# ISO 30401: Knowledge Management Systems - what does it mean for KM professionals and for organizations implementing KM?

Patrick Lambe – 15 January 2019

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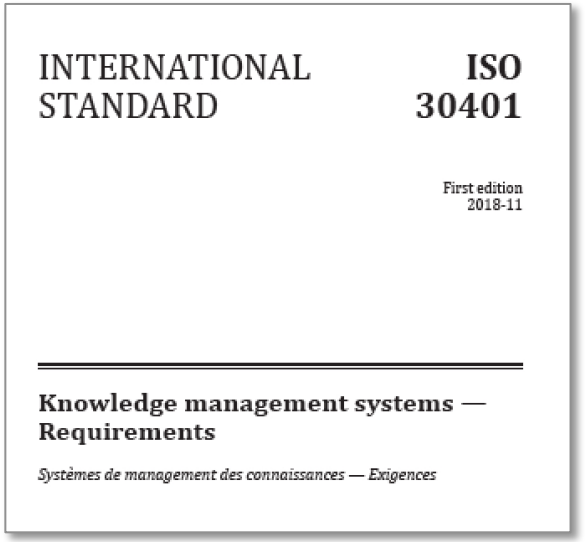
*Annual one day conference "Innovations in Knowledge Organisation"*

*Let your KM contacts and colleagues know!*

# Agenda

- Timeline of standards development in KM
- Why are standards contentious in KM? Arguments for and against
- ISO 30401 – why did it succeed?
- ISO 30401 – structure and requirements
- Limitations of the standard
- How can you use it?

