

KM4Dev Futures – and what it suggests for KM in Development futures

Pete Cranston and Jaap Pels

In 2013 and 2014 the KM4Dev network researched and reviewed how the network operates and how it might evolve, using funds from IFAD. As is explained on the KM4dev wiki¹, there were several work streams that were brought together in a Synthesis project. Following the final report, the authors were involved in a daylong reflection on the report and other work streams, reported in a Google document² and summarised in a blog³. The conclusion in the blog is that KM4Dev is an emergent network, that survives and thrives because of its diversity and open-ness. This case-study summarises the process and conversations that took place during the reflection and identifies what those conversations and the various reports from the IFAD-funded project suggest about the future of KM in Development. In particular, the mix of processes and conversations within the network, some centrally inspired – and, to an extent, centrally controlled – and others started by individuals deliberately or as part of the normal enquiry and discussion process within KM4Dev, enabled one strand of opinion to emerge as acceptable to the network at large. The authors consider this an example of how networks can survive and thrive by being open and enabling rather than contained and directive. In a world where successful ‘networked organisations’ are held up as models of how groups and institutions can evolve to respond to complexity, globalisation and the ever-increasing pace of change, the authors believe the KM4Dev Futures story illustrates how this can work out in practice.

Keywords: knowledge management, KM4Dev, learning, knowledge networks, knowledge sharing, IFAD, *Knowledge Management for Development Journal*

Introduction

The core of any living network is made up of relationships between individuals. Those relationships may be spelt out in enormous detail, along with a series of governance structures and operational procedures. At the opposite end of a spectrum of formality, there may be nothing more than a series of unwritten assumptions and historical precedents framing the way the network operates. As in all relationships, those inside networks spend much time thinking about its health and trajectory. Reflecting in this way within personal relationships between two or more individuals is generally welcomed, an indicator of relationship health.

¹ http://wiki.km4dev.org/Envisioning_KM4Dev_Futures_-_2013_-_2014

² <http://bit.ly/1DaxMUz>

³ <http://www.euforicsservices.com/2014/06/multiple-km4dev.html>

However, inside the relationship this reflection is often accompanied by, uncertainty, anxiety, even pain – unsurprising when any genuine reflection about the state of a relationship must involve at least thinking about change. Also, reflection of this kind usually brings up issues relating to power within the relationship, for example whether it is equally or evenly distributed, how it is exercised and whether the existing disposition of power is productive or constrains growth and development. Navigating emotional reactions and power issues is also typical of network reflection processes.

Networks have life cycles. Relationships of all kinds, whether personal or within a network are impacted by the passage of time. In personal relationships individuals change as they age, which affects how they relate to each other. In the same way, networks change over time, whether because their members age and change and in so doing influence the network or because the context in which the network operates alters⁴. Members becoming aware of how their network is changing, or identifying changes in the context in which it operates, often triggers a questioning and reflective process amongst the members of that network.

Almost since its inception, KM4Dev has been marked by constant – and the authors believe healthy – public, reflective, discussions among members about how the network operates, how it could be improved and how it can or must adapt to new circumstances. From 2012 to 2014, KM4Dev embarked on its largest and most fundamental internal reflection process, funded by a two-year grant by IFAD. The authors believe that the process itself, as well as its outputs and outcomes provide useful material for thinking about the future of KM in Development. In this paper we

- describe as briefly as possible the nature and evolution of KM4Dev, drawing on already published material
- describe the internal review processes known as the *KM4Dev Futures* project and summarise the main findings of the final synthesis report
- describe how a small group of members used the model to reflect on KM4Dev, and KM more generally
- offer some reflections on what light this process throws on the question of how KM in Development might evolve.

At the core of the synthesis report is a model that can be used to think about different ways in which KM4Dev might develop.

