

Preliminary Research Proposal
for the Award of
Doctor of Philosophy

(Communication Specialisation)

By

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Presented to

Associate Professor Trish Milne and Professor John Halligan

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The Research Proposal

'A good deal of the corporate planning I have observed is like a ritual rain dance; it has no effect on the weather that follows, but those who engage in it think it does. Moreover, it seems to me that much of the advice and instruction related to corporate planning is directed at improving the dancing, not the weather.' (Mintzberg 1994, p. 139)

Introduction

In the past decade or so there has been an explosive interest in academic and business circles in knowledge management. The central theme is that we are now in the 'knowledge age' (Drucker 1993) and that the new economy is based on knowledge exploitation¹ (Kermally 1997, p. 220). Knowledge exploitation, so the argument goes, is concerned with capturing existing knowledge and/or creating new knowledge for commercial advantage (Probert 2003, p. 63). However it is my contention that we have the puzzling situation where we talk about knowledge without really understanding what it is we are talking about. Indeed, Thomas Davenport and Laurence Prusak make the point that:

'Confusion about what data, information, and knowledge are – how they differ, what the words mean – has resulted in enormous expenditures on technology initiatives that rarely deliver what the firms spending the money needed or thought they were getting' (Davenport & Prusak 1998, p. 1).

Knowledge management practitioners, with a few exceptions, typically delineate between tacit and explicit knowledge. Tacit knowledge is the understanding held by an individual that is derived from the integration of values, perceptions, opinions and personal beliefs with experience and information, which allows it to be employed effectively (Nonaka, I. & Konno 2000). Explicit knowledge is codified and clearly articulated, making it available to all and sundry, and in this sense it is public knowledge. It is found in the form of books, documents, reports, spreadsheets, and so on (Awad & Ghaziri 2004, p. 47).

From these descriptions we can safely conclude that explicit knowledge exists as an artefact, and tacit knowledge is some sort of understanding that is difficult to articulate, but is based on beliefs. However at this point we have a conundrum. Data is usually thought as being '*a set of discrete, objective facts existing in symbolic form that have not been interpreted*' (Davenport & Prusak 1998, pp. 2-3). On the other hand information is '*data that have been shaped by humans into a meaningful and useful form*' (Laudon & Laudon 1998, p. 16), usually by adding context. But to an epistemologist a fact represents a truth, and a truth in some cases is knowledge. It follows therefore that data as defined can actually be knowledge, and the same can be said for information. On the other hand the knowledge management practitioner's definition of explicit knowledge is less than useful because explicit knowledge is an artefact which actually means it is data, or at best information! Clearly the definitions are inadequate, and some other more subtle vocabulary beyond the data, information, and knowledge divide is required.

¹ The word 'exploitation' is used in the sense of turning something into practical account, rather than the more negative meaning of selfish use for one's own ends.

Research Topic

I propose to document what knowledge actually means for three Canberra-based public sector organisations, in order to understand how they exploit and manage knowledge. This should elicit how knowledge is integrated for them into daily processes and outputs, as well as how it contributes to their strategic planning. I am hopeful that such an understanding will allow the development of a generic model for a positive knowledge management intervention² in a public sector organisation, including a means for measuring the intervention.

Accordingly the working title of the thesis is '*Chaos into Order: Towards a Generic Model of Knowledge Management for Public Sector Organisations.*'

Research Questions

The following preliminary research questions have been identified:

- Is there a difference between data, information and knowledge for public sector organisations, and if so what is it?
- Are there intermediate forms of data, information, and knowledge, and if so how are they related?
- How do public sector organisations evaluate a knowledge claim, both at the personal and organisational level?
- How do public sector organisations engage in knowledge exploitation, and for what purpose, given they are not directly involved in commercial activities?
- How do public sector organisations evaluate the utility of the various knowledge management models, given that there seems to be no agreed definition of knowledge?
- How do public sector organisations measure knowledge capital?

