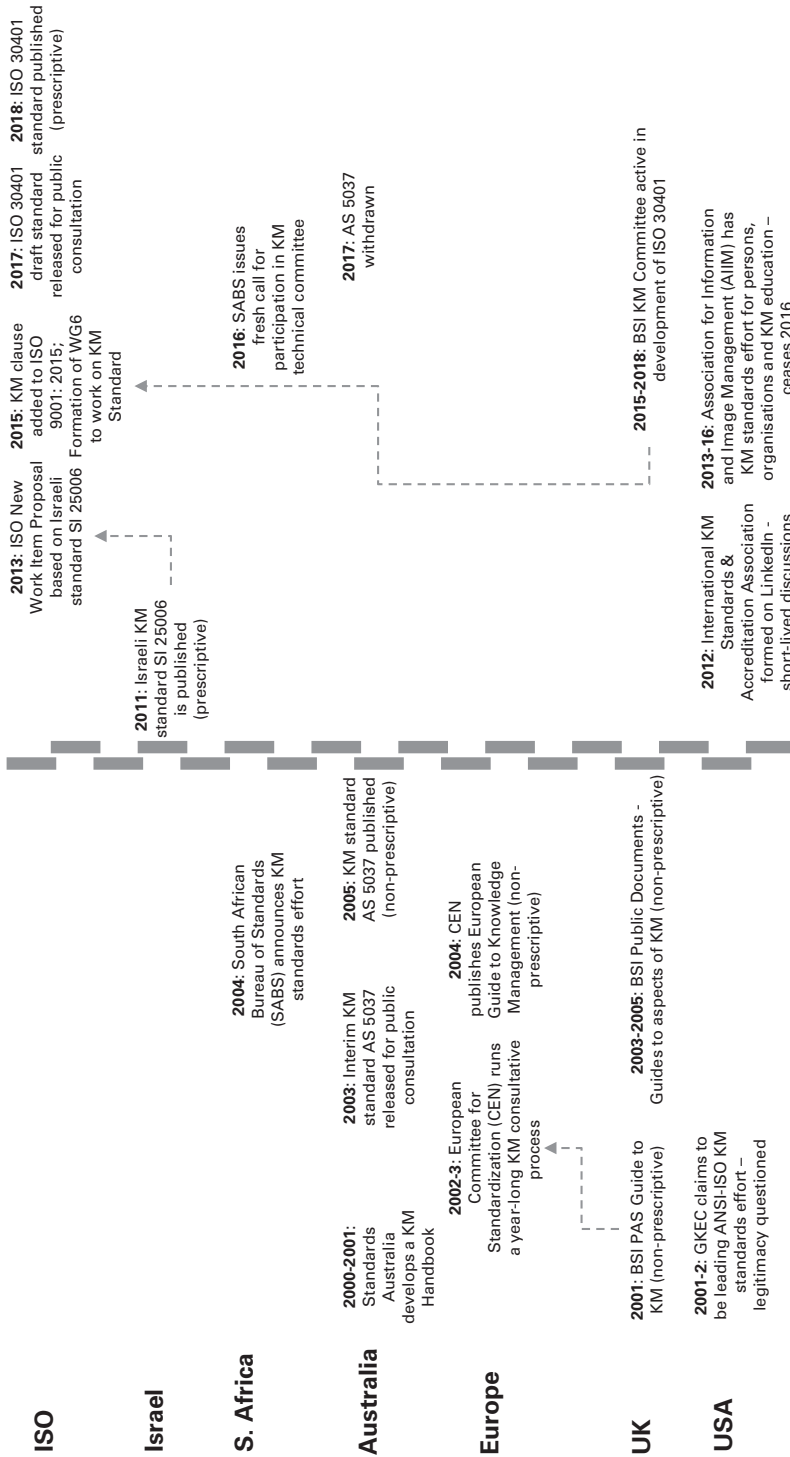
#### **Case Study: A Controversial KM Standards Effort**

In July 2001 an outfit called the Global Knowledge Economics Council (GKEC) became a member of the American National Standards Institute (ANSI), the North American standards body, and immediately claimed it had begun a process to develop an ISO knowledge management standard (McElroy, 2001). ANSI is the US representative for ISO. GKEC, despite its rather grand-sounding name, was actually a two-person outfit operating out of a single-story office unit in Tucson, Arizona. Its founder was Edward C. Swanstrom, a tall, baby-faced man in his mid-forties, with ash-blond hair worn slightly long and with a couple of KM books to his name.

The GKEC was one of a network of nonprofit organizations operating as fronts for commercial certification services in knowledge management. This is a phenomenon particular to the US. Knowledge management certification is still the preserve today of supposedly professional associations or nonprofit “institutes” that license their commercial training and consulting offerings exclusively to private entities owned by the founders of the associations or nonprofits. It operates using apparently respectable fronts with self-dealing in the background.

In the US there is a small group of people behind all these bodies; they are almost all personally connected through early alliances followed by disputatious splits to set up competing outfits. The formula is to register under a grand-sounding name, to set up a volunteer advisory board comprising distinguished names (who, having lent their names, would be troubled no longer), and then to sell services to KM novices who are impressed by the appearance of institutional heft or who believe that their employers would be so impressed.





**Figure 9.2**  
A time line of standards development for knowledge management.

The formula was also, in the heady early days of KM, to stalk the many online KM discussion forums, touting their competing offerings and decrying their competitors-cum-erstwhile partners. Here, from 2002 to 2006 a number of flame wars raged, resulting in a series of censorship actions by moderators and, in the most extreme case, the taking down of at least three Yahoo KM discussion forums following accusations of intellectual property theft against forum members (Lambe, 2005; Schenk, 2006).

Edward Swanstrom was one of the early players in this feeding frenzy, and he was especially opportunistic, spawning a large number of parallel *paper organizations*—a number disproportionate to the number of people who were actually drawing salaries.

He was creating, in effect, an internet-enabled appearance of an entire ecosystem, all tracing back to one ubiquitous man. These self-referential networks were commonplace. As we know, the internet facilitates this illusory propagation of presences. The goal is a virtual crowding out of the competition to occupy the cognitive space of the innocent consumer in the knowledge that at least some of them will fall for your offering.

For example, Jenny Odell (2018) recently investigated a bizarre and sprawling self-referential network of e-commerce businesses centered on one alumnus of a private Christian university in California and specializing in *drop-shipping*—when you carry no inventory but list items in online stores at vastly inflated prices and on receipt of an order (because not everybody compares prices), you buy the product from somebody else's online store and have it shipped to your customer, pocketing the difference. The greater the reach and presence of your network, the more likely it is that you will find people who will fall for your offer.

Swanstrom was a pioneer in opportunistic self-propagation. Immediately after the 9/11 attacks, he issued a press release promising an initiative to develop an antiterrorism KM task force to work with federal agencies, pointing to one of his vehicles, the Innovation Management Institute (Skyrme, 2001; Swanstrom, 2001a). A month later he announced the formation of a nonprofit organization called the Volunteer Organization of Certified Knowledge Managers to partner "with the Federal Emergency Management Agency (FEMA) in developing a National/World Knowledge System for Civil Defense and Homeland Security," complete with a new website and impressive-sounding projects (Swanstrom, 2001b, 2001c).

Both initiatives were linked to upcoming "GKEC/ANSI KM Standards" meetings. The ANSI link was an integral part of the bolstering ecosystem, together with his vehemently defended certification program (Swanstrom, 2001a), and we can understand its allure. If you control the standard (or are seen to control it), you can reap rewards from the certification and training that follows. Swanstrom had already shown his willingness in 2001 to use standards as a cudgel with which to attack his certification competitors—in that case, through the affiliation of another of his creatures, the Knowledge Management Certification Board, with the National Organization for Competency Assurance (NOCA):

The Knowledge Management Certification Board (KMCB) is a non-profit organization made up of knowledge practitioners from major KM firms worldwide. It is the only organization within the KM community that is a member of, and follows NOCA standards. Due to NOCA's strict guidelines, it is a waste of effort to have more than one certifying body in the same discipline. . . . Unless the organization is following NOCA or similar standards,

it is not a genuine certification program. Anything less than NOCA standards is extremely risky. (Scarpignato, 2001)

Swanstrom's claim to be leading an ISO KM standards development initiative did not go unchallenged. His erstwhile associates and then competitors in KM certification, the Knowledge Management Consortium International (KMCI), solicited from ANSI, and then published, ANSI's disavowal:

ANSI has expressed its concerns to GKEC that this press release contains a number of statements that are either incorrect or reflect a misunderstanding of the ANSI and ISO standards development processes and systems, including:

- The press release assumes that ANSI and ISO will proceed with this new activity. However, there will be a number of process and approval steps necessary before we know whether both ANSI and ISO will do so or not. . . .
- GKEC would not be considered "the U.S. Knowledge Management (KM) and Knowledge Economics (KE) Standards representative to the International Standards Organization (ISO)." Each country has a specific organization that serves as the ISO member for that country, and ANSI is the dues-paying U.S. representative to ISO. Within the ISO committees, it is the ISO member organizations from the various countries (such as ANSI for the USA) that are considered the members. (McElroy, 2001)

Despite this, the standards-related meetings and the puffery apparently continued until late 2002, at which time Swanstrom (2002) was soliciting applications for membership in the "GKEC/ANSI main standards committee." The push for a KM standard in the US seems to have started losing steam shortly after that.