KM4Dev

The KM4Dev network began as a community of practice⁵ and over time has grown into a network with many sub communities of interest. As a group of people, the network organises or is active in a range of face-to-face meetings. Until recently there was an annual face-to-face

⁴ See for example Creech and Ramji, 2004 and work done by CARE on KM and life-cycles <http://p-shift.care2share.wikispaces.net/Knowledge+Sharing+Strategy>;

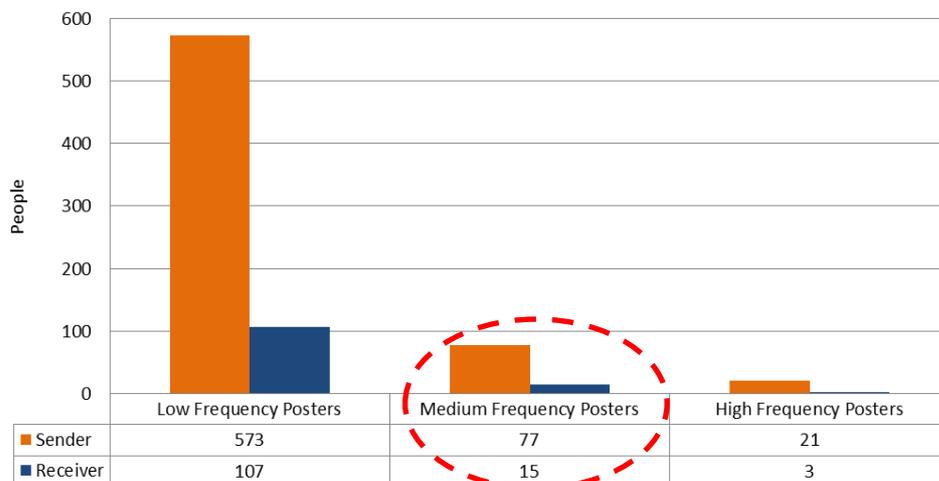
⁵ There are various sources that give a historic overview for the history, including the first KM4Dev journal. http://wiki.km4dev.org/Main_Page

event, the last of which was in 2013. Many members work together in overlapping projects and organisations. KM4Dev began with two workshops in 2000, which led to a mailing group that is still the primary channel of communication for the global membership of around 1500. It is supported by a wide range of digital tools, including a Ning site (4750 members), and a wiki as well as content featured on interlinked other sites such as Flickr, Google documents, YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.

KM4Dev governance

KM4Dev is towards the informal end of the continuum referred to in the Introduction. Since 2010 there have been no paid staff supporting the network. There is a Core Group that is responsible for Governance. Its' Terms of Reference are publicly available on the KM4Dev wiki. KM4Dev members volunteer to join, the Core Group and their membership is determined by the Core Group. There is no limit to how long a member can sit on the Core Group, although in practice most members tend to stay between two to four years, although there are some very long-standing members of the Core Group.

A Social Network Analysis (SNA) was carried out in 2012 as part of the *KM4Dev futures* project. It revealed a typical network pattern. A subset of KM4Dev members is very active, and that activity is one of the elements in the glue that holds the network together. They form a *guiding coalition*. “The active or key participant group comprises 113 individuals and deeper analysis shows they are active over almost all the years in the dataset”⁶.



Case study: KM4Dev Futures Project

This project is described in detail on the KM4Dev wiki. For this case-study, we present a short summary and the key findings of a report that synthesised work done as part of the IFAD funded project and, through further analysis and interactions with the KM4Dev network drew out a series of themes for further reflection and analysis by KM4Dev in considering its future direction.

⁶ From blog three by the SNA consultant, Graham Durant-Law, 2012

IFAD funded activities: 2012 – 2014

In May 2011 the KM4Dev Core Group submitted a grant proposal to IFAD, the International Fund for Agricultural Development. It was in part a move to garner funds that could help deepen and sustain KM4Dev as a network. There had been grants in the past from ICCO and SDC, for example. It was also, in part, a response to the KM4Dev internal reflection processes alluded to above and had been discussed at length both within the core group and more widely in the network during a two-year long gestation period for the fund application. The context was explained in the final application:

Healthy networks and communities are dynamic. KM4Dev as a community is at a transition point after 10 years of existence, having experienced significant growth which challenges it to evolve to emerging conditions. Traditional structures and funding models should and are being questioned. Community practices and ways of capturing and more widely sharing knowledge are required. While some past practices (particularly the on-going online conversations) are still strong and central, vigorous communities need innovation. Communities also need to extend connections beyond their core and KM4Dev is particularly keen to deepen the engagement of and exchange between members based in and from the ‘South’ and anywhere peer to peer connections deepen and improve practice. There is no assumption that any one set of interactions is ‘the only way to go.’