Relationship to Previous Research

To inform the research I will draw upon literature from the disciplines of philosophy, epistemology, management theory, public sector management, policy development, systems engineering, chaos theory, change management, project management, and of course knowledge management.

With regard to knowledge management models there are three models that seem to have gained prominence in the past few years. These are Nonaka and Takeuchi's '*SECI Knowledge Spiral*', Firestone and McElroy's '*Knowledge Life Cycle*', and Snowden's '*Cynefin Model*'. However, each of these models has a dissimilar approach and begins with a differing set of assumptions. For example Nonaka and Takeuchi's '*SECI Knowledge Spiral*'

² I have chosen the word 'intervention' in preference to 'initiative' because it has positive and negative, and benign and non-benign connotations. It also implies some sort of purposeful, deliberate, and conscious action that is intended to be permanent or long-lasting. Initiative, on the other hand, implies that the purpose is a first step towards some action.

has a justified true belief premise, whilst Firestone and McElroy's '*Knowledge Life Cycle*' uses a Popperian framework. No model, as far as I can determine, provides a complete real world example that firstly illustrates the 'knowledge process' from end to end, and then explains, rather than describes, how it actually works. This makes it extremely difficult to evaluate the models, let alone determine their utility in the business world. Furthermore, where examples are provided they tend to focus on commercial enterprises rather than public sector organisations. I am hopeful that my research will fill this gap by providing a complete end-to-end example of two or more public sector knowledge management interventions.

Justification for the Research

Much of the literature has an evangelistic quality about it, and relies upon a 'business guru' or self-proclaimed knowledge expert to justify its contention. Recently this has been recognised to some extent with pleas for research that provides an empirical basis for the argument (see for example Bouthillier & Shearer 2002; Edwards et al. 2003; Patriotta 2003). In a similar vein it is clear that critical analysis of the existing knowledge management models is required. The proposed research will play a role in correcting this anomaly by undertaking an empirical and critical examination of the knowledge management interventions in three public sector organisations.

Potential Contribution of this Research

Potentially this research would assist in the development of a generic model of knowledge management by documenting the 'knowledge processes' that public sector organisations engage in on a daily basis. This would assist these organisations to select an appropriate knowledge management intervention, and provide a basis for evaluating their existing knowledge management solutions. The research would also assist other public sector organisations to develop a workable knowledge management framework. At the very least it should provide a guide to other public sector organisations as to what has been, and has not been, successful.

Less importantly it should also be observed that, with the notable exception of Hasan and Handzic's 2003 publication '*Australian Studies in Knowledge Management*', there is a paucity of Australian examples in the literature. This research will contribute to the Australian literature on knowledge management.

Outline Plan and Research Method

It is proposed to study knowledge management interventions in the Commonwealth Department of Health and Ageing, the Department of Defence, and Telstra, noting that permissions have not yet been obtained. These organisations have been chosen because I am aware that they have one or more knowledge management initiatives underway. Each organisation provides very different services and has differing types of public contact. They have also been chosen because I have senior management contacts inside each of these organisations, which should ease the processes of obtaining permissions and gaining management support for the research.

At this early stage I have yet to develop a research methodology however I am inclined to employ a grounded theory methodology. It is my understanding that this approach is emergent and does not test a hypothesis per se, but rather sets out to find a theory that is implicit in the data. The data is reviewed constantly to locate an explanation that best fits it and in this sense it is iterative (Robson 2002). It seems to me that this is an appropriate approach given the proposed research topic and preliminary questions; however I would greatly appreciate some guidance in this area and recognise that this is the weakness in my proposal.

Proposed Timetable

I intend to complete the doctorate on a part-time basis over six years in accordance with current University of Canberra's guidelines. An outline timetable is at Annex A. This is my initial plan, which will be reviewed regularly in light of continuous and iterative data analysis.

Thesis Structure

Broadly I see the thesis as having five sections some of which may be divided into two or more chapters. Table 1 shows the structure and approximate writing time for each section. Again I see this as an iterative process that will be subject to review, particularly if the data leads me down unforeseen paths.

