

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

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Citation:

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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

10 Risky Metaphors

No, Hump, these things are too difficult to explain to people and too abstract to interest them.
—Heinlein (1967, p. 340)

In part I of this book, we established the historical context of knowledge auditing and connected it to earlier forms in communication audits and information audits. That rich history gives us a better understanding of the diversity of auditing approaches and methods available today.

In part II, we disentangled the multiple possible senses of *audit* and provided a framework for linking audit type to audit purpose. This should help us think more clearly about how to scope and plan audits, as well as to set expectations for how they should be conducted and the authority of their findings.

In part III we investigated these different audit types as they played out in the evolution of communication audits, information audits, and knowledge audits. We saw how their source disciplines, and the contexts that generated them, influenced the methods they used and the unspoken assumptions they relied upon. We saw how problematic the assessment audit model has been in relation to information auditing and knowledge auditing, and laid out some principles for thinking about knowledge management (KM) assessments clearly and systematically.

In this final part, we turn to the inventory audit, that most foundational form of knowledge audit, and we attempt to first complexify, then clarify, the way that “knowledge” can be understood, described, and cataloged in organizations. Because in an audit we rely on reports from the ground, the language we use about knowledge can help or hinder the KM planning and implementation endeavor.

Useful Ambiguity and Treacherous Ambiguity

The vocabulary of knowledge management, and by extension knowledge audits, is rife with ambiguity and imprecision of language (Ward, 2010). Not all ambiguity is bad. In “portmanteau” or “umbrella” terms that bring together otherwise disparate concepts and practices for productive purposes, ambiguity can be useful. We could view this as a strategic use of ambiguity.

Knowledge management is an example of a usefully ambiguous umbrella term. It has multiple understandings depending on the disciplines that use it, but the use of a single umbrella term forces those disparate disciplines into dialogue with each other in useful and interesting ways. People who are forced to share an umbrella concept can then start to learn across disciplinary boundaries as they expose their assumptions, principles, and methods (Raub & Rüling, 2001; Alavi & Leidner, 2001).

However, ambiguity can also have bad effects. Some of the key language of knowledge audits is prone to ambiguity that is both slippery and treacherous:

- *Slippery* because a series of connected statements explaining KM practice can start off with a term meaning one thing and end with the same term meaning something else entirely.
- *Treacherous* because when meanings shift like this, the rationales behind those activities can also be undermined by the unacknowledged shift in meaning.

Slippery language obscures the point at which a rationale for an activity or process ceases to become relevant. The instability of meaning thereby introduces irrationality into the management process itself and undermines it. Worse, the irrationality is concealed from view. Worse still, our lack of care for establishing a precision of language in knowledge management leads us into poor practices.

We will see examples in this chapter of how slippery language can have an impact on the way we use the term *audit*. In the same audit exercise, we can start with an inference of a “strong” compliance and standards-based audit based on measurable data, and we can end by using methods that belong to a looser evaluative type of audit and that carry much less authority or allow wider latitude in interpretation. The point at which we have moved from the strong sense to the weak sense of the term *audit* is not clear, and with that concealment, the point at which we should start to treat our findings with greater caution is concealed.

In knowledge audits and in knowledge management more generally, we have no safeguards built into our use of language, or into our reasoning processes, to avoid this.

In fact, as our opening quote from the science fiction writer Robert Heinlein suggests, in most cases the recipients and audiences of knowledge audits are largely incurious about the underlying rationality of the exercise, except insofar as it affects their participation and any benefits they might acquire from it. More worrying, when knowledge managers want to bolster the credibility of their methodology and approach, they have a strong motive to conceal or ignore these slippages of meaning.

In the next few chapters, I want to show that the phenomenon of slippery and treacherous language can also happen with a foundational concept within the practice and discussion of knowledge audits, the concept of *knowledge asset*. I will suggest that some of the terms associated with knowledge audits, such as knowledge as *capital* or *resource*, contain *addressable ambiguity*—meaning that the negative effects of the ambiguity can be mitigated by qualifying the term more precisely—but that the use of the term *knowledge asset* cannot be mitigated in this way. I will claim that the term *knowledge asset* suffers from unaddressable and treacherous ambiguity.

The Benefits and Dangers of Working with Metaphors for Knowledge

How should we think and speak about knowledge in organizations? What labels should we use? Is knowledge an asset or a resource? Is it capital? Is it a capability or a strategic competence? Is it a state of mind or a condition? Is it a process? Is it a thing to be husbanded or a flow to be facilitated?

The literature of knowledge management would suggest, rather confusingly, that it is all of these things (Alavi & Leidner, 2001). The intellectual capital expert Daniel Andriessen (2006), in a textual analysis of the most widely cited knowledge management and intellectual capital textbooks, once counted twenty-two different and sometimes competing metaphors for describing knowledge, and his list could have been expanded by including strategy-oriented metaphors such as capability or competence.

He later speculated on how interesting KM would be if we characterized knowledge as “love”, with its implications of nurturing human relations, instead of as “stuff”, which entails a mechanistic, less human-oriented approach (Andriessen, 2008). Our choice of language is of course determined in part by the orientation we want to take or the argument we want to make. At the same time, the language we choose can impose limitations on how we think about knowledge and how we think about managing it.

