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Knowledge Management is to Solve Practical Problems—Postprint of an Interview with Tian Zhigang, Director of the Knowledge Management Center, from Knowledge Management Forum

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Abstract

The Knowledge Management Center (KMCenter) was established in 2001 as an institution whose primary business encompasses knowledge management research and consulting services, dedicated to advancing the practical implementation of knowledge management.

Its founder, Mr. Tian Zhigang, possesses extensive experience in knowledge management research and practice. He not only directs knowledge management implementation projects, assisting organizations and professionals in addressing knowledge management challenges, but also conducts knowledge management training initiatives and publishes scholarly monographs.

Director Tian has demonstrated considerable interest in the development of the Knowledge Management Forum and graciously accepted our interview invitation.

On a sunny afternoon on the last day of February, Director Tian had just returned to Beijing upon concluding field research in other regions. Despite the rigors of travel, he was in high spirits and engaged in an extensive dialogue with us, sharing his latest research findings.

Full Text

Preamble

Interview: Knowledge Management is for Solving Practical Problems—*Knowledge Management Forum* Exclusive Interview with Tian Zhigang, Director of Knowledge Management Center

Interviewee: Tian Zhigang—Founder and Director of Knowledge Management Center (KMCenter), Chairman of Beijing Zhixingyi Technology Co., Ltd. He has served as Technical Director, Operations General Manager, and Senior Consultant for manufacturing defense enterprises, software companies, and renowned management consulting firms. A pioneer and advocate of knowledge management research and practice in China, he has been hailed by the media as the expert who “best understands Chinese enterprise knowledge management.” His current work focuses on consulting and training in knowledge management, and he is the author of *Your Knowledge Needs Management* and *The Excellence Code: How to Become an Expert*.

Interviewers: Liu Yuanying and Wang Chuanqing, Editorial Department of *Knowledge Management Forum* (KMF)

Transcript: Wang Zheng

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1. Understanding Knowledge Management First from a Personal Dimension

KMF: Hello, Mr. Tian. First, congratulations on the publication of your new book *The Excellence Code: How to Become an Expert*. Many people came to know you through your first book *Your Knowledge Needs Management*, which helps knowledge workers improve themselves from a knowledge management perspective. We also understand that since its publication in 2010, *Your Knowledge Needs Management* has been reprinted more than ten times, demonstrating its influence and value, while also reflecting society’s attention to and demand for knowledge management. From *Your Knowledge Needs Management* to *The Excellence Code: How to Become an Expert*, the titles themselves suggest a journey from “cultivation” to “excellence” for knowledge workers. As the author, how do you view the connection between these two books? What experiences, reflections, and personal journey have you gone through during the nearly ten years between them? Could you introduce the origins of these two books?

Tian Zhigang: Thank you. When writing the first book, my original intention was to demonstrate the value of knowledge management—to prove that it is useful. Compared to library and information science or archival science, knowledge management started relatively late, and many people lacked understanding of it in the early days. When we promoted knowledge management to practitioners in enterprises, they would say: “What you’re saying is all correct, but it has

nothing to do with us.” Enterprises must see actual results. Therefore, I wanted to start from a personal dimension, to help individuals understand that knowledge management is relevant to each of us and can bring value to individuals, and then expand from there.

As for the background of the second book, we discovered that companies often cannot recruit competent people, cannot recruit “masters.” So I wanted to explore how to cultivate masters and identify what is common behind them. With this goal, we found that literature on this topic is relatively scarce. There are some studies on expertise abroad, but they mainly focus on arts and sports—fields with their own characteristics involving special skills. However, there is very little research on how knowledge workers become masters. So we wanted to distill the path for knowledge workers to become masters and analyze their growth patterns.

In summary, the first book stands from the perspective of knowledge, while the second stands from the perspective of people. Now I feel the second perspective is more important. Everyone thinks knowledge management is good, but for it to be effective, it must be combined with actual scenarios and specific needs, and ultimately, it must be combined with people. If you achieve this, it won’t matter even if you don’t call it knowledge management in the future. Conversely, if you can’t achieve this, no one will listen to you promoting knowledge management or talking about it in the abstract.

2. Knowledge Management is a Difficult but Inevitable Path

KMF: You are the founder of KMCenter (China Knowledge Management Center), an authoritative institution in knowledge management research and practice in China, founded in 2001—already 18 years ago. Eighteen years is also the period from birth to adulthood for a person, which synchronizes with the introduction and development of knowledge management in China. Looking back, could you briefly review KMCenter’s development journey? At the same time, as a microcosm, could you introduce your understanding of the overall current state of knowledge management development in China?