In early February 2004, a tall, baby-faced Tucson-based man in his mid-forties with ash-blond hair worn slightly long named Edward C. Swanstrom was arrested near a California middle school on suspicion of raping a thirteen-year-old girl. He was subsequently convicted and imprisoned for the offense. It turned out that he had been grooming the girl in an online chat room since July 2003 by pretending to be a seventeen-year-old boy. At the time of his arrest that February day in 2004, he was out on bail waiting to begin a ten-year jail sentence for molesting another thirteen-year-old girl in Tucson in 2003. Swanstrom had already changed his name to Andrew Skewis Andersen in September 2003 (Welborn, 2006; Inside Tucson Business, 2003).

With Swanstrom's disappearance from the scene, the GKEC and its multifarious web presences began to evaporate from 2004 onwards and with it the US push for a KM standard, not to be revived for another decade. But the bitter taste of blatantly commercial interests and predatory, manipulative behaviors would continue to taint reactions to the very notion of a KM standard. As Joseph Firestone and Mark McElroy put it in 2003:

. . . when conflict behavior in standards development is too intense, the trust and objectivity necessary to synthesize and reduce the number of alternative formulations and produce consensus are bound to be casualties of conflict behavior. KM is a field in which conflict between certain organizations has grown intense. In the recent past, two well-known organizations in KM were contemplating legal action against one another, and one of these was heavily involved in the standards development process. (KMCI, 2003, pp. 3–4)

Across the Atlantic in the UK and in Europe, real institutions, as distinct from fake ones, were pursuing standards initiatives at the same time. In the UK the British Standards Institute (BSI) was keenly aware of the dichotomy it faced. On the one hand, the field of knowledge management, with its confusing and contradictory positions, was crying out for the guidance that a standard would provide. On the other hand, standards depend upon consensus, and it was not at all clear that consensus could be reached (Farmer, 2002; KMCI, 2003; Weber et al., 2002). The field, they felt, was not yet mature enough to produce a normative standard.

So the BSI stepped back and took a longer view. They felt that they could make a contribution through the provision of “a common framework of contextually based understanding, with the aim of facilitating the easy communication and co-operation of KM-aware bodies and persons” (Farmer, 2002, p. 5). This was an exercise in building common ground, which would nudge the field toward greater consistency and maturity and toward a situation in which a prescriptive standard might prove possible.

In 2001 the BSI issued a publicly available specification for knowledge management (defined as a prestandard document for which a high degree of consensus had not been achieved). It followed with a series of public documents (for which a moderate degree of consensus had been achieved) issued as “guides to good practice” in knowledge management between 2003 and 2005 (BSI 2001, 2003a, 2003b, 2003c, 2005a, 2005b, 2005c).

A similar position was taken by the European KM Forum in collaboration with the European Committee for Standardization (CEN), which shared some members with the BSI knowledge management committee (Weber et al., 2002). The CEN (2004) ran a yearlong consultative process between September 2002 and September 2003 to develop a *European Guide to Good Practice in Knowledge Management*, published in 2004 as a series of “common workshop agreement” documents.

Both the BSI and the CEN stopped short of producing full standards on the presumption that the field of knowledge management was not yet mature enough for a normative or prescriptive standard—maturity being measured primarily by the level of consensus in the field.

South Africa saw a short-lived effort to develop a standard in 2004, with no appreciable progress (Tobin & Snyman, 2004, p. 8).

Meanwhile, in Australia, Standards Australia International was also working on a KM standard. It had published a well-received guide to knowledge management in 2001 but, in contrast to the European agencies, had decided to go beyond this to aim for a full standard. Standards Australia set up a technical committee consisting of representatives from relevant industry, professional, and public bodies (Standards Australia, 2001; Hasan, 2004; Ferguson, 2006; Halbwirth & Olsson, 2007).

In 2003 it issued an interim standard for public comment (Standards Australia, 2003). It sparked debate well beyond Australia and was criticized on multiple grounds. The standard was said to be “too simplistic,” “rigid,” “too mechanistic,” and “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), and it had “too much jargon” (Halbwirth & Olsson, 2007, pp. 72–73; Hasan, 2004, pp. 110–111; Ferguson, 2006, p. 197).

Some of these remarks were clearly based on an immediate visceral response to *the idea of a KM standard* rather than a close reading of the text. For example, the interim standard had actually addressed the need to take a cyclical, iterative approach—to contextualize the framework presented in the standard to different situations and to adapt it to different needs—and it had stated quite clearly that “one size does not fit all” in knowledge management (Hasan, 2004, p. 107; Halbwirth & Olsson, 2007, p. 72). The document was also explicit in its intention to be a guide rather than a prescriptive standard, although the idea of a *nonprescriptive* standard was understandably novel to the KM practitioner audience.

But the emotional, visceral nature of the response can be seen in the words used to describe the reception of the interim standard: “Disparaging,” “heated,” “vociferous,” “concerns of forced control, compliance and inflexibility,” “blunt,” and “contentious” (Hasan, 2004, pp. 110–111; Ferguson, 2006, pp. 197, 202). Even the basic definitions of knowledge and knowledge management were hotly disputed (Halbwirth & Olsson, 2007, p. 74).

By self-report of the committee, the standards development process itself was “challenging,” “demanding,” and “controversial,” with many changes of direction, differences of opinion, and confusion. There was inconsistency of participation. Different people turned up at different meetings and pulled the standard in different directions. The process was “exhausting” (Hasan, 2004, p. 106; Hasan, 2014). Similar issues arose with the attempt by the Association of Image and Information Management (AIIM) to develop a KM standard ten years later (D. Bedford, personal communication, October 5, 2018).

In many respects it could then be considered a triumph that Standards Australia successfully brought out its standard in 2005, taking on board many of the earlier criticisms. It succeeded only by making front and center (including in its title) the point that this was in fact a “descriptive guide” rather than a prescriptive standard (Standards Australia, 2005; Sbarcea, 2007, 2010). But this raised the very legitimate question of how it was any different from the earlier guides produced in the UK and in the rest of Europe. Could it be considered a “real” standard without clear methods to measure conformity to the standard (Ferguson, 2006, pp. 203–204)?

The critiques, however bruising they felt, usefully revealed the rational basis for asserting the limitations of standards in knowledge management (as well as in other types of management systems in organizations). A good deal of the animus against KM standards (and certification) is driven by the taint of commercial interest in the framing of the standards. There is a fear that viable alternative approaches will be excluded from having any authoritative status either by premature convergence and compromise or through commercial interest. There were, for example, suspicions of commercially oriented bias in the “cash-strapped” standards institutions, leading to suspicions of a lack of objectivity in the standards themselves, and these must have been influenced in part by perceptions of the earlier standards development shenanigans in the US (Hasan, 2004, p. 111; Snowden, 2006a).

There were, however, two additional theory-driven strands to this response, going to the very heart of what a “standard” implies. The first relates to the characteristics of knowledge management as a field. The second relates to the nature of organizational life, which KM seeks to support.

### **Objection 1: Knowledge Management as a Field Is Too Complex**

The first in-principle argument against KM standards is the challenge involved in bringing into a common picture the breadth and diversity of what is involved in KM but in a way that is sufficiently granular to consistently guide KM implementation. A standard is supposed to guide practice, after all.

As Stan Garfield (2015) remarked of KM certification, the “field of knowledge management spans over 100 KM specialties. It is too broad to be certified in as a whole.” A similar argument could be made for KM standards. A single standard, the argument goes, cannot cover the entire field at any meaningful level of detail.

Furthermore, it is quite possible to hold opposing, but equally valid, views on a specific KM matter, often influenced by one’s professional or disciplinary background (human resources, strategy, accounting, operations, information technology [IT], organization development, learning, research, library and information science). By “equally valid” we mean that there is often no real way to determine objectively, except by experimentation, which of two alternative perspectives should prevail in a given situation; moreover, unsuccessful approaches in one context can be shown to work in another context, without a clear understanding of what caused the difference in outcomes.