Section	Approximate Words	Time to Write (months)
Introduction	5,000	3
Literature Review	25,000	12
Methodology	15,000	9
Data Analysis	20,000	9
Implications	30,000	9
Conclusion	5,000	6
Total	100,000	48

Table 1: Proposed Thesis Structure and Writing Time

Ability to Undertake the Research

Annex B provides an outline of my academic and business background. I believe I have sufficient credentials to undertake this research, as well as the motivation and drive to succeed. You should note that I presently hold a University of Canberra Pro-Vice Chancellor's scholarship for a Masters of Knowledge Management which I expect to complete in November 2004. Completion is contingent, on submitting a minor dissertation

titled – ‘*TARDIS: A Journey Through an Enterprise Knowledge Space.*’ The dissertation describes the knowledge management system which I am currently building within Capability Systems Division of the Department of Defence, and is being supervised by Mr Tony Eccleston.

Three other individuals who can attest to my abilities are:

- Associate Professor Wayne Ramsey - 0438 405000,
- Doctor Malcolm Pettigrove - 0427 420766, and
- Mr Patrick Byrne – 0412 103629.

Resources

I propose to self-fund this research, although any assistance in the form of a scholarship would be very welcome.

Potential Supervisors

I have identified Associate Professor Trish Milne and Professor John Halligan as potential primary supervisors, and Mr Tony Eccleston as a secondary supervisor and mentor. I am not averse to the idea of conjoint supervisors, and I would welcome the opportunity for a partnering arrangement with another University, particularly if it was offshore. You should note that I have already established considerable rapport with Mr Eccleston.

