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Karl Wiig
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During a career spanning 35 years – and counting – Karl Wiig was working with the concepts embodied by knowledge management since before the term was even coined. Simon Lelic talks to him about his career so far, and about his expectations as to how the KM industry as a whole will develop from here.
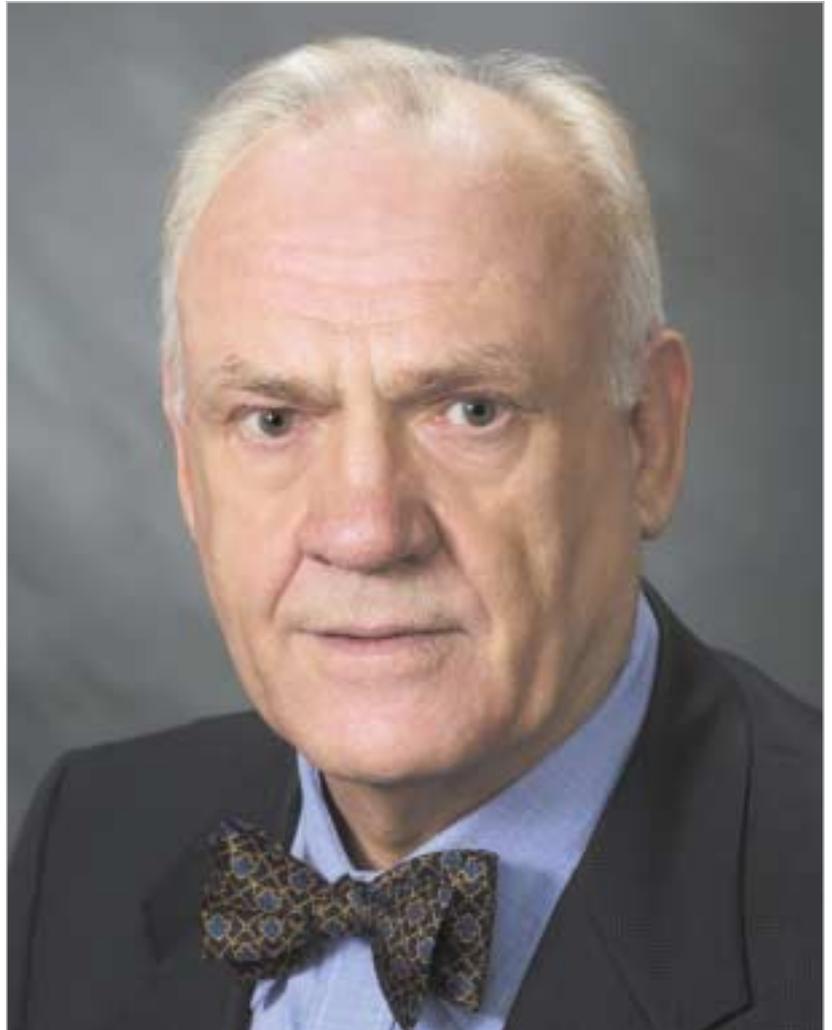
Karl Wiig

Officially, Karl Wiig is retired. But, as Wiig himself says, sometimes this just doesn't work. After a 35-year career as a technical and management consultant, he therefore continues to sit as chairman and chief executive of the Knowledge Research Institute, working with clients in the implementation of knowledge management-based approaches to improving internal operations and organisational decision making.

Wiig's distinguished career has taken him all over the world. He has worked in Europe, the Middle East, Asia, Africa, Latin America, Australia and, of course, North America, where he continues to be based. Having worked with companies in fields ranging from the financial sector, through manufacturing and process-oriented industries, to governmental and service-based sectors, Wiig has accumulated an array of experience that has helped establish him in his current position as one of the foremost practitioners in the knowledge management community.

After starting and leading the Policy and Systems Analysis group for Arthur D. Little in the 1970s, Wiig created the Applied Artificial Intelligence Center. Since then, his work has ranged from improving organisational structures, establishing enterprise planning capabilities, modelling and structuring work processes and collaborative teams, analysing the knowledge requirements needed to perform quality work, and implementing knowledge-based systems of various forms. Indeed, it was his activity in the area of artificial intelligence that led to his involvement in the field that would eventually become known as knowledge management.

"I started out building AI-based expert systems with my group of 35 people back in 1980," he says. "We built over 100 systems but found that most were not used after a year. In 1984, we started to look at what was amiss, and began to look into the role of knowledge in business." This trajectory led to the introduction of the concept of 'knowledge management' at an ILO conference in Zurich in 1986, and by then Wiig's team had begun to explore factors relating to cognitive science alongside technology-based solutions. By 1989, the focus of Wiig's research had shifted away from technology and towards a more

people-centric approach. With typical modesty, Wiig adds: "But as I am a slow learner, this transition has taken time."