Finally, the argument goes, KM practice is still evolving and has not stabilized to the point where a consensus can be achieved. To produce a standard before theory and practice have stabilized is to risk “freezing” imperfect practice and “freezing out” innovation and future developments (Farmer, 2002, p. 6; Weber et al., 2002, p. 2; Firestone & McElroy, 2003, pp. 332–333; Snowden, 2006a).

These factors, taken together, present a problem because the standards development process is based on codifying a common position, which means building a consensus. This can produce poor outcomes where the field is both diverse and complex, as well as where it is not fully evolved:

- There was a fear that the pressure to converge can produce an artificial “committee” agreement but where substantive disagreement in the field still exists; that is, the standard may misrepresent the true diversity of practice or exclude valid practices (Hasan, 2004, p. 110; Snowden, 2012). As Eric Mullerbeck (2014) observed in an email to a KM forum, “The risk that such a standard would actually enshrine and promote bad practice in the name of uniformity [would] seem to exceed the likelihood that it would add impetus to good practice in KM.” However, there is little evidence of any such rush to a false consensus in knowledge management—if anything, the opposite is the case. The rush to disagreement is more apparent.
- If the standards group is to achieve a real consensus, then there is pressure to abstract and generalize the language to the point where the standard has little practical application. As Dion Lindsay (2018) puts it, “Knowledge Management is a discipline where only the obvious finds common agreement, but where a lot of value lies in insights based on careful observation in situations which do not obtain universally.” We raised a similar objection to the application of a prescriptive operational audit model to knowledge management in chapter 3. Any noncontroversial language describing knowledge management is too broad in scope to be measurable or actionable, as a prescriptive audit model requires. This can have a “decoupling” effect between measurement and actual practice, where you have apparent compliance with the standard, but because of the level of abstraction and ambiguity involved in the measurement description, it is not an accurate reflection of reality on the ground.

Of course, there are also counterarguments. Although there is indeed great breadth and complexity in knowledge management, it should at least be possible to frame the landscape in a way that is useful to the larger community (Griffiths, 2011). There is a vulnerability in our failure to register whatever consensus does exist and that is in the lack of any assurance for “innocent buyers” of KM products or services “that if they hire this individual or group that they are not buying a wo/man of straw” (Snowden, 2012).

1. It should be possible to frame KM in such a way to aid novices, or managers who do not want to get into the guts of KM theory, in ways of detecting insubstantial shysters and hucksters or in mitigating the ill effects of dogmatic enthusiasm for misleading and overly simplistic KM models (Handzic & Hasan, 2003, p. 534; Maier & Remus, 2003, p. 65; Snowden & Stanbridge, 2004, p. 142).

2. It does seem that in-principle resistance to the idea of the possibility for or value of consensus (KMCI, 2003) may be a self-fulfilling prophecy. As Arthur Shelley (2018) rather elegantly stated: “Our success depends on us collaborating around what we agree on instead of arguing endlessly about what we disagree about.” The consensus-building work intrinsic to the codification of a standard may have some benefits in nudging a field toward consensus and limiting the space for divergence by creating common reference points (Terlaak, 2007, p. 973). KM as a discipline is having a hard time keeping up with the affordances that advances in technology provide to organizations. This creates a deep discontinuity between managerial practice and technical capabilities, and this is manifested in a perceived lack of both utility and stability in the KM discipline. Working on consensus building and standards “presents us with an opportunity to add stability” (Callioni et al., 2004, p. 59).
3. As to the point about generalizations and abstractions, what seems like an obvious motherhood truism to KM specialists may still have value to other stakeholders in organizations to whom this supposedly “common” sense is not immediately obvious or authoritative unless it has a standard to give it credibility (Carpenter & Rudge, 2003, p. 85; Lindsay, 2018). In fact, one of the reported practical benefits of the Australian KM standard was its use as a source to give legitimacy to communications with management, more than as an actual implementation guide: “. . . you have an authoritative organization putting out a guide and they go, ‘Oh, yes in that case it’s got credibility’” (Ferguson & Burford, 2009, p. 50; cf. Burford & Ferguson, 2011, p. 10).
4. And if a landscape-framing approach is taken, as distinct from a stipulated set of granular rules, and if the underlying model is sufficiently rich, generative, and hospitable to variations in practice, then there is in principle no reason why innovation, adaptation, and learning in practice should not continue to occur within the purlieu of a framing standard (Weber et al., 2002, p. 2). This was in fact a major argument behind the Australian KM standard: “The standard also aimed to be a guide or framework, which can be ‘moulded’ to suit the particular context of a specific organization. In this sense it is a living, fluid document” (Sbarcea, 2007; cf. Hasan, 2004, p. 110; cf. Ferguson & Burford, 2009, p. 51).

### **Objection 2: Organizational Life and Knowledge Use in Organizations Is Too Complex**

The second in-principle argument against the appropriateness and applicability of standards in KM is that organizations are intrinsically complex adaptive systems, and complex behaviors militate against the predictability and regulation that standards assume (Burford & Ferguson, 2011, p. 3). While there are large elements of structure, predictability,



and control in organizations, the phenomenon of knowledge use in organizations is held to be fundamentally complex. This means that it is locally constructed and adapted in response to local conditions and context and is not subject to universal, predictable rules (Stacey & Mowles, 2016; cf. Snowden & Stanbridge, 2004).

By their nature, in contrast, standards assume predictability, consistency, and stability (Wilson & Campbell, 2016, p. 830). So this argument states that the practice of KM is simply incommensurate with the application of standards. As Helen Hasan (2014) reported, "Taking complexity aspects into account is even more relevant now than 10 years ago and I agree that it is critical for KM. There is however a real hurdle to overcome in merging these ideas with the concept of a 'Standard.' It was fighting this battle that I think exhausted the committee in 2005."

Sally Burford and her colleagues took this thought even further. In a 2011 paper, they set up a contrast between mechanistic "top-down" and standards-driven prescriptions for how knowledge management *should* be done, compared to the complex, situated practice-led way in which knowledge management *actually* operates. This was presented as a "discordant" struggle between two opposing mental models of how organizations work. They cited examples in which mandated and resourced KM practices failed to succeed because they were not rooted in local contexts and needs: "Management intervention in communities of practice and rigidity in knowledge processes in Japanese organizations highlight the tension and dysfunction that can result when inappropriate interpretations and actions are invoked by adherence to traditional management theories when practice theories hold a dominant place" (Burford et al., 2011, p.11).

But again there are counterarguments. First, organizational life is not homogeneous. It incorporates systems, rules, and predictable environments as well as complex, emergent, and adaptive environments. As Snowden and Stanbridge (2004, p. 146) pointed out, organizations are inhabited by multiple parallel situation types, some of them structured and simple, some of them complex. Sensemaking for decision and action depends upon the ability to discern which ontologies are most pertinent to the issues (and contexts) at hand, whether complex or predictable (p. 146).

While standards-based approaches may be inappropriate to some KM contexts, this does not automatically rule them out for all contexts. There are clearly going to be valid scenarios for routinized knowledge use and systematic, repeatable knowledge-use processes that would be entirely amenable to standards-based approaches. Mandating lesson learning and transfer processes in major projects and capturing major decisions and rationales in a corporate memory system would be just two examples. Not all knowledge work is "make it up as you go along," nor should it be.

Second, it is a feature of complex adaptive systems that elements of those systems stabilize and gain wide social acceptance over time—practices become habituated, structured, and predictable and frequently become normative practice (Rouse, 2001; Gherardi, 2006, pp. 34–36). Normative practices may then acquire formal legitimacy and become prescribed. There is no reason to suppose that knowledge practices are any different in that respect. Knowledge management practices are neither wholly ordered (as a KM standard might assume) nor wholly emergent (as social complexity theorists might argue). It is not a straightforward either-or question.

The arguments-in-principle against the possibility of a standard for knowledge management raise important questions about the constraints and challenges of developing a useful standard in knowledge management, but they do not succeed in entirely dismissing the possibility.

They suggest that KM standards may work best as high-level framing and orientation devices for KM practice, and they are likely to work best for those aspects of organizational 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.

A KM standard could easily be used inappropriately if these distinctions are not recognized, but it is not of itself completely without utility.

### The Rise of the Prescriptive Standard in Knowledge Management

The publication of the Australian KM standard in 2005 as a nonprescriptive standard represented a temporary triumph for the antiprescriptivists, but it also represented a foot in the door for a more sustained and determined effort to develop a full prescriptive standard. And the desire for such a standard did not go away. Activities on the standards front were quiet for several years, but in 2011–2012 they started to move again (Milton & Lambe, 2020, pp. 300–303).

