

Knowledge management as an ephemeral management fashion?

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Abstract

Purpose – This paper aims to understand how interest in the topic of knowledge management has evolved in the decade between 1998 and 2008 and to evaluate the claim that knowledge management is a management fashion.

Design/methodology/approach – The paper uses the academic publications database to investigate academic interest in the topic of knowledge management between 2000 and 2008, and company web sites to evaluate level of contemporary interest among global consultants and professional service firms in knowledge management.

Findings – The data presented challenge the idea that knowledge management can be regarded as a transient fashion, showing that academic interest in the topic has been sustained throughout the first decade of the twenty-first century. However, in contrast to this, there has been a significant decline of interest in knowledge management among global consultancies and professional service firms.

Research limitations/implications – The data on levels of academic interest in knowledge management were taken from only one source (ABI Proquest) and data on the level of interest among consultants and professional service firms were based on an analysis of their web sites.

Originality/value – The paper provides the first systematic evaluation of the level of interest in the topic of knowledge management in almost a decade.

Keywords Knowledge management, Management activities, Business cycles, Management styles

Paper type General review

Introduction

It is now almost 15 years since widespread interest in the topic of knowledge management first developed. This paper provides the first systematic evaluation in nearly a decade on how levels of interest in knowledge management have evolved. In doing so it evaluates the claim made by a number of writers in the late 1990s that knowledge management was likely to be a management fashion, with interest in it likely to decline quickly.

Widespread interest in the topic of knowledge management first began in the late 1990s. Thus surveys by Scarbrough and Swan (2001), Ponzi and Keonig (2002), and Wilson (2002), revealed that prior to the mid-1990s interest in the topic was virtually non-existent, but that after this time the number of publications on knowledge management grew rapidly. The exponential growth of interest in the topic was such that Scarbrough and Swan (2001) found that there were more references to knowledge management in the first half of 1998 than there had been in the previous five years combined. Further, interest in the topic was not simply confined to the academic world, with the knowledge society rhetoric shaping government policy in a number of countries (Warhurst and Thompson, 2006), and with survey evidence suggesting that large numbers of organisations were attempting to develop formal knowledge management initiatives (KPMG, 2000, 2003).

However, both Scarbrough and Swan (2001) and Wilson (2002) suggested that there was a risk that knowledge management was likely to be a passing fashion, with interest in it likely to

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decrease as quickly as it had begun. Wilson was particularly scathing and talked of knowledge management as a bandwagon “without wheels”. Scarbrough and Swan (2001) argued similarly, but in a more measured tone, that the growth of interest in knowledge management resembled the first half of a bell-shaped curve that Abrahamson (1996, p. 6) argued was indicative of a management fashion. They suggested that it was likely that interest in knowledge management would continue to follow such a pattern, concluding that the existing evidence “hints strongly of an impending decline [of interest]”.

Recently there have been some partial reviews of the knowledge management literature, with Crilly *et al.* (2009) reviewing a selected range of it, and Nicolini *et al.* (2008) reviewing the knowledge management literature in the healthcare sector. However, since Scarbrough and Swan (2001) and Ponzi and Keonig (2002), there have been no systematic attempts to conduct a quantitative analysis to investigate how levels of interest in knowledge management have evolved. This paper addresses this gap by providing such an analysis. In doing so the paper makes use of Abrahamson's (1996) model of fashion setting/following, but focuses narrowly on the supply and production of knowledge on knowledge management, rather than on the consumption and use of knowledge on knowledge management by business and other organisations. The paper starts by reviewing Abrahamson's theory, before presenting the data on how interest in the topic of knowledge management has evolved in the decade between 1998 and 2008 among academics as well as global management consultants and professional service firms. The paper then concludes by analysing the implications and meaning of the major trends revealed in this data.