Several of these candidate labels (asset, resource, capital) reflect an orientation focused on the *value of knowledge* to the enterprise. Other “knowledge as stuff” metaphors (knowledge artifacts, products, objects) reflect a managerial orientation focused on *control*.

“Value” metaphors are closely linked to “stuff” metaphors. “Assets” are productive resources that are owned and controlled and accounted for, but they are only productive economically if they are managed as artifacts through their life cycle. Both “value” and “stuff” metaphors appear very attractive to KM thinkers and practitioners. “Value” metaphors help us to make a case for the importance of KM, and “stuff” metaphors communicate the possibility of imposing mechanisms of acquisition, growth, and control.

We can see these motivations playing out in the literature and in practice. When Andriessen analyzed his bucket of seventy-one different verbs used to describe how knowledge is managed, he found that “knowledge as stuff” metaphors made up two-thirds of the quota. A third of those verbs carried some inference of value (knowledge as resources, assets, or capital) (Andriessen, 2008).

In a global survey my firm conducted on knowledge-auditing practices, we found that taking an inventory of knowledge stocks and capitalizing the value of knowledge was the second most common type of knowledge audit conducted (the most common type was to take a knowledge inventory in order to review internal knowledge practices; Lambe, 2017). “Stuff” and “value” matter to knowledge managers.

Other types of metaphor, though less common, also have their uses, and so they survive as secondary themes. “Flow” metaphors (connections, transfer, mobilization) reflect a managerial orientation focused on people and process. The labels around competence and capability reflect a strategic orientation to knowledge as an enabler of organizational goals. Each type of label creates opportunities for thinking about managing knowledge, but it also imposes constraints.

When faced with fluid, abstract concepts such as knowledge, we choose our labels to serve our goals. They help us by giving us hooks to work with, which Lakoff and Johnson, in their seminal work on metaphor, call entailments.

When faced with fluid or fuzzy phenomena, a metaphor entails or implies attributes that we can work with. Using the metaphor of “knowledge flow” entails thoughts and actions associated with identifying sources and enabling mobility, directionality, and connections between places and people. The metaphors we choose help us to interpret our situation and in turn help us to structure what we do (Lakoff & Johnson, 1980, pp. 5–9). This is how we help ourselves to pin down an idea and take a course of action.

But the labels we choose also come with baggage. While our metaphors highlight aspects we can work with, they achieve this by hiding other, sometimes conflicting, characteristics of the phenomena. This baggage can become a problem when we forget we are thinking metaphorically and think we are thinking literally. We can mistake the map for the territory (Meralli, 2000, p. 16; Bronk, 2009, pp. 23–24).

As Andriessen (2008, p. 9) points out, using a “stuff” metaphor for knowledge enables a managerial approach to knowledge management, especially in codification, storage, and trading systems, but it conceals the human and especially the emotional dimension of knowledge use. We can easily become mechanistic and neglectful of human factors in KM planning and the design of KM processes.

The “stuff” metaphor is not completely incompatible with a “flow” metaphor, but it privileges codification and storage over movement. If we are not aware of these limitations, we can end up with knowledge bases that nobody uses, and in trying to get people to use our “warehouses,” we may actually be distracting people from productive work.

And metaphors in KM can be confusing and misleading—confusing, for example, if we are speaking at cross-purposes with a colleague who works with a different metaphor for knowledge, and misleading if we assume that our metaphor implies things that do not actually apply to our situation: “they can fool us when we take them as literal” (Andriessen, 2008, p. 7).

This implies the following:

1. We need reminders that we are thinking metaphorically and not literally.
2. We need a portfolio of metaphors that we can consciously adapt and deploy according to need, not an ideology of metaphors that oversimplifies the complex landscapes we work with.
3. We need to be cautious about metaphors that mislead us.

So if we are engaged in a systematic review and evaluation of knowledge in organizations, we had better be sure of the labels and metaphors we use, of where they help and where they hinder, of when to use them, and of when to jettison them. Some labels are more problematic than others because of the baggage they bring along with them. *Knowledge asset* is one of them, as we will see.

In this section of the book I want to

- show how we can be misled by the language we use,
- review the principal metaphors we use in knowledge audits to describe knowledge, especially in inventory and value audits, and
- identify their limitations and the risks they expose us to.

By the end of this section of the book, we should have a clearer understanding of how to work with these metaphors without getting confused, or misleading ourselves or others.

* * *

Summary

In this chapter I have distinguished between useful ambiguity and dangerous ambiguity and suggested some ways of discriminating between them. Here is a summary of the main points:

1. The idea of inventorying knowledge leads to the prevalent use of metaphors of knowledge as *stuff* or as *stocks*.
2. The metaphors we use bring entailments. These can be productive or counterproductive.
3. The idea that we should be able to demonstrate the value of knowledge (and by extension KM) is very attractive. This fixation on value leads to the widespread association of the metaphors “asset”, “capital”, and “resource” with knowledge.
4. We suffer from imprecision of language and lack of conceptual clarity in how we talk about knowledge with sponsors, stakeholders, collaborators, and fellow practitioners. This has led to our advocacy of vague, misleading, and sometimes just plain confused ideas and practices.

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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>