In the US, KM standards efforts had remained in abeyance after the Swanstrom-GKEC debacle in the early 2000s. It was not until 2012 that a group of largely US-based KM practitioners formed the grand-sounding International Knowledge Management Standards and Accreditation Association (IKMSAA) as a discussion group on LinkedIn. Its formation was more expressive of a resurgent desire for a consensus around standards than it was effective at getting anything done, and the group's ground rules display traces of the early bitterness of a decade previously: "1. No hawkers; 2. No arguments about 'the definition of knowledge'" (IKMSAA, 2018).

There is no evidence that this group was ever formally constituted as an association, and the standards-oriented discussions petered out after some initial controversy over the tactics that the group deployed to limit debate and restrict alternative views. The association was avowedly “consensus based,” and the founding members were accused of being unreceptive to any positions that challenged a consensus (Loxton, 2012; D. Griffiths, 2012; Snowden, 2012).

The following year, 2013, the US-based Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM)—a real association this time—formed three KM standards committees, under the leadership of Denise Bedford, to develop standards for (a) KM in organizations, (b) KM for individuals, and (c) for KM education. This effort attracted wide interest, nominal participation from over one hundred practitioners worldwide, and some draft texts, but it was discontinued along with all of AIIM’s other standards development work in 2016 following a financial review. AIIM relinquished its ANSI standards development affiliation in late 2017 (Bedford, personal communication, October 5, 2018; B. Fanning, personal communication, October 16, 2018).

The major progress, however, was to come from the ISO itself. In late 2011 the Standards Institution of Israel (Standards Institution of Israel, 2011; M. Levy, personal communications, October 10–11, 2018) issued a new standard for KM systems, after just over a year of work, prompted by a survey of customer demand for new standards to support organization effectiveness. This was an unabashedly prescriptive standard. The KM standard was well received in Israel, and the SII began to offer assessor and auditing services against the standard (Rozenal, 2013). On the back of this success, in 2013 the SII proposed a new work item for the ISO to develop an ISO management systems standard for knowledge management, based on the Israeli standard (ISO, 2013).

Meanwhile, also in 2011, the technical committee responsible for the ISO 9001 quality management standard conducted a worldwide survey across 122 countries. They discovered a high demand to include a requirement for knowledge management in an update to the ISO 9001 standard—over forty-five hundred respondents (72 percent) requested it. In September 2015 a new requirement for knowledge management entered the standard for the first time:

7.1.6 Organizational Knowledge—The organization shall determine the knowledge necessary for the operation of its processes and to achieve conformity of products and services. This knowledge shall be maintained and be made available to the extent necessary. When addressing changing needs and trends, the organization shall consider its current knowledge and determine how to acquire or access any necessary additional knowledge and required updates. (Fry, 2015; Wilson & Campbell, 2016, pp. 831–832)

After consultation among ISO member countries, the proposal for work on a full knowledge management system standard was accepted, and in 2015 an international

technical committee was formed and work commenced. It progressed remarkably quickly considering the history of contentiousness and disarray of much prior standards work. A draft standard for public consultation was released in late 2017 (Lindsay, 2018). It was at this point that the familiar manure hit the proverbial fan.

David Griffiths (2018), an early and prominent critic of both standards and certification in KM, wrote a blog post (since removed) critiquing the fundamental basis of the draft ISO standard. He raised three important objections:

- The draft standard expressed a retrograde view of knowledge management and failed to address emerging developments and future-oriented challenges in KM, such as artificial intelligence, robotics, learning and development, complexity, and strategy.
- The process for standards development lacked requisite diversity, was “incestuous,” and was dominated by consultants who had a vested interest in “product placement” and protecting legacy services.
- Standards development is wholly inappropriate if the goal is to aid in the future proofing of organizations. KM is itself a complex phenomenon, and so is the challenge of adapting to the future. Standards of this nature are incompatible with this goal unless they serve simply to put in place loose constraints within which complexity-oriented approaches can be undertaken.

The blog post provoked very lively and sometimes heated discussions both on David Griffiths’s site and in a number of other fora (Boyes, 2018). The perceptions of commercial bias by consultants seem to have been driven by the prominence of several well-known KM consultants on the BSI national KM standards committee. Moria Levy, the chair of the ISO technical committee for KM, clarified that the BSI committee was only one of fourteen participating national committees, and fewer than half of the active members in the development process were consultants (Griffiths, 2018, comment, December 20).

Her clarification went largely unnoticed in the broader debate, some of which revolved around personal attacks on a key member of the BSI committee for supposedly distorting the standards development process on the basis of commercial interest. The animus and suspicion arising from the US-based certification and standards wars of two decades earlier was casting a long shadow. As one commentator put it, partially but not entirely tongue in cheek:

“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.” (Moore, 2018)

The core antistandard arguments, both visceral and reasoned, were consistent with previous debates. They focused on commercial bias and on the supposed incompatibility

of standards with an area as complex as knowledge use in organizations. However, the institutional nature of ISO as an organization and its highly structured (and bureaucratic) standards development process weakened the force of some of the criticism. Some of the suspected “consultants’ product placement,” for example, turned out instead to be a consequence of the requirement to use the standard ISO Management Systems Standard template, introduced in 2014 for all management systems standards. This template sets out a mandatory structure and set of elements to be covered (Wilson & Campbell, 2016, p. 831; Collison, 2018; Lambe, 2018).

Moreover, critics of the process seemed initially unaware of the system of national committees and national voting that lies behind the development and adoption of an ISO standard, and of the presence of ISO technical experts on the working committee to ensure due process is followed. ISO explicitly prohibits references to specific products and services in its standards. Independence from any given commercial offering is one of the fundamental guiding principles for any ISO standard (ISO, 2015, p. 118). This is not to say that bias is impossible, but there are strong institutional guards against it.

The questions about a lack of diversity in the development of the standard were reasonable for such a broad and diverse discipline, though the representation of one particular group was not as sharply skewed as the initial critiques had claimed.

In the debate that followed the release of the draft standard, the defenders of the standard pointed out that the public consultation period was precisely the point at which a larger representation of views should be gathered. And the visibility and emotional tenor of the debate helped in this—244 public comments were collected on the BSI’s website alone, resulting in 270 recommendations for changes to ISO (Lindsay, 2018; Corney & McFarlane, 2018). To their credit, some of those most suspicious of the standard weighed in with substantive and wide-ranging comments, including David Griffiths, who worked with Stephen Bounds and Nancy White to develop a detailed set of recommendations for changes in the draft (Bounds et al., 2018).

The crisis passed and the revised standard was voted forward by ISO member countries and finally published in November 2018. Twenty years of struggle had finally produced a prescriptive standard. Arthur Shelley (2018), who had been involved in the development of the standard, acknowledged its continuing limitations in relation to the more intangible aspects of knowledge management but argued, as echoed in the earlier debate, that the perfect should not be the enemy of the good and that having an imperfect standard was better than having no standard at all:

Organizations can perform better when people accelerate the flow of knowledge through sharing, conversations and stories. This is reinforced in the standard, but it does not take it as far as I would have liked to see. The challenge is the standard is a REQUIREMENTS document, so needs to be able to be measured or demonstrated to validate compliance. Many aspects of

knowledge are intangible and these are the elements that are hard to put into the standard, but in reality these intangible aspects are the elements that drive the value from the knowledge.

This is acknowledged in the standard and some of us wanted more on this, but we ended up with less than some of us wanted. This is the nature of documents versus knowledge. Knowledge will always be richer than information artefacts. Knowledge exists in people's heads as an intangible asset and is quite fluid. It can be well supported by tangible artefacts, tools and processes, but in the end it is unique [to] each person.

This does not mean a KM standard cannot be useful. It is in fact WHY a standard IS useful. It provides a basic common foundation for everyone to get the basics of what it is. Although it is simple, it is helpful to guide people outside the knowledge profession and also to assist those inside the knowledge profession from around who we are and what value we can (collectively) bring to decision-making and value creation.

### Why Did the ISO 30401 Standard Succeed?

*Succeed* is a large word. At the time of writing, the ISO 30401 standard is largely unproven in practice. We will discuss what it is likely to be good for and not good for in the final section of this chapter. But gaining acceptance and reaching official status is a major victory, given the troubled history of standards in KM, and it is worth exploring how and why that happened because we may well find lessons there for how assessment audit instruments for KM might gain acceptance and utility in the future.

The “certification wars” of the later 1990s cast a long and bitter shadow on efforts in knowledge management to build consensus and common ground among KM practitioners. Without that common ground, the very notion of an assessment audit instrument was in constant contention.