Theorising the character and dynamics of management fashion cycles

Eric Abrahamson's name is synonymous with the topic of management fashions having published papers and developed theory on the topic for an extended period (Abrahamson, 1996, 2009; Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999; Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008). Abrahamson (1996, p. 257) defines a management fashion as: “a relatively transitory collective belief, disseminated by fashion setters, that a management technique leads to rational management progress”. The dissemination and adoption of a management fashion is thus something that happens to and within a group or community. The existence of a fashion can be identified from both the mood and feelings of a group's members, and also the extent to which a topic is referred to in publications. The rise of a fashion is identifiable with feelings of optimism and excitement regarding the potential of the new idea/technique to improve organisational performance, and a simultaneous rapid rise in the number of published references to the new idea/technique. In contrast, the decline of a fashion is identifiable by feelings of disappointment regarding unfulfilled potential, more considered analysis regarding the limitations of the idea/technique that had been fashionable, and a generally rapid simultaneous decline in the number of published references to the focal idea/technique (Abrahamson, 2009).

The transitoriness of fashions represents one of their defining characteristics, where a sudden upswing of interest in a topic is followed quickly by an equally rapid decline of interest in it. Thus, for Abrahamson (1996, p. 256), management fashions are identifiable by, “rapid bells-shaped swings”, and “waves of interest in management techniques”.

Over time, a number of developments and adaptations have been made to this model of fashion setting/following. First, there has been a noticeable evolution in the terminology used by Abrahamson. This to some extent reflects an attempt to clarify and distinguish between the terms “fad” and “fashion”, due to the confusion that emanates from their inconsistent usage in much academic literature (Abrahamson and Eisenman, 2008).

Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008) highlight a number of differences between management fads and fashions, which they suggest are fundamentally different processes with distinctive characteristics and dynamics. Thus, a fad is the result of a “chance conjunction of forces”, is characterised by a single cycle of growth and decline in a particular topic, produces virtually no cumulative learning, with the ideas promoted within it being quickly forgotten, and with

the growth of interest in the topic developing through informal “bandwagon effects”. In contrast they argue that management fashion trends result from cumulative waves of interest that feed into and build from each other, and which are the result of more conscious, top-down processes of fashion setting initiated by particular institutions/entrepreneurs in topics they detect there is a nascent level of interest in.

However, this clear distinction between fads and fashions made by Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008) arguably is not consistent with some of Abrahamson’s other work. Thus, while the distinction between fads and fashions was developed in 2008, in later work he consciously uses the terms “fad” and “fashion” interchangeably (Abrahamson, 2009). Second, arguably Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008) mis-characterise the paper by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) on management fashions as being focused on management fads. Further, the contemporary distinction between fads and fashions jars with Abrahamson and Fairchild’s (1999) earlier analysis of the dynamics of management fashion processes, which focused narrowly on the dynamics of a specific single cycle, the rise and fall of interest in the topic of quality circles. This paper follows the older convention of Abrahamson, and makes exclusive use of the term fashion rather than fad, with a fashion being conceptualised as involving the evolution of interest in a single specific topic, knowledge management.

Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008) also argue that management fashions do not necessarily follow a symmetrical pattern, where the up and downswings of a fashion cycle perfectly mirror each other. Instead, the up and downswings of a management cycle may follow their own distinctive patterns. Their empirical analysis of quality circles substantiated this argument, with the decline of interest in the topic being more slow and gradual than the pace and speed with which interest in the topic initially grew.

Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) also argue that just because the growth of interest in a topic resembles the upswing of a management fashion, that in every case such patterns will be followed by an inevitable decline of interest. Instead they argue that, “the exception may be the retention of the rare, once-fashionable management technique, via its relatively permanent institutionalization” (Abrahamson and Fairchild, 1999, p. 709). Thus, the logic of this argument applied to knowledge management means that just because there was a large and rapid growth of interest in it in the late 1990s does not necessarily mean that interest in the topic will have inevitably declined in subsequent years.

While a central element of Abrahamson’s theory of management fashion is the dynamics interaction between fashion setters/producers and followers/consumers, the focus in this paper is narrowly on knowledge production/fashion setting side of the process. This is fundamentally because limitations of space make it impossible to effectively investigate changes in the production and consumption of knowledge on knowledge management within a single academic paper.

In looking at the production of knowledge on knowledge management, the focus is on two distinct types of actor, academics and large, global consultancies and professional service firms. Suddaby and Greenwood (2001) argue that recent decades have witnessed the emergence of global consultancy and professional service firms, which developed and expanded through a process of mergers and acquisitions, as well as the movement of these firms into an increasingly diverse range of markets. Further, they argue that these developments have resulted in them becoming key actors in the production of management knowledge.