The focus of the grant was for IFAD and KM4Dev to explore together how networks operate and how they can contribute to Development goals. To quote again from the final application:

IFAD has invested heavily in networks but continues to have questions about how they operate, evolve and what are practical methods for supporting healthy networks. While each network is unique, there is value in reflecting and learning from each others' network experiences. KM4Dev is offering its own self reflection as a practice field for all network practitioners. In simple terms, this is a chance for IFAD to deepen its own network reflection practice through KM4Dev's.

KM4Dev committed to do three things and to do them "in public to broaden the field of understanding around the health of productive community networks":

1. Experiment on to both deepen and broaden KM4Dev knowledge sharing and capacity building,
2. Find ways to expand who KM4Dev connects to and learns with, "with attention to those who have been less engaged due to geographic, power or access reasons",
3. Identify and explore different ways in which the community can do that in a sustainable way that fosters the development of leadership and continues to provide concrete benefits to individuals and organisations.

There were two specific goals:

1. To provoke and promote KM4Dev community reflection, introspection and visioning.

2. To actively nurture knowledge sharing practices and the recording of shared learning, as a way to engage members, their organizations and any other interested parties in the process of learning how to facilitate effective networks.

Three projects had run their course by 2013. Each one looked at KM4Dev from a different perspective:

1. SNA: a Social Network Analysis of the network (and of its? counterparts in French and Spanish, SA-GE and SIWA),
2. CTLab: a technology stewardship-focused initiative,
3. L&M: a set of 'Learning & Monitoring' activities to review operations and processes within the network as well as the activities and results of the IFAD-funded KM4Dev activities.

A summary and synthesis report was developed as part of the KM4Dev Futures project and the source documents and reports are also stored on the KM4Dev wiki⁷.

Synthesis and community reflection

John Smith was engaged in 2013 to produce a report synthesizing previous work. Smith was then engaged to support a community reflection process, involving the collection of objective data about KM4Dev and an analysis of insights and recommendations to KM4Dev as to how it could further develop. In conjunction with the Core Group, this process of community reflection included:

- Developing with members a better understanding of, ‘adjoining communities’ frequented by KM4Dev members’.
- A discussion on ‘Pathways to involvement and leadership’.
- Mini-grants leading to organised, “focused conversations” in the email discussion group in 2014 including: 1) Landscapes of practice and systems convening” which included a discussion on the question, ‘what does the term “landscape of practices” evoke for you in your own KM4Dev work?’; 2) Community Advocacy for sustainable development; and 3) The Case of SIWA: a failed Spanish KM4Dev community.
- Interviews with current members which were shared and considered in the email discussion forum.

Smith was asked to produce a report on common findings from the above studies on activities or aspects of KM4Dev that are seen to be going well; those which make it stand-out as a ground-breaking and influential network; and those that need improvement. The final report⁸ was completed in February 2014 and described a situation in 2014 similar to the one depicted in the 2011 IFAD grant application. In the following section we draw heavily on Smith’s final report to outline the central analytical section and final observations.

⁷ http://wiki.km4dev.org/IFAD_synthesis_project:_Base_Documents

⁸ Smith found: “Ongoing debates within KM4Dev - familiar from previous reports – that concern questions of worldviews, activities, growth membership, and organization.... various understandings of how KM4Dev functioned at that time... diverse observations, needs, hopes, and visions that shape that understanding”.

Scenario construction as a heuristic

‘In order to develop narratives that coherently organize and fairly represent the variety of understandings and perceptions about KM4Dev’ the report adopted ‘a systemic scenario framework’. The report identified, “cross-cutting themes ... to understand and describe KM4Dev in its current state -- to describe KM4Dev as a system with a particular set of internal logics, or a particular “identity / ies”. Importantly, “the characterization of a system’s identity includes its implied worldviews, social structures, and prevailing technologies”. The selection of cross-cutting themes was intended to help, “situate the current understanding of KM4Dev within a framework of alternative identities or pathways”. Two themes were chosen as the most significant for KM4Dev:

1. **Knowledge orientation:** views and beliefs about knowledge production and management as a domain. Relevant questions include:
 - What counts as knowledge? How it is produced? What is the role of expertise in knowledge production? How inclusive and interactive is the management of KM4Dev interactions and activities? How do participants in KM4Dev develop their competencies?
 - As a result, we would ask: How might knowledge management and knowledge sharing be most effective in the development sector?
2. **Organizational structure:** views and beliefs about KM4Dev structure and organization as a community or network:
 - Relevant questions include: Who participates and how? What does membership and participation mean? How is governance conceived? Is there an explicit mission statement? Are there focus areas of operation?
 - As a result, we would ask: How might people most effectively organize themselves to advance knowledge management and knowledge sharing in the development sector?