The mechanisms of divisiveness are still with us today. The tale of two Edward Swanstroms, one the KM standards champion and the other a sexual predator, recapitulates this. It starkly illustrates a disturbing parallel between how you would groom “innocent buyers” by shaping a KM standards effort to serve blatantly commercial interests and how you would groom children for predatory ends. On the internet, as the saying goes, nobody knows if you are a dog. If you do happen to be a dog, you must prevent people from seeing you as a dog.

In both cases you must first establish trust by projecting a believable identity that disarms any suspicions the intended victims might have. In the KM list-serves, Swanstrom used the self-referential ecosystem of official-sounding entities and the constant name-dropping of real institutions' names. In the grooming of his child victim, he was first a lovelorn seventeen-year-old Arizona boy and then, when that pretense could no longer be maintained, a besotted older man who would travel cross-country to be with her and shower her with expensive gifts.

Next, the predator must separate the prey from the herd. In the KM list-serves, divisiveness and factionalism achieve the separation. You force an affiliation and position your prey against your competitors. In Swanstrom's grooming of the girl, he gave her a mobile phone that he told her to keep secret so that he could speak with her without her mother knowing.

Any in-principle argument that consensus in KM is either impossible or without value plays into this "separation of the prey" strategy, whether intended or not.

Next, you must control the perceptions of the prey and dominate what they see and how they react. You do this in knowledge management by propagating official-sounding entities and websites and by talking up your official connections. In this way you simulate the necessary solidity. You further this by drowning out real discourse in online discussions by engaging in relentless tit-for-tat self-referential postings (Grey, 2004). In Swanstrom's grooming of the girl, he showered her with gifts and confused her with the intensity of his attentions.

But you depend for your success on your ability to keep your victims isolated. Swanstrom's Californian victim was fortunate enough to have school friends who were concerned about her liaison with a much older man. That fateful February day, they alerted their teacher that the man she had been seeing was parked in his van nearby, and the school authorities called the police.

This is the larger lesson for standards development: The community has more defenses against deception than the individual has. Open scrutiny and discourse is better than closed-door discussions, and however bitter the disagreements might be or however opposed the interests, the ownership of a standard needs to be diffuse and not closed. It needs to be open to debate, and the community needs to be alert to how it is being deployed.

It is also important to be able to manage widely divergent views and the "tension and misunderstanding between proponents of different paradigms" (Handzic & Hasan, 2003, p. 550). As Firestone and McElroy pointed out in 2003:

When few alternative formulations exist in an area of the domain of interest, the political negotiation that builds consensus is possible and perhaps not too difficult. But when many alternatives exist, negotiation is very time consuming and frequently cannot be successful without years of compromise and consolidation among contending points of view (and, incidentally, without any guarantee that such compromises produce knowledge claims that correspond to reality). The condition of a small number of alternatives does not exist in the various domain areas of KM and knowledge processing. (KMCI, 2003, p. 2)

If progress is to be made in a field as divergent in contributing disciplines, phenomena of interest, and operating paradigms as knowledge management, the discourse needs to be constrained in some way. Otherwise, it will not be able to build common ground within time periods that are acceptable to the interlocutors. The process will run into the ground, and the collaborators will drift away. This tension between openness and constraint is unavoidable in a field as divergent and fragmented as knowledge management. At some point discussion has to be curtailed and positions taken. In this situation, where dialogue is curtailed or constrained, the broad-based institutional underpinnings of the standards development process take on much greater significance for preserving trust. Otherwise, suspicion of bias toward special interests will never be far away.

The institutional basis for standards in knowledge management is the strongest guarantor of a standard's legitimacy. Part of the strength of a real institution is its ability to resist co-option to individual or special interests (often interpreted as bureaucracy).

- Real institutions have processes and rules that are impersonal and disinterested in their operations and have consistency through time.
- They have forms of governance with rules, procedures, and tests to detect and control for bias.
- They have salaried persons who come and go, limiting the potential for dependency on influential individuals or cabals with special interests.
- They have resource bases and income streams that support the above capabilities and limit their vulnerability to commercial bias.
- Their governance regimes, processes, and products are open to scrutiny and external examination.

While these characteristics can often produce frustrating red tape and bring limitations of their own, they also provide safeguards. This is also why would-be co-opters of standards to political or commercial ends seek to conceal their individual interests and try to simulate institutional characteristics.

Three key questions can test the strength of an institution against these criteria:

- Where does its money come from?
- Who makes decisions, and how are they made?
- What is the process for changing a standard or a decision?

The ISO process itself offers clues as to why this effort succeeded where others failed. For example, both the Australian KM standard and the AIIM standards effort had been grounded on KM frameworks developed through prior research undertaken by principals in the standards effort.



The initial Australian draft KM standard had been influenced by a specific model of KM developed through research conducted by Meliha Handzic (Hasan, 2004, p. 106; Handzic & Zhou, 2005). Similarly, an early draft of the AIIM standards documentation was founded on a KM maturity framework developed by Denise Bedford and colleagues (2014) through research at Kent State University.

In a field such as KM where a proliferation of frameworks exists, where any framework necessarily privileges one perspective over others (e.g., process orientation vs. maturity orientation vs. life cycle orientation vs. enablers orientation vs. system orientation), and where one makes one's mark in the discipline by gaining adherence to a particular framework, then such an approach seems—in retrospect—likely to generate as much argumentation as consensus. The proposition of one framework invites the counter-proposition of others.

By contrast, the ISO KM standard was highly constrained by the preexisting structure of the management systems standard template. The effect, while producing some limitations, was also to constrain the process by sidestepping affiliation with any underpinning framework and therefore sidestepping the attendant controversy over the merits of one framework over another.

The second constraint was the disciplined way in which the ISO technical committee discussions were managed. This was influenced by Committee Chair Moria Levy's experience in working on the Israeli KM standard. Areas for discussion were scheduled in advance so that members had notice of which areas would be discussed when, and endless revisiting of the same topic was strongly discouraged once it had been thoroughly discussed. Committee members were delegated tasks and given responsibility to move work areas forward. Work on the definitions section, which is where most contention would likely occur, was delayed until some of the other major sections were drafted and until trust had been built up among the committee members (M. Levy, personal communications, October 10–11, 2018).

The third and final factor was an enabler rather than a constraint. As Ron Young explains, the shift in ISO and BSI from a conception of standards as rules based to principles based suddenly created the conceptual space to consider a standard for KM that would accommodate the intangibility, context variability, and complexity of knowledge work in organizations (Young et al., 2018).

Principles represent generalized but fundamental guiding or framing axioms—they are more durable over time than rules, and they allow flexibility of interpretation and adaptation to different circumstances. Earlier worries in KM standards initiatives about overly rigid, linear, rules-and-recipe-based standards could be sidestepped.

And in fact, the special characteristics of knowledge work and of KM were embodied in the eight guiding principles underpinning the standard (ISO, 2018b, p. vi):

- (a) **Nature of knowledge:** knowledge is intangible and complex; it is created by people.
- (b) **Value:** knowledge is a key source of value for organizations to meet their objectives. The determinable value of knowledge is in its impact on organizational purpose, vision, objectives, policies, processes and performance. Knowledge management is a means of unlocking the potential value of knowledge.
- (c) **Focus:** knowledge management serves the organizational objectives, strategies and needs.
- (d) **Adaptive:** there is no one knowledge management solution that fits all organizations within all contexts. Organizations may develop their own approach to the scope of knowledge and knowledge management and how to implement these efforts, based on needs and context.
- (e) **Shared understanding:** people create their own knowledge by their own understanding of the input they receive. For shared understanding, knowledge management should include interactions between people, using content, processes and technologies where appropriate.
- (f) **Environment:** knowledge is not managed directly; knowledge management focuses on managing the working environment, thus nurturing the knowledge lifecycle.
- (g) **Culture:** culture is critical to the effectiveness of knowledge management.
- (h) **Iterative:** knowledge management should be phased, incorporating learning and feedback cycles.

### Is ISO 30401 an Effective Knowledge Audit Instrument?

The question for us now is whether the ISO 30401 standard can function as an instrument for an assessment audit of knowledge management. The short answer is that, by itself, it cannot. There are several reasons for this.

The form of the standard, as a prescriptive standard, is somewhat misleading. Because it provides a list of requirements and because ISO prescriptive standards can be used as the basis for external audit and certification against the requirements, it has the formal appearance of a summative assessment audit instrument.

However, the standard by itself will, at best, only function as a summative assessment of whether some well-known basic hygiene factors for successful knowledge

management are in place. It will not function as a comprehensive summative assessment for assurance of effective KM nor will it, by itself, function as a helpful formative assessment that can guide KM implementation in depth.