In conclusion, this paper’s central focus is on examining how interest in the topic of knowledge management by academics, and large global consultants and professional service firms evolved in the decade following its rapid rise to popularity in the late 1990s. More specifically, the paper will address the following questions:

- the extent to which the production of knowledge on knowledge management can be characterised as an ephemeral fashion;

- if interest in knowledge management declined, whether there was a symmetrical growth and decline of interest in the topic; and
- whether there are any signs that interest in knowledge management has been sustained, or even become institutionalised.

Changes in the production of knowledge on knowledge management 1998-2008

This section of the paper presents a range of data showing how interest in knowledge management has evolved between 1998 and 2008. The data on academics are presented in a separate section from that for the consultants and professional service firms, with the section on academic interest in knowledge management examining the subsidiary issue addressed by Scarbrough and Swan (2001), the extent to which interest in the topic has focused on IT and people-related themes.

Abrahamson (2009) argued that one way to investigate management fashions was via analysing the tone of published literature, with upswings being associated with optimistic language, and downswings being associated with more pessimistic and disappointed language. However, in the data presented here no attempt is made to establish this, and interest in knowledge management is simply established via counting the number of references to knowledge management in a range of sources.

In order to identify relevant publications on knowledge management some working definition of the term was required. Alvesson and Kärreman (2001) argue having too broad a definition of knowledge, or knowledge management can be problematic as it can risk losing coherence, and be used to include an enormous range of different processes and activities. However, due to the genuine diversity of knowledge management activities that academics study, and that business organisations undertake, this paper considers knowledge management in relatively broad terms, including any organisational attempt to manage knowledge or knowledge processes which are aimed at improving organisational performance in some way.

Academic interest in knowledge management

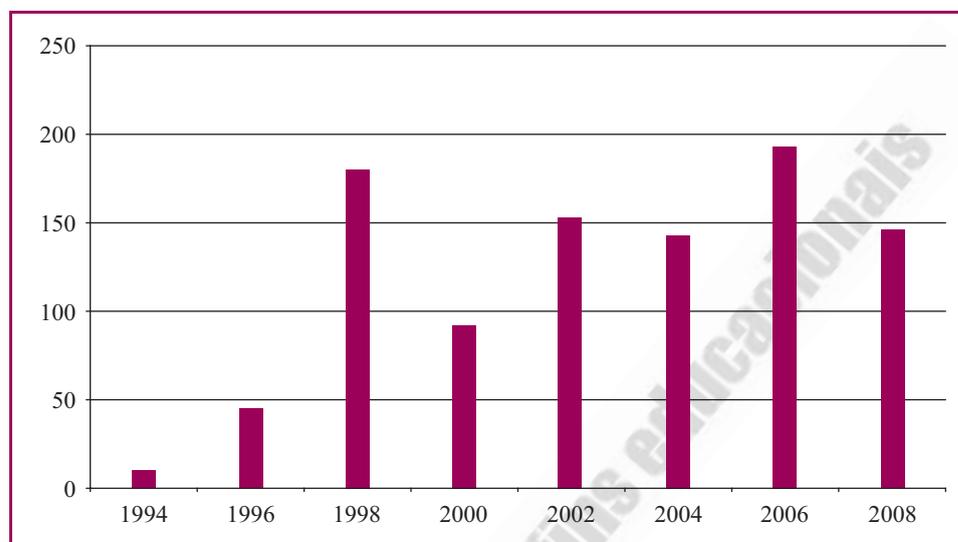
The main source of data utilised to evaluate how interest in the topic of knowledge management evolved among academics between 1998 and 2008 was through examining references to it in scholarly, academic journals. To access this data the ABI Proquest database of publications was utilised. The two key reasons why this particular database was used were that first, it is relatively comprehensive, and second, it was one of the two databases used by Scarbrough and Swan (2001)[1]. Thus using this particular database allows the analysis conducted by Scarbrough and Swan to be updated.

