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**Whitepaper**

# **Climbing the Personal Knowledge Mountain**

**By James Dellow, May 2003**



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## Getting Personal with Knowledge Management

### **Knowledge Management – that’s just for big business, right?**

Wrong! ‘Personal’ Knowledge Management provides an inside-out way for you to take advantage of this maturing management trend. Getting a grip on knowledge will help you and your business to overcome any difficult challenges that lie ahead.

### **A Brief History of Knowledge Management**

Management guru Peter Drucker was the first to describe knowledge work. Back in the late 1950’s he wrote:

*“Productive work in today’s society and economy is work that applies vision, knowledge and concepts -- work that is based on the mind rather than the hand.”<sup>1</sup>*

The idea of Knowledge Management (KM) evolved as a way of tapping into the organisational knowledge base that is essential to knowledge work.

But it has been assumed that KM is the strict domain of large corporations; only big business has enough money to build systems that can capture, extract and synthesis “knowledge”. Yet many companies have discovered that all they have created are large and expensive document management systems – there is nothing wrong with that, but documents don’t create and act on knowledge, people do.

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<sup>1</sup> Drucker, P., *The Landmarks of Tomorrow*, Harper & Row, New York, circa 1958.

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## A new way of thinking about Knowledge Management

### **Its about people not documents**

The importance of social networks and the interaction between people is now superseding the old mechanical methods of KM. Current approaches to applying KM suggest that you:

- Start with a group of people in an organisation that have a common knowledge need; and
- Then apply the right information, processes and technology resources that will help them to share knowledge and learn.

This is all well and good – but still, how exactly can small and medium sized businesses (SMEs) take advantage of Knowledge Management?

### **Personal Knowledge Management**

Personal knowledge management (PKM) provides an opportunity for business owners and managers working in SMEs to take advantage of the lessons from KM. **It's an idea that flips the outside-in style of organisational KM to an inside-out perspective.** In other words, it's up to you to take responsibility for whom you know, what you know and how you know.

Sounds easy, right? But try describing what you know out loud. Do your words really represent the depth and richness of your experiences and the conversations you've had?

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## Using Personal Knowledge Management to help you innovate

### Memory, Knowledge and Innovation

The Ancient Greeks were proud of their ability to remember things and this was essential in a culture with such a rich oral tradition. Our Internet-enabled knowledge economy has far exceeded the human ability to effectively interact with knowledge without some help. "Technostress"<sup>2</sup> is term given to technology-driven information overload. And if you want to innovate, you need the ability to take information from the outside world and combine with other knowledge to create ideas that lead to new processes, products and services.

### The role of PKM

PKM helps you to understand how your personal goals and values relate to:

- Your network of relationships in your family, business and community;
- The knowledge you have and new information you need; and
- The technology you use.

These three areas play a part in determining your ability to effectively learn, share knowledge and innovate. It's not hard to look at yourself from this perspective – you can use the **Personal Knowledge Mountain** framework to help identify the gaps in your abilities that might stop you from reaching your goals.

But remember – using Knowledge Management will always be optional. Highly productive people and organisations choose to use it because they believe it can help them reach higher and harder goals. Only once you recognise the role of knowledge in what you do can you begin to take control of how you take advantage of it.

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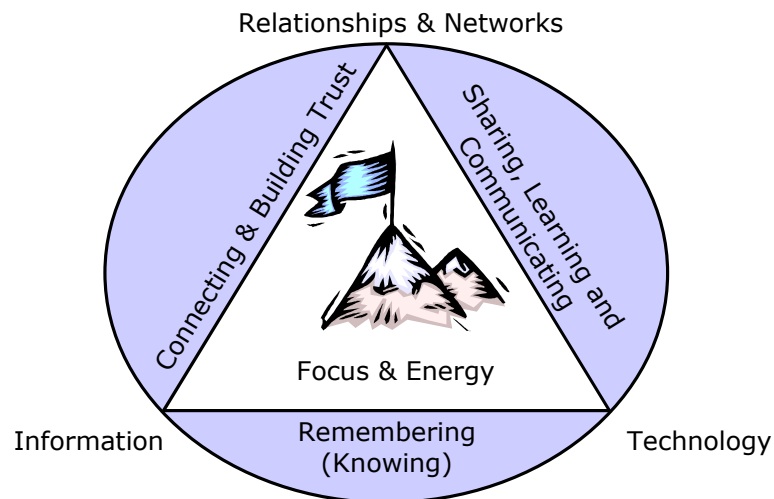
<sup>2</sup> Weil, M., Rosen, L., 1997, *Technostress*, John Wiley & Sons. New York.

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## The Personal Knowledge Mountain

### What is the Personal Knowledge Mountain?

The Personal Knowledge Mountain is an idea to help you consider how Personal Knowledge Management can support you in achieving your goals.



### How does it work?

Imagine you really were going to climb a mountain. Remembering that climbing mountains is risky and that many things can go wrong along the way, what would you need to succeed?

- Focus and Energy – a clear objective to aim for and the motivation to accomplish something;
- Relationships and Networks – the best people to help you on your way;
- Information – the essential facts and figures you need to reach your target; and
- Technology – the right equipment for the job and the skills to use it.

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## Climbing your knowledge mountain

### Understanding your energy and focus

The starting point for climbing your personal knowledge mountain is to gain insight into two attributes that are linked to your personal goals and values. These two counter-balanced traits are called **focus** and **energy**<sup>3</sup>. They relate to your ability to select an objective and commit to achieving it. Both require knowledge about the world around you and knowledge about yourself.

### Get the balance right

But how can you weigh up your options if you are overloaded with information or – even worse - don't know what you don't know? And studies suggest that knowledge workers waste as much as 90% of their time recreating way of doing things. The next step in this journey is to reflect on how the three PKM elements influence your ability to reach your goals:

- Relationships and Networks (the people you know);
- Information (abstracts of things you know, credentials/history and data); and
- Technology (tools you use to communicate, reflect, learn and remember).

From the PKM perspective these three elements are treated as inter-relating. Because of this the strategies you implement and approaches you take for dealing with knowledge obstacles will be unique to your situation and circumstances. Most likely you will find gaps in certain areas that need to be filled. Or on reflection you might find that you lack energy and focus and therefore a deeper personal change must take place before you can progress. In either case it may be worthwhile to call on the services of a specialist who can assist you with specific issues - and don't be afraid to call on your own personal network for help!

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<sup>3</sup> Bruch, H., Ghoshal, S., 2002, 'Beware the Busy Manager', *Harvard Business Review*, February 2002, pp.62-69.

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## Conclusion

**If you want to climb hills, then you probably don't need Personal Knowledge Management. But, if you want to climb mountains it can help you to achieve your goals.**

- First, you need to understand the direction of your focus and energy.
- Then work out what you need to do for each of the Personal Knowledge Management elements to get there.

The Personal Knowledge "Mountain" provides a simple idea that can help you understand how relationships and networks, information and technology can help or hinder you in reaching the summit of success.

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