The two themes were used to create a matrix with four quadrants (see Figure 1).

Future Identities: Orientations and Structure matrix

Each quadrant, “represents a potential identity or scenario for KM4Dev”. In relation to the first theme, Smith suggested KM4Dev participants, “as currently and primarily valuing an “interaction” orientation to knowledge production, rather than an “expertise” orientation”. In relation to the second theme, KM4Dev was seen as, “currently and primarily exemplifying a ‘loose’ organizational structure, rather than a “more formal” one. This located KM4Dev in the lower left-hand quadrant of the matrix in Figure 1. Smith emphasized that he didn’t see these as, “absolute positions along these two dimensions”. In fact, a good deal of the creativity and appeal that KM4Dev has for its several constituents is that there is some day-to-day tension and negotiation between the extremes.

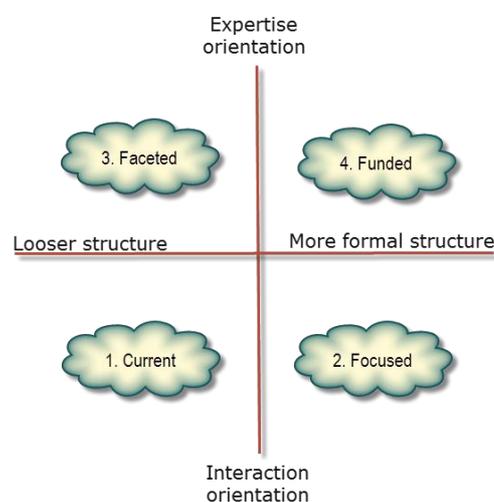
Processing the scenarios

Throughout 2012-2014, conversations shaped within KM4Dev about possible futures. These happened as part of the focused conversations and ‘provocations’ organised by Smith and the

Core Group. An important conversation took place in the comments to a blog by Nancy White, one of the key network nodes identified in the SNA described above⁹.

A group of KM4Dev members met to reflect on the implications of John's report as well as all the other material from KM4Dev that informed his thinking. The small group included both new members and others who had been in KM4Dev for all of its life. Three of the group were or had been core-group members and one had completed an earlier study of KM4Dev. The group, which included the two authors, met in the Hague and recorded in a Google document the process and outputs - including rich pictures - from that March 2014 meeting.

Figure 1. These scenarios imply a worldview. Orientation describes how knowledge is created and managed. Structure describes how people are organized to learn and manage what they know.



Multiple KM4Dev

As the conversations progressed, there was a coming together, a convergence of thinking about the future of KM4Dev. That was based partly on the fact that in fact, like most networks, there are multiple expressions of KM4Dev, happening simultaneously. That means questions about KM4Dev based on one-dimensional oppositions generate more heat than light. For example, there was a strong thread in the conversations about *KM4Dev futures* that argued KM4Dev should become more formal, with codified governance structures and strategic planning processes. The alternate view was that the strength of KM4Dev lies in its' informality and emergent nature, which has enabled it, for example, to adapt to the reduction in resources since the activity levels grow and subside according to available funds. From this perspective, the low-key governance structures and processes means that KM4Dev continues to exist as an entity, with minimal input. The heartbeat of the network, the questions and responses in the online discussion spaces, needs very little structure. The outcome of those debates is explained further below

The notion of multiple knowledges was at the very center of the much missed IKMemergent project. It helps in understanding that KM4Dev operates already in more than one quadrant.