An initial search of Proquest was done that attempted to replicate the literature search methodology utilised by Scarbrough and Swan, which involved searching for the term "knowledge management" in the title of articles. What was not clear in either Scarbrough and Swan's (2001) *British Journal of Management* paper, or their original CIPD report (Scarbrough *et al.*, 1998) was whether the data they presented were from a search of only academic articles, or academic plus trade journals. In the contemporary analysis of Proquest that was carried out, the focus was only on academic journals[2]. For the updated search biannual data were collected for the years between 2000 and 2008. These data, plus those for the years 1998, 1996 and 1994 from Scarbrough and Swan's analysis are presented in Figure 1[3].

These data show that after the sudden rise of interest in knowledge management in the late 1990s, which peaked in 1998, that interest in the topic then stabilised and remained at a relatively high level. Thus interest in the topic of knowledge management among academics has been ongoing and extensive rather than passing and ephemeral.

However, a significant limitation of this search methodology was that it excluded literature that did not have the specific term "knowledge management" in the title. Because of the heterogeneity of the knowledge management literature and organisational knowledge management activities (which includes a wide range of knowledge processes such as

Figure 1 Number of references to “knowledge management” in the title of articles on the Proquest database



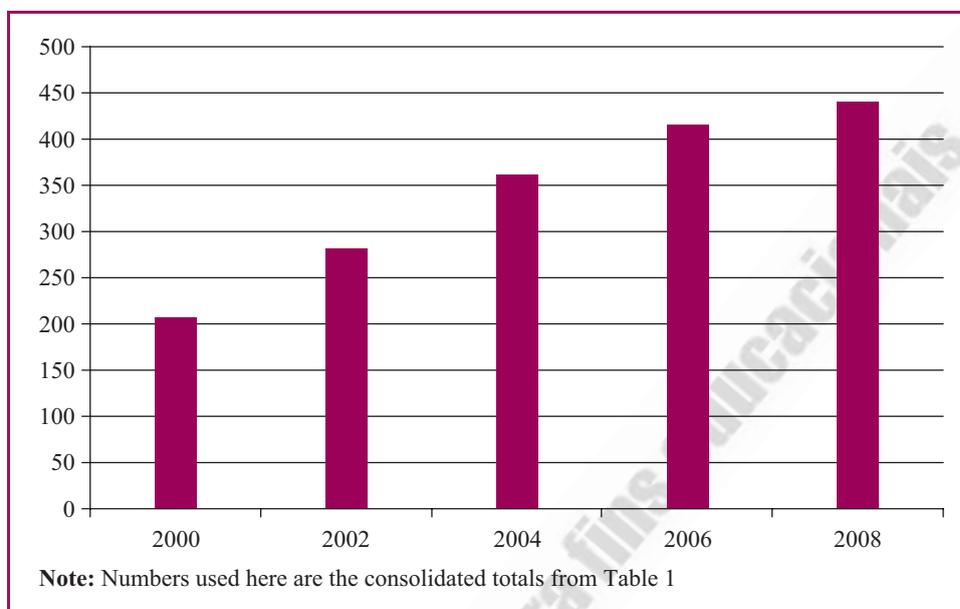
searching, codifying, sharing, creating, transferring) many relevant articles do not have the term “knowledge management” in their title. Thus, as with Nicolini *et al.* (2008), in order to get data on such articles, and to get a more comprehensive sense of the number of scholarly articles on knowledge management issues, the initial search was extended to include a range of different terms. The data from these searches is presented in Table I and Figure 2. These data reinforce the findings of Figure 1 in showing that interest in the topic of

Table I Number of articles on the topic of knowledge management in the Proquest database