Wiig has nevertheless written three books dedicated to knowledge management since then, a trilogy published in the space of three years, between 1993 and 1995[1]. The most satisfying aspect of his career, however, has, in his words, been working with proactive clients who have been able to make great business strides by discovering how to exploit KM for strategic purposes. "Some of these clients have taught me much more than I have taught them," he says, before conceding that he still struggles to see where the field as a whole is heading. Again with characteristic self-effacement, Wiig says: "I look forward to continuing to stumble forward working with clients, and also trying to make sense of where new-generation KM is headed."

Considering the fragmented evolution of the discipline thus far, however, Wiig is perhaps wise to be wary of making concrete predictions as to what direction it will take in the future. As he says, the practice of knowledge management has so far developed along different, disconnected paths. "One direction is the IT-dominant approach to KM," he says. "Second, the organisational learning approach and, third, the intellectual capital approach. Beyond these, we start to see the emergence of a more comprehensive approach that integrates the separate KM approaches into proactive business practices, with less emphasis on 'doing KM' and more on exploiting KM for specific business reasons."

> "One of the biggest challenges thrown down by the discipline in recent years stems from the growing recognition that knowledge management is infinitely more complex than most practitioners like to acknowledge."

As an aside, Wiig believes the first of these – the IT-dominant perspective – has, while still being important, proved to be the least successful. Wiig attributes the strength of its following to its 'tangibleness', which makes the discipline easier to grasp and manage. This approach has also benefited from having a well-established constituency in the IT community at large, which continues to promote and foster the centrality of information and communications technology to knowledge management as a whole.

Nevertheless, Wiig maintains that the dominant issues associated with KM have changed considerably since the discipline's inception. "The issue is no longer a question of the importance of implementing KM – everybody seems to understand that knowledge has always been managed, it is only a question of how well and how explicit and systematic its management should be," he says. "Instead, the issue in advanced enterprises has become, how can the enterprise exploit the value and capabilities of knowledge to become stronger and better?"

Unfortunately, this is a far from simple equation. One of the biggest challenges thrown down by the discipline in recent years stems from the growing recognition that KM, as Wiig says, is infinitely more complex than most practitioners like to acknowledge. "There is a particular need for practising KM leaders (which means CKOs and their KM staff) to have a deeper understanding of how humans – and organisations – create and use knowledge," he says. Which, he hastens to add, is not to say that everyone has to become a specialist in learning theory, epistemology or cognitive science. "It does mean, though, that practice leaders must appreciate the complexity of well-executed KM that truly advances the competitiveness of their organisation."

Hand in hand with this is the concept of what Wiig calls 'knowledge diagnostics', which he believes remains among the least understood aspects of knowledge management. "In most of the situations I encounter, there is precious little understanding of how to think about problems and opportunities from a knowledge perspective," he says. While most people tend to focus on the observable and tangible, such as information, workflow, systems and procedures, Wiig maintains that very few recognise how central a role knowledge assets – or the lack thereof – play in people's capabilities to deliver quality work, or in the enterprise's ability to pursue and achieve strategic goals.

According to Wiig, competent knowledge diagnostics rely on an integrated understanding of three factors: of how competent intellectual work contributes to business performance; of the mechanisms of how intellectual work is conducted; and of how the myriad KM solution alternatives that are available can help conduct effective and systematic knowledge management. "We will need KM diagnosticians in almost every organisation to possess mental libraries of the hundreds of symptoms, mechanisms and solutions," he says. "Frequently, we find now that the people who decide what to do understand only very limited options. Some may even advocate a single solution to everything."

Wiig therefore expects great changes in the KM industry. It is his contention that the so-called 'knowledge society' is only just beginning. He predicts the emergence of a number of new vendors, both large and small, most of which will not offer technology, but will rely on ICT in the services they provide. Wiig also expects a growing emphasis on the importance of content, or IC assets, of all kinds and for all areas of business and life. In addition, he recognises how much work needs to be done both in deciding what knowledge management is exactly, and in linking knowledge-based working practices with the way business is currently conducted.

Having come so far and, in his eyes, with so much still to accomplish, it is perhaps not surprising that Wiig has found it difficult to step back from his position at the forefront of the knowledge management industry. Which, in a sense, is good news for the rest of the KM community: Wiig will be one of six keynote speakers at this year's KM Europe, which takes place in London next month. "These events have great value for KM professional and users to gauge what is happening [in the industry]," he says. "They are good learning opportunities – I always come away with many 'I never thought of that' insights." And if that's the case for someone who has been working with knowledge management concepts since before the term even came into common usage, it should be time well spent for the rest of us. ■

Reference

1. Wiig, K., *Knowledge Management Foundations: Thinking about Thinking – How Organizations Create, Represent and Use Knowledge* (Schema Press, 1993); Wiig, K., *Knowledge Management: The Central Management Focus for Intelligent-Acting Organizations* (Schema Press, 1994); and, Wiig, K., *Knowledge Management Methods: Practical Approaches to Managing Knowledge* (Schema Press, 1995)