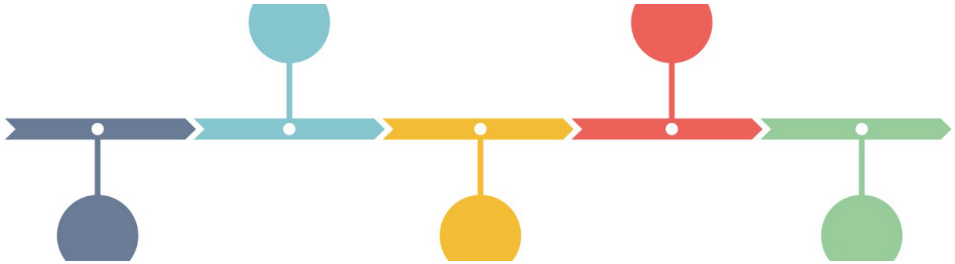

INTERNATIONAL STANDARD

ISO 30401

First edition
2018-11

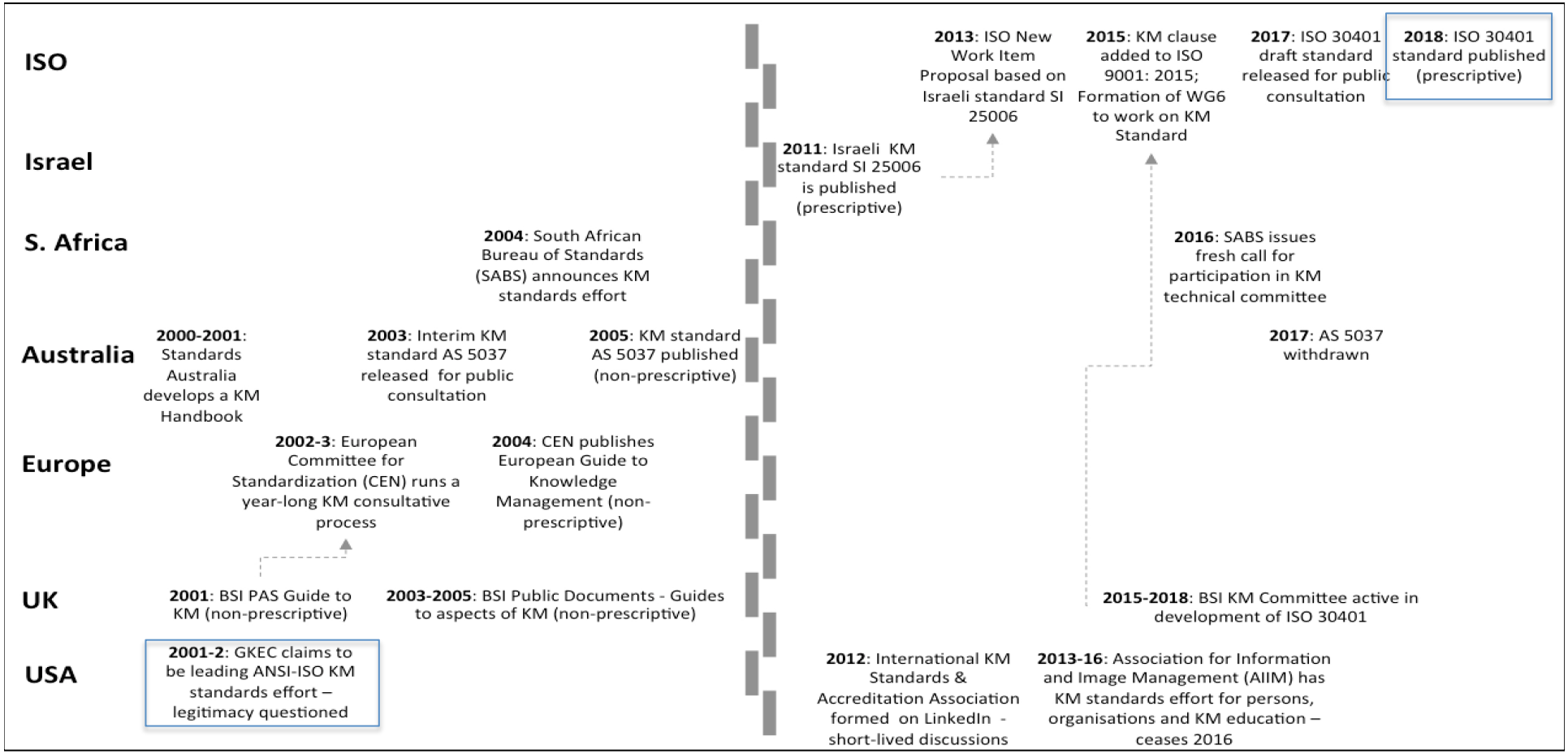
Knowledge management systems — Requirements