Search term used in title of article	2000	2002	2004	2006	2008
“Knowledge management”	92	153	143	193	146
“Knowledge sharing”	8	16	38	61	67
“Knowledge transfer”	17	15	41	38	60
“Intellectual capital”	12	6	30	19	42
“Knowledge” and “practice”	12	24	21	27	28
“Knowledge creation”	14	12	31	28	28
“Communities of practice”	14	28	24	23	27
“Managing knowledge”	15	28	35	19	26
“Knowledge acquisition”	7	8	6	19	18
“Tacit knowledge”	12	12	6	12	10
“Learning organisation”	16	9	15	12	9
“Knowledge diffusion”	3	7	11	5	8
“Knowledge assets”	3	0	5	4	8
“Knowledge exchange”	4	5	1	7	6
“Explicit knowledge”	1	0	3	4	5
“Distributed knowing”	1	1	4	6	5
“Knowledge utilisation”	0	0	2	2	2
“Knowledge conversion”	0	0	1	1	2
“Knowledge” and “Knowing”	4	4	2	2	2
“Knowledge retention”	1	1	0	2	1
“Knowledge capture”	0	2	0	1	1
“Knowledge codification”	4	0	1	2	1
Consolidated total	207	281	361	415	440

Note: The totals in each column add up to less than the consolidated totals due to the fact that articles which appeared in more than one category were only counted once in the total

Figure 2 Number of references to articles on the topic of knowledge management on the Proquest database



knowledge management has not only been sustained, but has actually increased between 2000 and 2008.

Table I also reveals some issues regarding continuity and change in the sub-topics that make up knowledge management. First, in terms of change, in the period between 2000 and 2008, the level of interest in the topics of “knowledge sharing”, “knowledge transfer”, and “intellectual capital” all increased significantly. In terms of the topics “knowledge transfer” and “knowledge sharing” this is partly because of the growing use of these concepts to analyse and understand the dynamics of knowledge processes within a range of contexts such as joint ventures, multinational corporations, and distributed/virtual organisations, where the sharing and transferral of knowledge are fundamentally important. In relation to the topic of “intellectual capital”, this links to the increasing interest in the broad theme of social capital, and its application within the knowledge management literature.

In terms of continuity, two topics for which there have been sustained levels of interest are “communities of practice” and “practice” based perspectives on knowledge. The continued, ongoing interest in these topics and perspectives arguably flows from a recognition among many that knowledge is closely inter-related with the work activities of individuals and groups.

Another issue examined by Scarbrough and Swan in their analysis of the knowledge management literature was the extent to which they focused on IS/IT related and people-related topics. Their analysis found a strong emphasis on IS/IT issues, and a general neglect of people related issues. Thus, of the 1998 literature they reviewed, almost 70 per cent of it focused on IS/IT related issues, while only 5 per cent of it examined human resource and people related issues. The extent to which these themes were of interest in the contemporary knowledge management literature was evaluated by a focused examination of the articles published in 2008 (see Table I). First, these articles were analysed to identify the type of journal they were published in (see Table II). In this analysis the business management category included all business and management journal including human resource management, organisation theory, marketing, strategy, operations management etc. The journals which were classified as knowledge management ones were taken from the list used by Serenko and Bontis (2008).

Table II Type of journals that published articles on knowledge management themes in a search of the Proquest database for 2008

<i>Journal type</i>	<i>Number of articles</i>	<i>Percentage of articles</i>
Business management	218	50
KM	80	19
IS/IT/IM/library studies	58	13
Technology/technology management	38	9
Computing	14	3
Other	29	7

Note: Analysis based on consolidated list of 440 publications from 2008

This analysis suggests that, with only 13 per cent of the literature being published in IS/IT type journals, and with 50 per cent of it being published in business management journals, that the 2008 knowledge management literature has much less focus on IS/IT issues and much more focus on people related issues than the 1998 literature. Even when the number of articles on knowledge management published in IS/IT, technology management and computing journals are combined, this still only amounts to 25 per cent of the published papers in 2008 on knowledge management. However, this analysis only gives a partial insight into the extent to which people or IT related issues are examined. For example, the knowledge management literature included articles that had an IS/IT focus, and articles that had a people-related focus. Further, not all the business management journal articles had a focus on people related issues, with some examining issues such as strategy and marketing.

To get a greater insight into the extent to which the 2008 knowledge management literature examined IS/IT and people-related issues a content analysis of the titles and abstracts of this literature was conducted (see Table III). These data reinforce the finding that there appears to have been a significant reversal of interest in IS/IT and people-related issues between 1998 and 2008 as in the 2008 literature only 8 per cent was focused on IS/IT issues, while 27 per cent was focused on people-related issues[4].