⁹ <http://www.fullcirc.com/2014/03/05/network-and-community-governance-part-1/>

Jaap Pels did the mapping below that illustrates it well, with a page on the wiki to gather ideas.

| | |
|--|---|
| <p>Faceted</p> <hr/> <p>Loose structure Expertise oriented <i>'KM4Dev inside'</i> KSTools dGroups KM Journal CTA work??</p> | <p>Funded</p> <hr/> <p>Formal structure Expertise oriented <i>'KM4Dev.INC'</i></p> |
| <p>Current</p> <hr/> <p>Loose structure Interaction oriented <i>F2F meetings KM4Dev</i> <i>Back2Back share fair</i></p> | <p>Focused</p> <hr/> <p>Formal structure Interaction oriented <i>'KM4Dev branded'</i> IFAD assignment Self-funding</p> |

Multiple KM4Dev means that the Open Space principle operates within the network: people cluster around ideas, usually suggested or led by one or two people; those people stay in the network, report back, engage with the KM4Dev Core Group as necessary, develop short-term (like face to face meetings) or longer projects (like the KM4Dev journal).

Crucially, KM4Dev as a network flexes to accommodate those ideas and projects. If there is energy and some leadership then activity happens, and when it is over, it is over, to borrow from the Open Space principles. This potted history of the Km4Dev journal, lifted from the meeting documentation, illustrates the point.

Case Study: Knowledge Management for Development Journal

A group of individual members started the journal because they wanted to. They consulted within the network, and the core group, and have been running it since 2005 as volunteers. In 2009 funds became available from the IKM Emergent project to support its becoming a print journal, published by Taylor and Francis (T&F). The decision to move to a printed, published journal, caused controversy within KM4Dev. Some people opposed the move on the grounds that the journal ceased being an Open Access publication, although 200 free print copies were available. Some of the founder members decided to move the journal to T&F, from where it was published between 2009-2012. When the funds ceased the journal moved back to an Open Access model, from 2013 onwards.

The significance of this example is that, firstly, the journal represents a focus on capturing, 'reifying' knowledge into collections of articles. The move to T&F was in order to benefit from the more formal status of an academic journal and some argue that the content became more 'academically rigorous'. In this sense the journal as a whole, and the move to T&F,

represent a position where expertise, formally captured, is seen as at least as important as the interactions at the core of KM4Dev.

The second significant lesson from the history is that it illustrates the benefits - and risks - of a loose structure. A group of individuals started the journal, from within the community. A group of people made a move that other people opposed, yet the material being published largely came from within KM4Dev, which continued to support and promote the journal. It is now back in Open Access format because the same, dedicated, group of individuals decided to put the time to re-establishing the journal in the Open Journal platform. Km4Dev enabled, supported, and flexed to accommodate the trajectory of the journal. It is interesting to speculate what would have happened if there had been a more formal structure to which such a set of decisions would be taken. Would a more formal structure have been more rigid, and in consequence taken decisions that resulted in a split - as is so often the case in organisations that are less supple than the loosely organised KM4Dev?

Conclusions

Formal vs Informal - a view of the IFAD funded project

The Hague meeting sketched out a case study of the IFAD project, to illustrate how KM4Dev operates in the ‘Focused Quadrant, where more formal structures develop but the predominant value is an “interaction” orientation to knowledge production, rather than an “expertise” orientation.’ Formality, in the sense of more detailed and bureaucratic structures for governance and management, is the dimension that worried the participants in the Hague meeting - concern that was reflected in the various conversations that took place online in the KM4Dev network. The IFAD project illustrates both the strengths and weaknesses of the current informal structure. On the plus side, a lot was achieved in terms of research, useful reports, conversations - both “directed” and emergent - in the network and the richness of the work that John Smith led, co-created from and with KM4Dev members. However, there is a strong case that the absence of any dedicated, paid, coordination made the project inefficient, in the sense that time was wasted in getting things started and delivered, and opportunities to learn with the network weren’t taken as fully as they might have been. The only coordination came from the already over-burdened volunteer KM4Dev Core Group, which has next to no formal structure or processes. That exacerbated the inefficiency, yet the project delivered, people volunteered and all we know about learning tells us that a lot of people will have been enriched by the exchanges, the materials and their spin offs.

KM in Development

KM4Dev is an influential network, public and open, with a constantly evolving membership base. So how it operates and develops is to some extent a reflection of KM in Development more generally. As of February 2016, conversations continue in the online discussion spaces – mainly the email list, but also on the Ning site; the sites are moderated by a revolving group of volunteers; plans are being developed for the first face-to-face meeting since 2013 (Vienna October 2016); and the core group continues to operate behind the scenes.