Tian Zhigang: Our initial motivation for doing knowledge management was that we found it valuable and interesting, and gradually we made it our specialized focus—turning interest into a career. In the early stages, we organized many activities each year, inviting peers for intellectual exchange and discussion. We believed knowledge management was valuable and in demand, so we had a group of people researching and practicing it. During these dozen-plus years, we have done a lot of enlightenment work and shared many materials and e-books. KMCenter started as a virtual organization; had it been a physical entity at the time, operational difficulties would have been much greater. Later we established a company specializing in knowledge management. Over

these dozen-plus years, we have served hundreds of institutions, accumulated experience and lessons, and explored many methods.

We didn't want to sell software and tools but chose the most difficult path, so this process has been full of hardships. But looking back, we still feel this is a worthwhile endeavor.

Regarding the current state of knowledge management development in China, my overall feeling is that much of it still remains at the stage of promotion and superficiality, with relatively few doing concrete work. So when clients approach us, we objectively tell them: knowledge management is quite difficult.

However, on the other hand, knowledge management is an inevitable stage in our development that we cannot avoid. Forty years of reform and opening up have brought many data showing that our country has reached the level of moderately developed countries in many regions and aspects. What is the difference between developed and developing countries? Developed countries' main industries must be doing complex, innovative work. Why do developing countries face the middle-income trap at a certain stage? One important challenge is the need to transform the economic growth model into innovation-driven growth. China's future must engage in complex, innovative work. In the past, our development had relatively low innovation content, but as China moves from following to gradually entering globally advanced positions in various fields, there are no longer objects to imitate. So at this point, knowledge management becomes an inevitable path. How to improve the efficiency of knowledge work, how to innovate, and how to better motivate knowledge workers are problems that must be solved.

3. From Following to Innovation: Knowledge Management is “Forced by Circumstances” and “Demand-Driven”

KMF: You mentioned that knowledge management is essentially demand-driven, and innovation is as well. If not forced to that point, no individual, company, or organization truly wants to do knowledge management well. Could you elaborate on this?

Tian Zhigang: Knowledge management is essentially demand-driven, and so is innovation. If not forced to that point, no individual, company, or organization truly wants to do knowledge management well.

Let's further explore why knowledge bases don't get used—because people don't need them. User needs must be very clear: the knowledge in the knowledge base must be able to guide my work and save me time and effort. After all, laziness is human nature. For example, when we take taxis, many drivers just follow the navigation—wherever it tells them to go—because this way they don't have to think.

A clear example is knowledge base construction. In the past, various corporate call centers were labor-intensive industries. During scale expansion, they could hire almost unlimitedly. We saw many call centers using seat scale as an important metric. With the sharp rise in labor costs, this is now too expensive, and another reason is that it's hard to recruit people. At this point, artificial intelligence has become a universal need, and AI's effectiveness still depends on knowledge bases.

From this example, we can see that to do knowledge management well in China, it must be when it becomes “imperative.” Those who truly invest effort in knowledge management must be “forced by circumstances.” When companies “can't muddle through anymore,” they will remember and truly invest resources. Companies are becoming smarter now and won't be fooled by terminology and concepts. Only when they are forced to a certain extent will they naturally adopt knowledge management methods.

We have also seen some enterprises that have never used the term “knowledge management,” but in fact, they do it very well—they treat it as a natural process of management optimization. We have a client in the design industry who has always done well. When their business developed rapidly, they found they didn't have enough staff. As projects increased, their limited people couldn't be in two places at once, so they needed to add staff and replicate successful experiences. At this point, they face new problems—many things are difficult to externalize, difficult to copy and share. You need to process, organize, systematize, and structure the ways of doing things—this is the essence of knowledge management, and also the most difficult part. Writing papers is easy, but no enterprise or institution relies on publishing papers to form competitiveness; they must have their own unique things. And these unique things cannot be completely expressed through documents and charts. At this time, we need to look at what's behind them, which brings us back to “people” themselves.

4. The Era of Knowledge Services: Facing “Knowledge Consumption” and Cultivating “Service Consciousness”

KMF: Compared to when *Your Knowledge Needs Management* was published years ago, knowledge management in China has experienced rapid development. Whether it's new technologies like mobile internet and smart devices, or new models like knowledge payment, users' cognitive levels and maturity are continuously improving. We have especially noticed that a huge market has formed in the domestic knowledge management field, with strong demand on one end and diverse, continuously entering “new players” on the other, providing different types and grades of “knowledge services.” How do you view the various knowledge service providers that have emerged in recent years?

Tian Zhigang: Everyone has a different definition of knowledge services. There is currently no commonly accepted definition of “knowledge services.”

Therefore, anyone can claim to be doing knowledge services. For example, teaching children is knowledge services, and running tutoring classes can also be knowledge services. When there is no unified definition and standard, you have no way to say others are wrong.