Thus, between 1998 and 2008 there was a significant change in focus within the academic knowledge management literature, with there being both a significant decline in the proportion of papers on IS/IT-related issues, and a simultaneous increase in the proportion of papers on people-related issues.

The academic institutionalisation of knowledge management

The ongoing academic interest in the topic of knowledge management is also visible in two other ways, which suggests that it is becoming institutionalised as a specific and distinctive subject area in its own right. First, there has been the emergence of a number of conferences on the topic, such as the Organizational Learning, Knowledge and Capabilities Conference, the European Conference on Knowledge Management and the International Conference on Intellectual Capital, Knowledge Management and Organizational Learning. All of these conferences have been running annually for at least the last five years. Second, there has also been the emergence of a number of journals specifically concerned with issues of learning and knowledge management such as the *Journal of Knowledge Management* (started in 1997), *Knowledge and Process Management* (started in 1997) and *Knowledge*

Table III Content analysis of the 2008 Proquest literature on knowledge management

	<i>Number of articles with technical IS/IT focus</i>	<i>Number of articles with people-related focus</i>
B&M	7	71
IS/IT/IM/library	20	27
KM	7	21
Total number	34	119
Percentage of all 2008 KM articles	8	27

Management: Research and Practice (started in 2003). Serenko and Bontis (2008) in a review of knowledge management and intellectual capital journals identified at least 20 journals dedicated to these topics. Both of these trends suggest that current levels of academic interest in the topic of knowledge management are likely to continue for at least the medium term.

Interest in knowledge management among global consultancies and professional service firms

Identifying the extent to which interest among consultants and professional service firms in knowledge management has evolved is more difficult to establish than with academic interest. This is primarily because there is no single database that can be utilised to give a universal overview. Thus, gaining accurate, comprehensive data on this topic is difficult. As a consequence, the data presented here are more limited and partial.

In the late 1990s, when initial interest in knowledge management had mushroomed, many of these organisations took a keen interest in the topic, and offered both business services and large-scale IT-based knowledge management systems in this area (Scarborough and Swan, 2001). Anecdotal evidence of this interest is visible in the fact that KPMG had a business division focused on knowledge management, and published two high profile surveys of industry practice in the area (KPMG, 2000, 2003). Further, McKinsey consultants authored an early polemical book on the topic (Kluge *et al.*, 2001).

Since then interest in knowledge management among these organisations appears to have declined significantly. For example, the division of KPMG which carried out the above surveys, and which was responsible for knowledge management services was closed (personal communication, January 2007). Other evidence on the extent of their contemporary interest in knowledge management was gleaned from a content analysis of the web pages of a selection of companies that was conducted in late 2009 (Table IV). The limited number of significant references to knowledge management on these web sites arguably gives a clear indication that it does not represent what they regard as a topic of

Table IV Extent to which knowledge management is referred to on the web pages of large consulting and professional service firms in 2009

	<i>Web site (all accessed on 23/24 September 2009)</i>	<i>References to knowledge management</i>
McKinsey	www.mckinsey.com/	Search with the term "knowledge management" found a number of relevant references, but mostly dated between 2001-2004 KM not one of seven main research topics of McKinsey Global Institute KM does not feature in McKinsey Global Institute publications and multimedia presentations
Boston Consulting Group	www.bcg.com	KM not listed as one of 15 highlighted capabilities A search of their publications found most references to KM dating from 2001 or before Knowledge retention was a key issue, but labelled as talent management, not KM
KPMG	www.kpmg.com	Search with the term "knowledge management" produced zero hits No high profile linkages to KM (or related theme) on main pages
Deloitte & Touche	www.deloitte.com	Knowledge management not one of five "hot topics" in consulting division "Managing human capital" to encourage retention was key theme, but not labeled KM
Ernst & Young	www.ey.com	KM not one of eight priority thematic issues Search with the term "knowledge management" does not produce relevant hits Inter-firm knowledge flows, and managing human capital were highlighted, but not labelled KM
PricewaterhouseCoopers	www.pwc.com	KM not one of eight key "challenges" for today KM not a significant theme in its recent publications

significant contemporary interest. Thus, in stark contrast to the situation among academics, interest in knowledge management by these organisations appears to have declined significantly between 1998 and 2008.