Because the standard is principles led rather than rules led, because it is intended to allow for a variety of KM practices and approaches, and because it lacks specificity and granularity, it is peculiarly dependent on auditor experience, interpretation, and judgment. This can lead to three audit-related issues:

1. **Ambiguity:** When the underlying principle is so vague or ambiguous that it provides no substantive guidance for action or for audit.
2. **Decoupling:** When the standard becomes vulnerable to the risk of decoupling between observed and measurable practice and the underlying behaviors and effects—that is, when documented practice may suggest compliance but we do not have accurate observation and measurement of the effectiveness of the practice or of whether the intent of the standard is actually met.
3. **Audit inconsistency:** When the same practices may give rise to different interpretations by different auditors.

Factors (1) and (2) necessarily lead to (3).

### Issue 1: Ambiguity

Ambiguity means that the same principle can be interpreted in very different ways. Ambiguity is a widespread problem within any principles-led standard, and it is not just limited to “soft” management systems. It is also found in tight models of audit. Even in compliance audits that are principles led, guiding principles are not infrequently found to contain so much ambiguity that they require substantive fleshing out in the form of supporting rules and guidelines.

Over a decade ago, the Institute of Chartered Accountants in England and Wales (ICAEW) described how a single principle about the need to report on internal controls in section 404 of the Sarbanes-Oxley Act was so vague that it required a supporting auditing standard, which in turn spawned a set of rules and 57 FAQs, leading to a grand total of 225 pages on that principle alone—and the ambiguity was still not completely removed (ICAEW, 2006, p. 11).

In this case the principle’s inability to control for auditing inconsistency resulted in the undermining of the principles-led approach and excessive rulemaking. It is true that principles can provide powerful, generative, and adaptive ways to guide conduct, but excessive ambiguity in principles can have the opposite effect and lead either to inconsistency or, to counteract this, excessive rule-making.

A test of the ambiguity and utility of a principle is whether it can be seen to lead directly to an expression of a requirement within the standard, whether it leads to only one interpretation, and whether it communicates enough guidance as to how that principle should be interpreted.

In ISO 30401, the first two guiding principles, the first on the complex and intangible nature of knowledge and the second on the potential of knowledge for unlocking organizational value, look more like broad philosophical statements than principles that would guide action. Unlike the other principles in the standard, it is hard to see any direct relationship between these principles and any specific requirements of the standard. Moreover, closer scrutiny reveals questions about how consistently these principles can be interpreted and applied in practice.

For example, knowledge emerges in different forms in organizations, some of them more tangible than others. A documented guideline, a schematic design, a response to a question, and exchange of advice by email are much more tangible and less complex than the slow acquisition of experience and capability in a midlevel engineer or the way in which a new team begins to operate cohesively and adaptively in a reflexive and responsive way. Annex A of the standard recognizes this variation but does not provide any means to address it.

Similarly, it is hard to argue with the statement that knowledge is a key source of organizational value and that it should be managed, but it is much harder to identify which knowledge, in which forms, is more important for the organization to manage. This simple statement belies the struggles of a generation of intellectual capital theorists and practitioners to get a handle on how intellectual capital can and should be measured and reported and managed. We will discuss the fraught issues with using the language of valuation in relation to knowledge in greater depth in chapters 12–14.

## Issue 2: Decoupling

We first described the *decoupling effect* in chapter 3. Let me repeat the characteristics of a system where observation and measurement are systematically decoupled from what actually happens:

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) an insistence on measurement and documentation of observed behaviors, regardless of how well they reflect the underlying activity of the system. This practice is deliberately maintained as a ritual that is unquestioned, in order to conceal the difficulties in measuring the effectiveness of complex human systems and to conceal the lack of clarity about how effectiveness is actually to be achieved. It is a masterpiece of misdirection. The result is to create an illusion of measurement while ensuring that the actual practice

of interpretation and audit is amenable to informal negotiations and is dependent on constant recourse to the skills of “specialist” (but opaque) expertise on the part of the auditors.

Decoupling is a well-known risk in the auditing of management systems (Terlaak, 2007, p. 981). It arises easily where there is a lack of consensus on specific best practices, where noncompliance is difficult to observe or detect, and where there is a perceived reward for compliance—for example, through the legitimacy benefits of certification (Terlaak, 2007, pp. 972–974). In relation to the environmental standard ISO 14001, Deepa Aravind and Petra Christmann (2011) found that “Recent evidence confirms that despite third-party auditing some firms obtain standard certification without continuously complying with standard requirements and incorporating the prescribed practices in their daily activities” (p. 74).

The point is that the inability of the standard to provide sufficient support for auditing rigor means that adoption of the standard may be purely symbolic and not “real” (Vílchez, 2017, p. 38).

Knowledge management is particularly sensitive to the decoupling effect because of the intangibility and poor observability of large portions of knowledge work compared to others: “The main challenge facing quality auditors and more importantly organizations themselves is to address the difficulty of accurately and systematically organizing and measuring deeply embedded tacit knowledge whether that be in organizational systems and processes or within the heads of employees” (Wilson & Campbell, 2016, p. 837).

In chapter 15 we will consider a case study showing how poor observability can lead a knowledge audit to fail to address a full spectrum of needs. Unless counteracted, observability tends to bias findings and actions toward explicit forms of knowledge.

Particular requirements within the ISO 30401 standard are especially vulnerable to the decoupling effect. For example, requirement 4.5 states: “The organization shall demonstrate that organizational culture has been addressed as a means to support the knowledge management system” (ISO, 2018b, p. 8). Annex C of the standard provides further guidance on how to demonstrate that culture has been addressed, falling short of strict requirements (ISO, 2018b, p. 19):

- 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.

This is a classic case of the decoupling of observable actions from the underlying intent of those actions.

It would be quite possible for an organization to demonstrate compliance with the requirement (“addressing” culture) without having had any real effect on the culture. It puts me in mind of an incident several years ago when I was called upon to brief a senior vice president of a telecom company on how to implement KM effectively. In my briefing I dwelled not only on good practices but also on known failure points. I was perplexed that the senior vice president seemed more interested in my descriptions of how to do KM badly than in how to do it well. So I asked him why. With surprising candor, he replied, “Actually, we don’t really want to do KM ‘properly’ because it will rock too many boats internally—we just want *to look like* we are doing it, because it looks good to the shareholders.”

Similarly, the ISO 30401 principle that people create their own knowledge through their own understanding of inputs that are shared with them leads, reasonably enough, to the requirement that there should be processes for interactions between people and people and content (ISO, 2018b, pp. 6–7). However, documented compliance as to the presence of such processes and interactions does not mean that you have verified that people are creating valid and useful understandings related to organizational needs—and indeed it is difficult to imagine how you would do this repeatedly, reliably, and reproducibly, as an auditor should. The contextual variabilities are too high (cf. Maximo et al., 2020).

### Issue 3: Audit Inconsistency

When ambiguity and decoupling effects are combined, there is enhanced reliance on auditor interpretation and judgment. This will invariably lead to different auditor assessments of similar circumstances and nonreproducibility of audit findings.

Moreover, it places an unusual burden on (a) auditors’ knowledge and experience of the variety of KM practices and outcomes and (b) auditors’ knowledge of the contextual idiosyncrasies of an organization’s stakeholders, business environment, and structural characteristics. It is not clear that external third-party auditors, such as those who would be engaged for summative certification audits, would possess such in-depth knowledge and experience (Milton & Lambe, 2020, pp. 306–307).

It has also been shown that overly vague standards frequently result in lower levels of auditor effort; that is to say, when a standard is vague, there is a lower payoff for an auditor to probe compliance with that requirement in depth (Willekens & Simunic, 2007; Knechel, 2013).

The notion of an experienced auditor’s “professional judgment” is by no means fiction. Experienced auditors in any field are by nature generalists. They understand through exposure to many organizations the variety of ways in which actual practices

may diverge from documented practices, they are swift in spotting discrepancies, and they are sharp in probing them. But without domain knowledge and detailed contextual knowledge of the target organization, these skills are blinkered.

Patricia Eng, coauthor of *The KM Cookbook* (Collison et al., 2019), is the only person I know of who is both a deeply experienced auditor (of nuclear power plants) and a deeply experienced KM practitioner, as well as trained and certified in ISO auditing methods. She is a rarity, and even she would be challenged in adequately sampling and probing the contextual particularities of any complex organization that she audits for its KM practices against the ISO 30401 standard. Eng points out that there are mechanisms to control for this variability:

Auditors are subjective human beings—hence, what is acceptable to one auditor may not be acceptable to another. This is a valid concern and organizations have a means of recourse, should this happen. . . . if an organization believes that an auditor has gone beyond the ISO standard, or even if the audit findings seem unreasonable, the organization can discuss its views with the audit team leader during the audit. If . . . the matter is not resolved and the organization still believes that the auditor has gone too far, the finding may be appealed to the certifying body. There is no stigma attached to an appeal and some audit findings have been overturned in the past. (Collison et al., 2019, p. 48)

This is reassuring. However, what Meyer and Rowan (1977) referred to as the “ceremonial and ritualized” elements of the auditor’s role and activities would tend, on the one hand, to apply friction to the likelihood of appeal, especially among less experienced KM teams within organizations. On the other hand, remembering Willekens and Simunic’s (2007) findings on the small payoffs for extra effort, strongly framed challenges by assertive auditees can inhibit the ability of less assertive auditors to resist. In a field that is largely still populated by inexperienced KM auditors and auditees, the audit process is going to be fraught for some time to come with such tensions, and the quality of the audit process will not always triumph.