However, I think the differences between different knowledge service formats are still significant. Internet knowledge services are very different from library, information, and archival knowledge services. Internet knowledge services solve anxiety, are universal, and employ many marketing techniques, while CNKI's knowledge services are oriented toward research and paper writing.

Regarding ordinary users' needs, we have an assumption: ordinary people don't like to study hard; they all hope knowledge can be used immediately, but they also need knowledge to solve problems. Simply put, a person may not love "learning" knowledge, but he will definitely "consume" knowledge. For example, when I buy something, I need to rely on knowledge to analyze whether the seller is reliable or will cheat me—this is "consuming" (applying) knowledge, and this kind of knowledge "consumption" behavior is even more complex.

I agree with the concept of knowledge services. In fact, the essence of knowledge management is to use knowledge and make it circulate. So adding the word "service" to "knowledge" is beneficial. The biggest benefit is that it cultivates service consciousness.

For a long time, both in China and abroad, knowledgeable people have been proud. But the advantage of the West is that it had the Industrial Revolution, which combined knowledge with production and applied knowledge to production. However, China didn't have this, so for a long time, many knowledgeable people were unwilling to serve. This is a big problem. Now the promotion of knowledge services has advanced service consciousness, making knowledge solve problems, which is a good thing.

5. Knowledge Payment Satisfies General Education Needs, but Professional Fields Require In-Depth Research

KMF: This leads to the next important topic: 2016 was called China's "first year of knowledge payment," with many "phenomenal-level" platforms, products, IPs, and influencers emerging. Regarding the knowledge payment business format, especially those knowledge influencers, many people have different views. So, what is your perspective on the "knowledge payment" industry?

Tian Zhigang: I think this wave of knowledge payment is first related to certain deficiencies in Chinese education. The most popular knowledge payment products online are actually common-sense knowledge that should have been accessed during middle school, high school, or university. If you go too deep in knowledge payment products, no one will listen, so you must talk about

popular, general knowledge. The higher the level of your content, the smaller the audience.

And those popular, general knowledge types should have been mastered during middle and high school. But there is a deficiency in this aspect of education in China, where everyone was emphasizing exams at that time. That stage should theoretically be for massive reading, but it didn't happen. There wasn't much reading at the undergraduate level either, because once in university, everyone felt free. It is precisely this deficiency that has created the current demand for knowledge payment products.

The second reason is knowledge anxiety, manifested as “If I don't learn something, I can't survive.” Knowledge payment is now capitalizing on people's anxiety. Faced with knowledge anxiety, people have two reactions: one is to simply stop learning, and the second is to learn whatever they come across—these are both forms of self-comfort.

I think knowledge payment also has a positive role. It compensates for the deficiencies in liberal education and is now making up for common knowledge. However, this is limited to the role of knowledge popularization. For professionals, they still need professional knowledge, and the value of knowledge payment content is limited at this point. This is why many people take many courses but ultimately find no use for them. As a workplace professional, you still need to systematically learn some professional things, some in-depth things.

6. On Systems and Tools: Necessary but Not Sufficient

KMF: We have observed that some domestic knowledge management service providers rely on a system or platform when conducting consulting or training, while KMCenter does not seem to sell its own branded software or platform. How do you understand the relationship between knowledge management and “systems” or “tools”?

Tian Zhigang: We don't develop software ourselves, but we will select and recommend suitable tools based on customer needs. Because user needs vary greatly, we tell customers that if they don't have sufficient funds, open-source options can also work. We hope to truly act according to needs. If we developed software, we could only sell our own products.

Frankly, the functionality and user experience of domestic knowledge management software systems still need improvement. Compared to the development of Chinese internet tools, there is a huge gap between enterprise knowledge management software and these tools. I often communicate with software developers, pointing out that storing knowledge is not the key problem for current knowledge management software. Basic functions like classification, tagging, and information organization can all be implemented. The current key problem is “how to promote the application of knowledge.”

In work scenarios, when employees are working, what they need most is a little bit of knowledge that precisely meets their immediate needs. Enterprise knowledge management is not about managing knowledge; it's not about building a “CNKI” inside the enterprise. Why does CNKI thrive? Because it sells to “people with rigid needs”: you can't write papers or do research without reading references. But enterprise employees work completely differently. In enterprises, solving problems is the main thing. At this time, if you provide them with 20 references, they won't read them. What they need most is personalized, targeted content. Employees need actionable, executable content, but we find that many knowledge base software still provides traditional long documents.

Systems and tools are a means. Sometimes, you don't notice when you have them, but you can't do without them. It's like getting an extra 500 yuan in salary this month—you won't notice, but if 500 yuan is deducted, you'll ask why. Systems and tools also serve another function: they sometimes bear the “blame”—when knowledge management software is not in use, if people want to complain, they don't know what to complain about; with the software, they have something to complain about.