Discussion

Two of the key empirical findings presented in the previous section were that during the period between 1998 and 2008, academic interest in knowledge management remained at a high level, while, in stark contrast, there appeared to be a significant decline of interest in it among global consultancies and professional service firms over the same time period. These findings will be discussed in relation to the focal question addressed in this paper regarding whether knowledge management can be characterised as an ephemeral management fashion.

In relation to the academic world the level of ongoing interest means that academic interest in knowledge management has not followed the pattern of a bell-shaped curve that Abrahamson (1996) suggested is evidence of a management fashion. This evidence therefore challenges the suggestion made by a number of writers (such as Scarbrough and Swan, 2001; Wilson, 2002) that knowledge management would be an ephemeral management fashion with interest in the topic likely to wane quickly. Further, not only did the number of publications on knowledge management remain high, but there was also the emergence of a number of dedicated journals and conferences on the topic. This embryonic institutionalisation of knowledge management as a subject area suggests that interest in the topic is likely to continue for the foreseeable future.

This empirical evidence could thus arguably be interpreted as supporting the argument made by Abrahamson and Fairchild (1999) that some topics that appear to be management fashions, due to a sudden growth of interest in them, can become institutionalised if interest in them remains sustained. Thus, the data presented on sustained academic interest could be taken as evidence that knowledge management has evolved into a legitimate academic discipline in its own right. In this respect, knowledge management could be seen to be comparable to the topic of organisational culture management, which appeared to be a management fashion when interest in it grew in the mid-1980s, but which has evolved into a legitimate topic of ongoing academic interest.

However, a more cautious, or pessimistic interpretation of the empirical data presented, especially when account is also taken of the apparent decline of interest in knowledge management among global consultancies and professional service firms, is that it may be too early to tell whether knowledge management has become a permanent and legitimate subject of academic inquiry. This interpretation can be linked to the insight by Abrahamson and Eisenman (2008) that the upswing and downswings of management fashions are not necessarily symmetrical, and may not always look like the classical bell-shaped curve. Thus, while interest in knowledge management grew rapidly, and remained at a sustained level between 1998 and 2008, it could be that interest in it will decline over the next ten years and that in the long term it may become regarded as a management fashion, although one with a distinctive, and non-typical shape to it. Ultimately, the only way to establish which interpretation of how academic interest in knowledge management will evolve over the medium term will be through repeating the type of analysis conducted here, in ten years time.

In explaining the contrasting decline of interest in knowledge management among global consultancies and professional service firms, links can be made with the other empirical finding outlined in the previous section, that between the late 1990s and 2008 there had been a simultaneous declining level of interest in IS/IT related issues, and increasing emphasis on people-related issues in academic publications on knowledge management. Fundamentally, these trends could arguably all be indicative of the same significant change in the way organisations have been attempting to manage knowledge. As outlined previously, it is beyond the scope of this paper to undertake a comprehensive review of the extent to which business organisations are interested in managing the knowledge of their

workforce. Thus, the analysis developed here is based more on combining the insights of a number of separate studies, reviews and commentaries, than on a comprehensive analysis of knowledge management activities among business organisations.

Fundamentally, these trends may be due to the fact that there has been a significant decline in the type of large-scale, IT-based knowledge management systems that many organisations were implementing (Ruggles, 1998) and that consultants, IT companies, and professional service companies were promoting in the late 1990s.

This was the argument put forward by Schultze (2008), whose conclusions were based, somewhat anecdotally, on conversations with some friends in the business world. In explaining the apparent difference between the sustained academic interest and declining business interest in knowledge management Schultze distinguishes between what she refers to as “knowledge management as a solution”, and “knowledge management as a problem”. The concept of “knowledge management as a solution” represents the idea that the best way to address knowledge management issues is to utilise particular types of organisation-wide IT-based knowledge management systems. By contrast, the concept of “knowledge management as a problem” refers to the day-to-day challenges and problems that organisations and workers face in using, sharing and developing knowledge in the management and completion of work activities. Schultze concluded that in the business world there had been a shift from a “knowledge management as a solution” perspective, to one of “knowledge management as a problem”.