Ambiguous, decoupled requirements can easily lead to superficial, symbolic findings, particularly where the specific experience and knowledge of the pool of auditors is neither well defined nor well governed.

They may provide superficial validation that certain hygiene factors for KM have been met, but they are unlikely to consistently differentiate effective KM programs from ineffective ones on the basis of summative certification alone, and the vagueness of some requirements means that they are even less likely to provide formative assessments that will give specific recommendations to guide KM practice in detail.

In fact, Patricia Eng is explicit about this: “Just as restaurant critics do not tell the restaurateur or chef how to do things, the auditor does not tell the organization how to

meet its objectives and goals—they simply assess the ability of the organization to do so” (Collison et al., 2019, p. 48).

Some KM practitioners are doubtful that the ISO 30401 standard will be widely used as a summative assessment instrument to certify a KM implementation (Milton, 2015a, 2015b; Lindsay, 2018). However, there is clear precedent in the use of the Israeli KM standard, the ISO 30401 precursor, for the provision of certification services by ISO certification agencies (Rozenal, 2013). Certainly, Collison et al. (2019) envisage this type of use for the standard. So there are clear risks associated with the limitations of the standard and the present capabilities for its use in certification.

There are even some risks that widespread encouragement of the standard for certification might distort KM practices from productive to unproductive ends. This concern echoes the message of Dennis Tourish (2019), a longtime exponent of communication audits and a more recent critic of the distortions caused by an overly rigid audit culture in institutions of higher learning:

The more layers of assessment that are added and the more bureaucratic the process becomes, the more game-playing ensues. . . . This can drive [academics] towards safe topics and short-termism, and a reluctance to engage in risky or multidisciplinary projects . . . (p. 77)

For example, while the ISO 30401 standard contains the principle that KM implementation should be phased and iterative, it also requires that all forms of knowledge flow and use be addressed, including knowledge sharing, knowledge representation, knowledge combination, and knowledge internalization.

But not all KM initiatives are equally dependent on all the knowledge processes. A rush to certification combined with the ease of decoupled measurement could, as the two case examples below illustrate, distract an organization from a properly scaled and useful piloting approach, which should by nature be limited in scope, and push it toward being able to demonstrate the processes, but not necessarily the effects, of the comprehensive system required by the standard *whether or not* all the elements of the comprehensive system were required at that stage in the organization’s journey.

---

#### **Case Study: A Cautionary Tale of Two KM Implementations**

The received wisdom is that senior leadership support for KM, proper resourcing, and formal alignment with organizational objectives is a necessary requirement for successful, sustainable KM. The ISO 30401 standard articulates this wisdom. However, while this is generally valid, there are examples where the trappings of senior leadership support, as described in the standard, might well be present but where KM efforts are not sustainable or sustained in the long term. Conversely, there are examples where KM can flourish and be sustainable in the absence of underlying senior leadership support.



*This means that while the requirement is a well-known hygiene factor for KM, it is neither a necessary nor a sufficient condition for KM success.*

About a decade ago, I worked on a KM project in a government organization where all the requirements of the ISO 30401 standard would have been met. There had been a thorough audit of needs against stakeholder requirements and the business goals of the organization. Key knowledge domains had been identified and a number of phased projects instituted following a road map. All the key KM processes and enablers were addressed, and a clear measurement system was put in place. The KM team was expanded, and a KM competency development program was established with a network of KM champions across the organization. The CEO was vocal in his support for KM, and a KM policy was developed and communicated.

As time went on, any change initiative that had a knowledge dimension (and there were several) was directed to the KM team to take on and incorporated into the road map. Gradually, the momentum began to slow and eventually stalled. The addition of so many initiatives, initially seen as a mark of top management support, became a burden. KM became associated with change fatigue in the organization because it was associated with so many change initiatives. Departments started dragging their feet, and they relied on the KM department to perform basic actions for which the KM team itself was counting on departmental support. This was not overt resistance, but it appeared in small, chronic, and incremental ways that started to show up in lags against reaching implementation targets on the road map.

By the time the problem came to the attention of the senior leadership team at a biennial KM review, several programs were significantly behind, or lacking participation, and a number of projects were failing to show any progress at all. The KM leader was blamed, the team was restructured, and, eventually, disillusioned and burned-out, most of them left.

Now a very seasoned and experienced auditor might just have picked up this risk early on, but I think it is unlikely. Its effects were felt only marginally and incrementally, and the acceptance of what felt like “good” projects on the assumption of departmental support can only be understood as a major flaw in the implementation when looked at in retrospect. The standard does not have any means of determining when a KM program is overloaded. Had a certification process been available at any time in the earlier part of the year leading up to the disastrous KM review, it is likely that this organization would have been able to demonstrate full compliance with the requirements of the standard. Certification in this case would not have been an indicator of sustainability.

Shortly after this project, I worked with another government agency where the IT team had determined that the organization had several structural and performance issues that required a KM approach to resolve. However, the team members had not been able to convince their top management that this was appropriate or necessary. It was a heavily silo-based organization, and each divisional head felt that their needs were unique and special and that there was little merit in promoting a cross-organizational KM approach.

The IT team leader decided to work within his own span of influence (he had very good informal networks across the organization) and persuaded his counterparts in other divisions, over an eighteen-month period, to participate in a rolling knowledge audit exercise to identify major KM pain points they shared and to identify key knowledge domains that needed support. From this exercise he developed three small and very focused interventions, only one of them extending outside of his IT remit. While the needs analysis and design process were consistent with the

ISO requirements, the audit lacked the comprehensiveness across all knowledge processes and enablers required by the standard, as well as senior management support.

Overall, however, the initiatives showed major success in addressing common recognized pain points and won sufficient support for a repeat exercise three years later. That KM program is still ongoing at the time of writing, and while it has gained credibility and respectability, it is still struggling with the issue of getting and maintaining full-fledged top management understanding and support. It is not clear that this program, sustained over almost a decade, would meet all of the requirements for certification against the ISO 30401 standard. And yet it has clearly demonstrated sustainability and value over time.

---

### How Might ISO 30401 Be Useful for Knowledge Auditing?

Notwithstanding the limitations of the ISO 30401 standard as an instrument for conducting a summative or formative assessment audit for KM, it is not without value (Milton & Lambe, 2020, pp. 303–304).

The ISO 30401 standard does capture a broad consensus on the basic hygiene factors for KM. For an organization that wants to do KM well and systematically and that wants to avoid common failure points, the standard may well function as a framing device to guide planning and implementation (Milton, 2015b; Milton & Lambe, 2020, pp. 303–304). This, of course, suggests that it would function better as an implementation guide rather than as an auditing instrument.

The limitations of the standard's use as a comprehensive and reliable assessment audit instrument come from its lack of specificity, the poor observability of some requirements, and some of its ambiguities. The standard by itself is especially limited if, as we have argued throughout this book, the power and utility of a knowledge audit is in its ability to direct improvement and change. In knowledge management, any useful assessment audit instrument must provide a valid and useful formative assessment.

Generalization is necessary in a KM standard in order to claim broad applicability. But, ironically, this limits its applicability in detail. As Ronald Maier and Ulrich Remus (2003) express it, useful guidance needs specificity, not generalized principles:

It seems inappropriate to simply state a general model that describes the application of KM in organizations. Instead, it seems more useful to describe scenarios of potentially useful KM initiatives that can currently be found or are targeted by organizations and that apply a matching set of instruments and ICT. (p. 65)

This statement, and an earlier attempt to use the BSI guide to KM good practices, provides a clue to how the ISO 30401 standard might be used as one component within a set of audit instruments.

---

**Case Study: From Framework to Audit Instrument**

In 2003 Simon Carpenter and Sarah Rudge (2003) reported on an attempt to use the BSI (2001) guide to good practice in KM at the former British Energy Power and Energy Trading (BEPET), a subsidiary of what was then British Energy. They wanted to conduct a formative assessment, using a benchmarking approach, to identify useful improvements to KM practice for their organization.