We once consulted for a client who said—could you not mention knowledge management this time? As soon as you mention knowledge management...

In short, I think knowledge management systems and tools are needed, but they must follow a certain sequence. The premise is that you must know your needs and what problems need to be solved. Only then can systems and tools function effectively.

7. Different Types of Work Have Different Knowledge

KMF: There is an impressive paragraph in your book where you mention systematically researching domestic recruitment needs for knowledge management positions. So, based on your understanding, what are the current demands for dedicated knowledge management positions and talent in domestic organizations? We have also found that many units may not directly use “knowledge management” as the job or department title for knowledge workers. So from KMCenter's consulting experience, which departments have greater knowledge management needs (or higher levels of knowledge-based work)?

Tian Zhigang: Which fields have greater demand for knowledge management? It must be knowledge-intensive fields, such as R&D and design. We have discovered a problem in the process of implementing knowledge management in China: most people doing knowledge management are young.

In foreign countries, you find many “veteran employees” doing knowledge management. For example, an employee who has been in sales for decades now starts doing knowledge management. But in China, many newly hired young people may have professional academic backgrounds in knowledge management,

but they don't understand the culture, accumulation, characteristics, or work methods of their enterprises. Such people cannot do knowledge management well. We see that many enterprises don't understand this close relationship between knowledge management and business.

Currently, knowledge management functions are placed in all kinds of departments: human resources, IT, administration, etc. The most mature area now is knowledge management for operations and customer service, because call centers cannot operate without knowledge management—they can't function without a knowledge base. We divide work into three categories: the first is repetitive work, where knowledge management most easily produces results; the second is project-based work; the third is innovative work. All enterprises include these three types of work, which is also the difficulty of enterprise knowledge management. In fact, the methods of knowledge management within an enterprise are completely different.

8. Realizing the Ideal of Promoting Knowledge Management Implementation

KMF: On KMCenter's website homepage, the phrase "Promoting Knowledge Management Implementation" is very prominent. Compared to promotion, publicity, and sales, "implementation" is the most difficult and most critical aspect for knowledge management. So, how do you think KMCenter practices this phrase "promoting knowledge management implementation" compared to other knowledge management service providers?

Tian Zhigang: First, we are not purely profit-driven. Of course we need to make money, but we don't want to deceive or mislead people through this. When is deception most likely to occur? When there is information asymmetry between both parties. We have a creed: making money by exploiting information and knowledge asymmetry is wrong.

So we have chosen a relatively difficult path. We have many users, and I think it's not us helping them, but them helping us. We learn from them about Chinese users' needs, what they have, and what they think. Through them, we learn. Therefore, I think we better understand what kind of knowledge management Chinese enterprises need.

Perhaps this is also our "shortcoming"—we are more idealistic. We truly want to do knowledge management well and truly create value. But many of our users are just trying to cope, introducing knowledge management for show or to receive praise. But this is not what we want. What we want is for clients to truly solve problems through knowledge management.

So we will select clients. We judge whether users really want to do it, to the point where some users complain—why are you so unenthusiastic? We believe

that if you don't promote knowledge management as a truly strategic matter, accumulating more documents is useless.

9. Making the Knowledge Management Career: Becoming Knowledge Workers with Intrinsic Motivation

KMF: Finally, we noticed that “knowledge worker” is a concept that appears frequently in your books. You yourself are also a representative “knowledge worker.” From your public account, we see you continue to write and update consistently. How do you maintain such vigorous work status and continuous output? What suggestions do you have for more knowledge workers and researchers?

Tian Zhigang: There was once an article discussing when the gap between people begins to widen. We see some people who are very smart, have excellent grades, and attended prestigious schools, but after graduation, they haven't achieved much. Because they never truly liked learning or had an exploratory spirit. They studied for grades before, with someone forcing them. When no one forces you, you easily give up.

As an independent, self-motivated individual, the higher you go, the fewer people there are to tell you what to do, and the lonelier it gets at the top—you have to figure things out yourself. But most of us don't have enough internal drive, so we give up. We also say “revolutionaries are forever young” precisely because they have a cause in their hearts and can never stay idle, so even if their appearance ages, their hearts don't.

Finally, for knowledge management research, my suggestion is to focus on small, real problems. Different academic fields are all researching knowledge management—such as library and information science, human resource management, strategic management, enterprise management, information technology, etc.—but with different emphases. We also see some research with big titles, but upon reading, it's all from literature to literature, not responding to actual needs. I suggest selecting a small point for focused research. (End)

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Note: Figure translations are in progress. See original paper for figures.

Source: ChinaXiv — Machine translation. Verify with original.