This change in emphasis towards knowledge management among business organisations arguably provides an explanation for both trends considered. Thus, the change in academic interest from IT to people-focused knowledge management issues could simply be a reflection of how business organisations have changed the way they attempt to management knowledge. Further, the decline of interest among global consultants and professional service firms in knowledge management could be explained by the fact that the market for the type of large-scale IT based knowledge management solutions that these organisations were promoting declined significantly after the initial growth of interest in knowledge management in the late 1990s.

This perspective regarding a change in emphasis from IT to people-oriented knowledge management is supported by Nicolini *et al.*'s (2008) analysis of knowledge management in the health sector where they concluded that while many healthcare organisations were very concerned with managing knowledge, there was more interest in the use of social-based rather than IT-based systems, and that many of these initiatives/activities were not even formally labeled “knowledge management”. Hutchinson and Quintas' (2008) study of knowledge management in some UK SMEs reached very similar conclusions, with the “informal” knowledge management activities they identified, such as talking with suppliers, having brainstorming sessions, or going to particular trade shows and events, were typically socially-based rather than IT-based means of managing knowledge processes.

Conclusion

In broad terms one of the key conclusions which flow from the data presented here is that the sustained level of academic interest in knowledge management that occurred between 1998 and 2008 means that interest in the topic has not followed the bell-shaped curve argued to be indicative of a management fashion. Arguably, however, it still remains too early to say definitively whether knowledge management has become institutionalised to such an extent that it has developed into a permanent and sustained domain of academic inquiry. While there is indicative evidence of the nascent institutionalisation of knowledge management, it still may be the case that interest in the topic will decline over the medium term. However, on balance, current evidence suggests that knowledge management is more likely to continue being a topic of inquiry for a significant number of academics, than decline to become another passing topic of interest. Thus, even if Spender's (2008) claim that knowledge management represents an important subject area that has the potential to open up new ways of theorising about organisations represents something of an exaggeration, evidence

suggests that knowledge management is increasingly being recognised as a permanent topic of academic inquiry.

The other key argument developed in the discussion was that there had been a significant decline in the level of interest among global consultancies and professional service firms in knowledge management, and that this could be interpreted as being indicative of a significant change in the way organisations attempt to manage knowledge. However, these arguments are somewhat tentative and the limits of the empirical evidence supporting them require to be acknowledged.

To conclude it is useful to consider some of the implications of the data presented here for academics and practitioners. First, in terms of academics this paper points towards a number of issues worthy of further investigation. Firstly, more research on consultants and professional service firms could be undertaken which would help provide insights into their level of interest in knowledge management, and why their interest in the topic of knowledge management appears to have declined so significantly. Second, large-scale survey research could also be done to provide insights into the general extent to which business organisations are attempting to manage knowledge. Such research could help give insights not only into the extent to which business organisations were interested in knowledge management, but also the particular types of approach that they typically adopt in doing so. Finally, a repetition of this study in ten years time, in 2020 would help answer the question of whether knowledge management had become a fully institutionalised and permanent academic subject area.

In terms of practitioners, one basic implication of the trends reported here is that the general level of support and advice on knowledge management issues available from consultants and professional service firms is likely to be significantly lower now than it was in the late 1990s, when they were most interested in the topic. Second, the anecdotal evidence presented here suggests that for any organisation interested in managing its knowledge processes, that if current practitioner trends are followed, that such initiatives should be less focused on using large-scale IT systems, and instead be more concerned with small scale, informal initiatives which link closely to the day-to-day knowledge activities and problems that people carry out and have to deal with.

Notes

1. The other database used by Scarbrough and Swan was BIDS, which is no longer in existence.
2. In Proquest the journal *Knowledge Management Research and Practice* was listed as a trade journal and not a scholarly journal. However, it was considered as a scholarly journal in the search that was done.
3. Because of the time that Scarbrough and Swan's survey was done, they only had data for the first six months of 1998.
4. A significant proportion of the 2008 literature examined was focussed on strategic issues, examining the organisational performance implications of the use of particular knowledge management or intellectual capital activities.

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