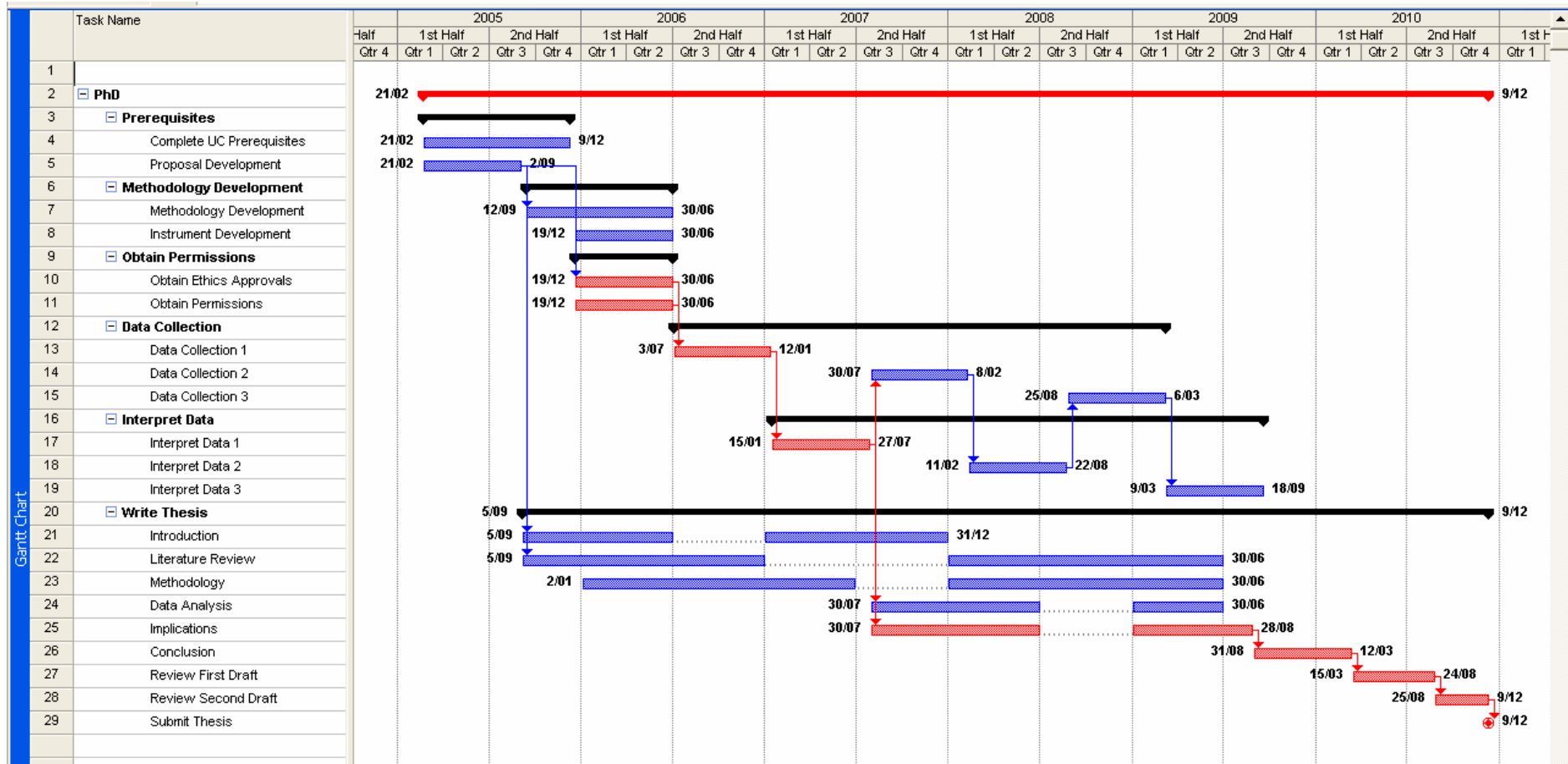
Monitoring and Evaluation

I expect the research will be monitored through monthly or bi-monthly face-to face meetings and/or e-mail contact as agreed with the supervisors. The thesis will be evaluated through normal University of Canberra examination procedures.

Summary

The scope of the proposed research is multi-disciplinary, and will draw upon the disciplines of philosophy, epistemology, management theory, public sector management, policy development, systems engineering, chaos theory, change management, project management, and of course knowledge management. As a result of the integration of different disciplines, plus the research methodology, it is expected to develop a generic model for a positive knowledge management intervention in a public sector organisation, including a means for measuring the intervention. The research should aid these organisations to improve their effectiveness and efficiency. It will also contribute to the knowledge management discipline by providing a complete end to end example of two or more knowledge management interventions.

Annex A: Outline Timetable



Annex B: Researcher's Background

Graham is a graduate of the Officer Cadet School Portsea and the Australian Army Command and Staff College Queenscliff. He has over 20 years experience with the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps and the Royal Australian Infantry, including command, and operational service in Rwanda and Bougainville. He also has substantial experience as an adult trainer, and has held senior instructional appointments in Australia, the USA and Canada. Whilst still in the Army Graham conducted research to identify injury and disease trends of regular Army soldiers as part of a Masters of Health Administration program. In 2000 he was awarded the Geoffrey Harkness Medal for outstanding services to the Royal Australian Army Medical Corps particularly in the area of developmental work.

Since leaving the Army Graham has worked as a partner in HolisTech Pty Ltd, and as the director of his own consulting company. His work has included the literature research for a Royal Australian Navy project that determined the regulatory framework and information management structure necessary to ensure the safety integrity of the Navy's platforms and people. More recently Graham has been intimately involved in the design and ongoing support to knowledge management systems for Defence Health Services Branch, and Capability Systems Division of the Australian Defence Force.

Graham has the following academic qualifications:

- Masters of Health Administration,
- Bachelor of Science (Psychology),
- Graduate Diploma in Defence Studies (Public Policy), and
- Graduate Diploma in Management Studies.

Graham presently holds a University of Canberra Pro-Vice Chancellor's scholarship and expects to complete the Masters of Knowledge Management in November 2004, on submitting a minor dissertation titled – '*TARDIS: A Journey Through an Enterprise Knowledge Space.*' The dissertation describes the knowledge management system which Graham is currently building within Capability Systems Division.

Annex C - References

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