While the BSI guide was thought to hold some authority as a precursor to a full standard, it was found to be too broad and generic. It did not provide the specificity that a benchmarking approach to improvement would require. So they supplemented the guide with data from the MAKE (Most Admired Knowledge Enterprise) awards.

They used the elements of the BSI document to identify areas of good KM practice and then mapped them against MAKE award criteria and results to identify firms with good practices in those areas. It was an ingenious way of enriching a generalized framing document with specific scenarios collected according to a common set of criteria. Combined, the BSI document and the MAKE awards data provided the basis for a self-assessment and a set of recommendations for potential good practices.

This reminds us of the primary intention of the communications assessment audit instruments developed by Goldhaber and Wio in the 1970s. A standard instrument for auditing and measurement becomes a collecting device for examples of effective practice and then comparison across organizations.

---

There is no reason why the ISO 30401 standard should not function as a similar framing instrument for an audit—not alone, but in combination with other instruments and sources of evidence—and as the basis for a benchmarking assessment audit rather than just a compliance-oriented assessment audit.

Chris Collison, Paul Corney, and Patricia Eng provide such a pathway in *The KM Cookbook*. They lay out what Maier and Remus (2003) described as “scenarios of potentially useful KM initiatives,” and this is why *The KM Cookbook* is such a useful companion resource to the ISO 30401 standard. They use the metaphor of a restaurant, a kitchen, and a cookbook to frame illustrative examples of effective KM practices drawn from organizations around the world, and these examples are organized around what they call the “KM Chef’s Canvas,” a framework of guiding questions following the general structure of the ISO 30401 standard’s requirements (Collison et al., 2019, p. 55).

It is clear that a variety of audit methods could be used to respond to those guiding questions. The illustrative examples from a wide variety of organizations connect the good practices to their practising organizations’ goals and objectives. This downplays

the idea of the standard as a decontextualized and prescriptive list of standardized practices. Variety and context sensitivity are preserved.

This idea of the standard as a guiding and framing instrument is supported by a reflective and pragmatic piece written by David Skyrme at the height of the KM “certification wars” in 2002. Skyrme (2002) listed a number of expected benefits for standards, which I reproduce in table 9.1 along with some of my own observations on how the ISO 30401 standard can perhaps provide value for knowledge auditing, when used in combination with other approaches and instruments.

It is unlikely that ISO 30401 will serve on its own as an effective assessment audit instrument for KM. Its coverage of a range of KM processes and KM enablers could help to frame an assessment of those elements of KM implementation, but it lacks the specificity to do this in depth. It needs supporting audit instruments to perform this function.

Although the ISO 30401 standard may not be a particularly effective audit instrument on its own, in combination with other instruments it might be. And other knowledge audit approaches might help organizations to implement KM according to ISO 30401 requirements.

For example, section 4.3 states that “the organization shall identify, evaluate and prioritize the knowledge domains which have the greatest value to the organization and its interested parties, and to which the knowledge management system should be applied” (ISO, 2018b, p. 5). The standard does not specify how this should be done, but this is the purpose that an inventory audit typically serves.

Similarly, while a range of KM processes and enablers is specified, the standard does not give examples of what good practice looks like or how to identify effective practices that already exist within the organization. Discovery review audits can uncover such practices, as can some forms of assessment audit instruments. For good practices in other organizations, the case study interview approach used by Collison et al. (2019) in *The KM Cookbook* can also help. So a knowledge audit, more broadly framed, could also serve as a preparatory step to implementing ISO 30401 requirements.

\* \* \*

## Summary

In this chapter we traced the troubled history of developing assessment-based audits for knowledge management.

1. In KM there has been a long and contentious history of resistance to the notion of prescriptive standards, with arguments and counterarguments on both sides.

**Table 9.1**

Potential benefits of the ISO 30401 standard

Benefit	Observation	ISO 30401 implication
Compatibility and interchangeability	Components and practices can be combined without error.	The consistency of approach in the ISO management systems standards, especially with the 2015 addition of a KM clause in ISO 9001, should help organizations take an organization-centric rather than a function-based approach to KM (cf. Boyes, 2018).
Common understanding and consistent vocabulary	Knowledge management practitioners and top management teams will use key KM terms with greater consistency and less ambiguity.	While some ambiguity exists in parts of the standard, the standard provides a comprehensive and reasonably consensus-based frame of reference for KM.
Transferability of learning between contexts	Having a common frame of reference for KM systems and implementations will allow KM practitioners and organizations to compare practices more easily and learn from each other.	This is consistent with using the standard as a supporting frame for a benchmarking assessment audit and for using assessment against the standard as a common evidence- and scenario-gathering device.
Competitiveness and comparability between suppliers	KM has suffered from a tendency in commercial software and service providers to use distinctions in language, fine conceptual distinctions, and fancy rhetorical footwork to befuddle and confuse buyers and to justify one product or service over another. Partial or incomplete approaches to KM cannot be distinguished from more comprehensive approaches.	The standard, in providing a common frame of reference and a comprehensive suite of hygiene factors for KM, gives service and product providers a common platform against which they can define their offerings in a consistent and easily comparable way.
Quality and safety	Implementers want to have greater assurance of the likely quality of implementation and reduce the risk of poor implementation.	The standard does not bring absolute assurance of quality, and a superficial use of the standard could increase implementation risks, as described above, but where there is a balanced and pragmatic use of the standard alongside other instruments, quality and risk should be better managed.
Enhancing levels of competence among professionals	Having a common frame of reference also provides a profession-wide approach to describing competencies and skills areas for KM practitioners, identifying gaps, and providing development opportunities.	The standard does describe a comprehensive range of activities that KM professionals and top management will need to be engaged in, and requires that competencies be developed to match needs.

Based on Skyrme 2002.

2. The arguments in principle against the possibility of a standard for KM raise important questions about the constraints and challenges of developing a useful standard in KM, but they do not succeed in entirely dismissing the possibility.
3. The history of standards development suggests that 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 organizational 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.
4. A KM standard could easily be used inappropriately if these distinctions are not recognized, but it is not in itself completely without utility.
5. The institutional basis of a KM standard and a format and structure independent of commercial providers or schools of thought are critical for its credibility, adoption, and productive use.
6. Although the ISO 30401 standard for KM systems is presented as a prescriptive standard with requirements that can in principle be audited against, three factors weaken its potential use as the main instrument for an assessment-driven knowledge audit:
  - It contains substantive ambiguities that make it difficult to measure all requirements evenly.
  - The standard tends to conceal the fact that some aspects of knowledge use are less easily observable, and this may lead to a decoupling effect in which what is measured is not an accurate and complete description of what actually happens.
  - The presence of ambiguity and decoupling creates a dependency on individual auditor judgment and experience that will almost certainly lead to audit inconsistencies and a tendency to retreat to the easily observed.
7. The ISO 30401 standard formalizes a number of well-known basic hygiene factors for effective KM implementation but does not successfully capture all the necessary and sufficient conditions for successful KM implementation.
8. The ISO 30401 standard may be useful as a framing instrument alongside other audit approaches (such as inventory audits and discovery review audits), against which to collect data according to a common framework across multiple organizations to enhance the possibility for productive comparison of practices, for cross-organizational learning, and for competency development within the profession.
9. Other knowledge audit approaches, such as inventory audits and discovery review audits, might be used to help organizations implement KM according to ISO 30401 requirements.



© 2023 Massachusetts Institute of Technology

This work is subject to a Creative Commons CC-BY-NC-ND license.  
Subject to such license, all rights are reserved.



The MIT Press would like to thank the anonymous peer reviewers who provided comments on drafts of this book. The generous work of academic experts is essential for establishing the authority and quality of our publications. We acknowledge with gratitude the contributions of these otherwise uncredited readers.

This book was set in Stone Serif and Stone Sans by Westchester Publishing Services.

#### Library of Congress Cataloging-in-Publication Data

Names: Lambe, Patrick, 1960– author.

Title: Principles of knowledge auditing : foundations for knowledge management implementation / Patrick Lambe.

Description: Cambridge, Massachusetts : The MIT Press, [2023] | Includes bibliographical references and index.

Identifiers: LCCN 2022015397 (print) | LCCN 2022015398 (ebook) | ISBN 9780262545037 (paperback) | ISBN 9780262373159 (epub) | ISBN 9780262373166 (pdf)

Subjects: LCSH: Knowledge management. | Organizational learning. | Organizational change.

Classification: LCC HD30.2 .L362 2022 (print) | LCC HD30.2 (ebook) | DDC 658.4/038—dc23/eng/20220718

LC record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022015397>

LC ebook record available at <https://lcn.loc.gov/2022015398>