KM4Dev emergent

One of the driving forces for the IFAD project was a fear about KM4Dev surviving in the absence of funding. And, as explained above, there were those who argued that KM4Dev should become more of a formal entity, to be able to attract more funding and become more influential, to be able to advocate for KM in Development. Discussions continued over most of the project, with a particularly rich set of exchanges on Nancy White's blog. But the impression from all the exchanges is that probably a majority (of those who contributed):

- Did **not** support KM4Dev moving to a formal, governed structure, with a constitution and the formation of a legal entity. Indeed there is support for the opposite, staying as organic, emergent, informal and open as it is.
- Believed that funded activity can deliver enormous benefits and that funds will be useful for:
 - A paid coordinator;
 - Support for KM4Dev face to face meetings, including scholarships for people to attend, especially from the global South.
- Probably the most inspiring development was the number of people volunteering to contribute financially to KM4Dev, via a membership scheme of some kind. It will be interesting to see what emerges, how much money is actually generated.

KM4Dev has not done a review or evaluation of the IFAD project, which would be a useful activity. While John Smith's reports are a rich resource of information and analysis on KM4Dev his final report is deliberately not a set of recommendations or a plan. There is an interesting outstanding question as to whether the outcome of the whole *KM4Dev futures* process is that one, single community-driven strategy plan cannot be and shouldn't be a target. That the logic of the report, driven by the network in discussions and in response to surveys, is instead of multiple future states co-existing within a healthy KM4Dev network - a model of a complex adaptive system.

KM(4Dev) futures

The *KM4Dev futures* project illustrates that networked organisations are stronger, resilient if they allow multiple conversations, are open, accept diversity and tolerate inefficiency and duplication. And as illustrated by Charles Dhewa's article on his journey with KM4Dev¹⁰, such open-ness presents enormous opportunities for those outside large institutions. The emergent nature of the network – the conversations, the meetings, the products like the journal – suggests that KM professionals (and the field, perhaps) when left to their own devices, with no or little organisational structure or boundaries, operate openly and publicly, think out loud, embrace diversity, generate ad-hoc alliances and networks. For sure here are lessons for KM and KM professionals about how Knowledge Flows can be eased or maximised.

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About the authors

Pete Cranston is co-director of Euforic Services and was a Euforic Associate from 2007. Pete is an ICT, Communication and New Media specialist, with long experience as a facilitator and trainer. His early career was in international and UK education, working with adults and 16 - 19 year olds. For the past 20 years he has worked in the 3rd sector, mainly in International Development, for a wide range of international and UK organisations, from the very large to the tiny. A seasoned manager of organisational IS&T and ICT development programmes, he has worked since 2001 as an independent consultant supporting strategic planning, knowledge management, organisational communication, research and evaluation. Along with regular short-term facilitation assignments, larger assignments include strategy development with telecentre.org and local content exchange programmes; research into global social media trends, with special reference to health communications; and the impact of convergent mobile technologies in rural development. Since 2007 a significant proportion of his work has been taken up advising and training in web 2.0 technologies and interactive media, at both strategic and practical application levels, including in the field of eDiplomacy. Coming full circle, Pete's main current focus is on KM within large organisations and their portfolios of projects. Email: pete.cranston@btinternet.com

Jaap Pels studied Molecular Sciences - Genetics, Organic Chemistry and Fundamental Physics - early 1980-ties in Wageningen. He started in the 1990-ties as KM practitioner mimicking the World Bank Knowledge bank initiative for the Dutch consumer association. Over there he was corporate information manager of the 600.000 membership organisation. In 2001 he changed jobs / scene to the WASH development sector to initiate and support global KM in all facets ranging from tailored facilitation (up to 50 people), capacity development to hard core IT and social media use and from apprenticeship programs and strategy development trajectories to learning alliances. Also he has worked as department manager of information- (on finances and KM), goods- and people streams in the secondary process. He worked world-wide across very small and very large organisations (AMREF, ONEP, WorldVision, Loughborough University, WEDC, DfID, BMGF, OXFAM Novib, CTA, Hivos, WorldBank), networks and individuals to improve their impact mostly through training and workshops but also by corporate and management coaching and advice on location. Jaap publishes on KM / KS, is a social media power user and KM4Dev Ning administrator and core group member actively engaging on the KM4Dev mailing list. Jaap owns his own KM-business 'Kennisklussen | KnowledgeWorks'. Email: jaap.pels@gmail.com