*Systèmes de management des connaissances — Exigences*



# 1. KM Standards: A Timeline

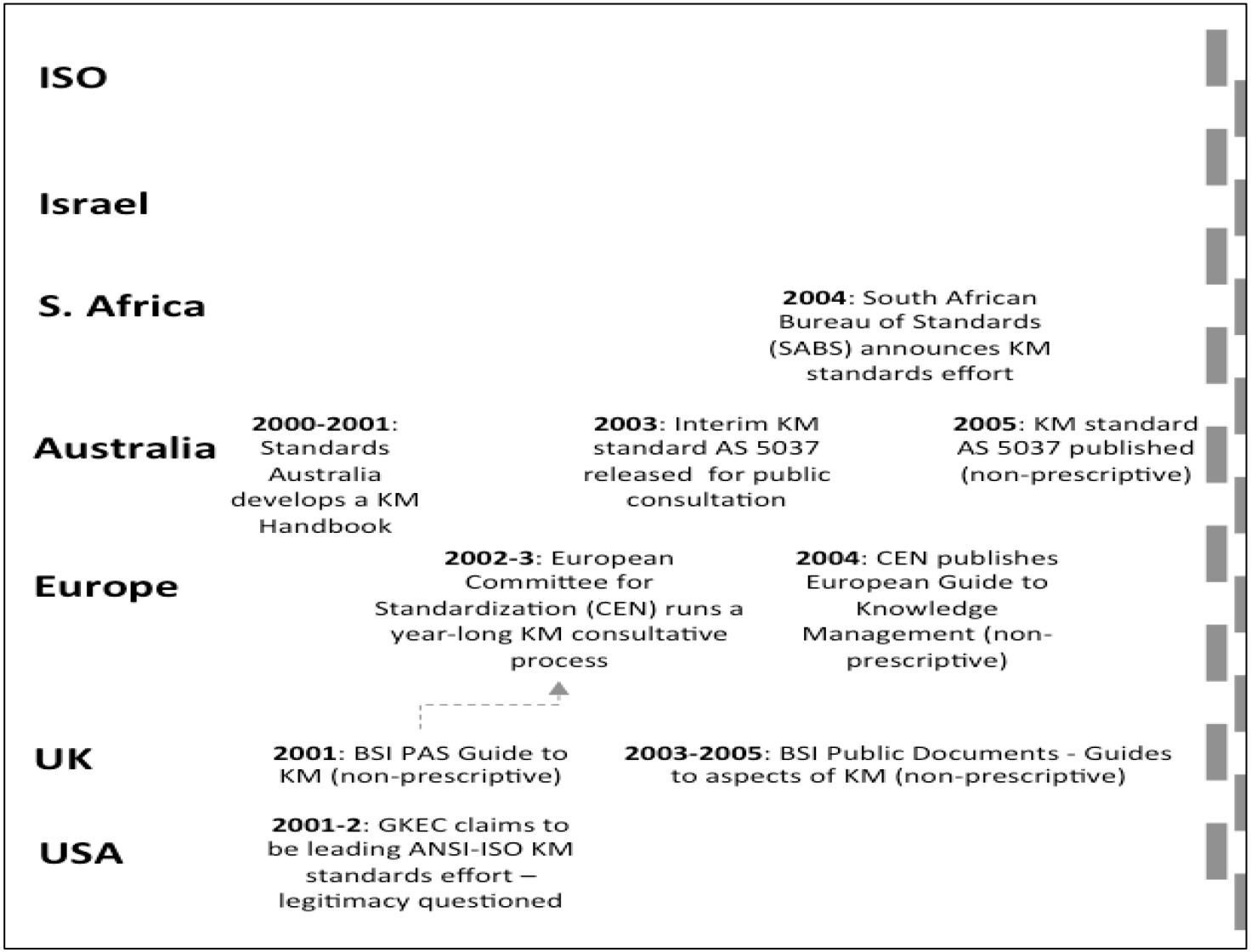
# Timeline



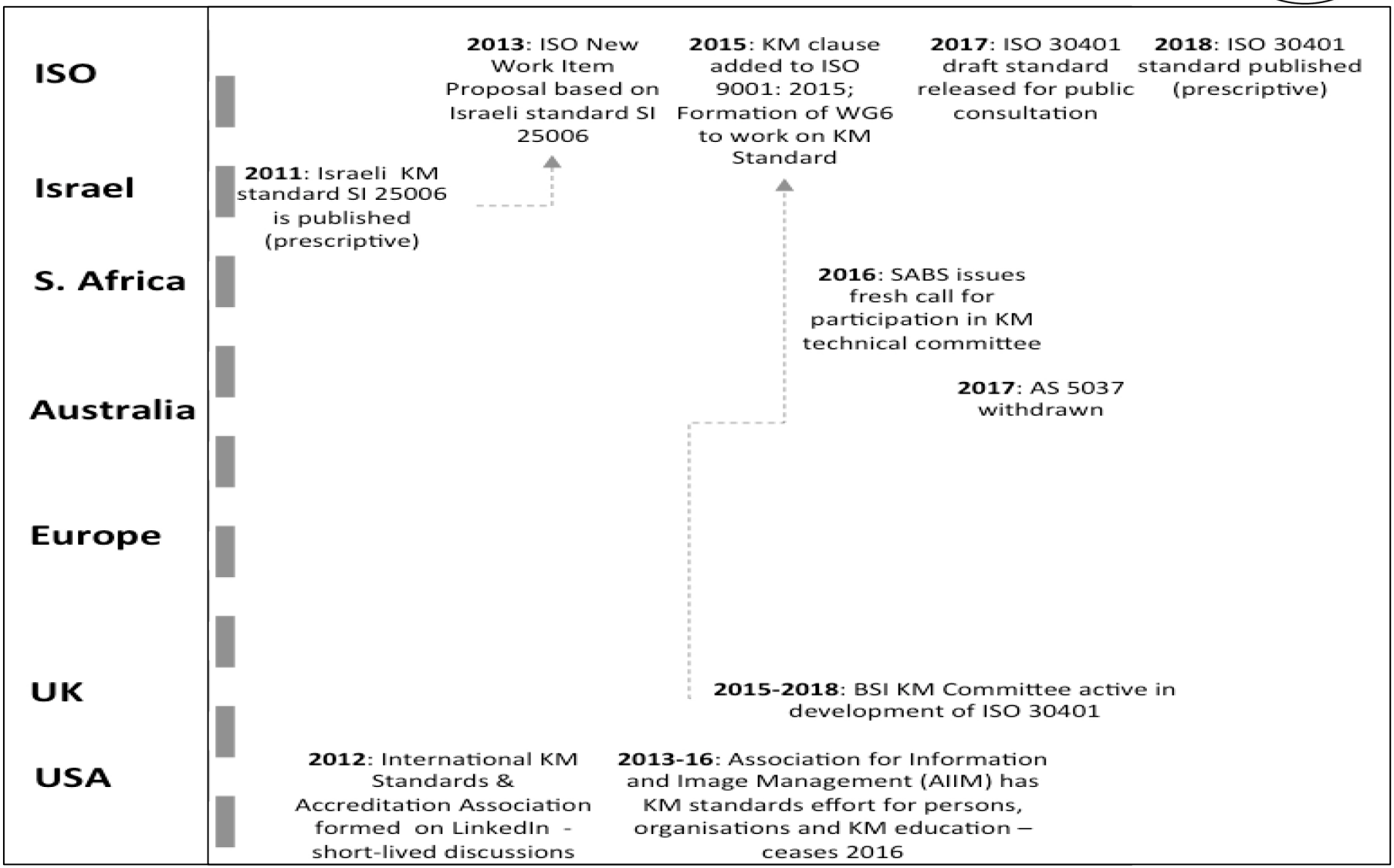

2000-2005
"Struggle"

2011-2018
"Success"

# 2000-2005


ISO
Israel
S. Africa
2004: South African Bureau of Standards (SABS) announces KM standards effort
Australia
2000-2001: Standards Australia develops a KM Handbook
2003: Interim KM standard AS 5037 released for public consultation
2005: KM standard AS 5037 published (non-prescriptive)
Europe
2002-3: European Committee for Standardization (CEN) runs a year-long KM consultative process
2004: CEN publishes European Guide to Knowledge Management (non-prescriptive)
UK
2001: BSI PAS Guide to KM (non-prescriptive)
2003-2005: BSI Public Documents - Guides to aspects of KM (non-prescriptive)
USA
2001-2: GKEC claims to be leading ANSI-ISO KM standards effort – legitimacy questioned

# 2011-2018


ISO
Israel
S. Africa
Australia
Europe
UK
USA
2013: ISO New Work Item Proposal based on Israeli standard SI 25006
2015: KM clause added to ISO 9001: 2015; Formation of WG6 to work on KM Standard
2017: ISO 30401 draft standard released for public consultation
2018: ISO 30401 standard published (prescriptive)
2011: Israeli KM standard SI 25006 is published (prescriptive)
2016: SABS issues fresh call for participation in KM technical committee
2017: AS 5037 withdrawn
2015-2018: BSI KM Committee active in development of ISO 30401
2012: International KM Standards & Accreditation Association formed on LinkedIn - short-lived discussions
2013-16: Association for Information and Image Management (AIIM) has KM standards effort for persons, organisations and KM education – ceases 2016

# 2. The Battle over KM Standards

*"So this ISO KM standard, how's it going then?"*

*"It's pretty much what you'd expect. There's lots of people accusing each other of crass commercialism, being wrong, not recognizing each other's genius. Everyone really seems to hate each other in this group."*

*(Matt Moore – SIKM Leaders Forum)*

# Emotional Critiques

Edward Swanstrom

- KM Certification Wars 1998-2006
- Fear of commercial bias
- Lack of trust or active mistrust
- Fear of loss of freedom
- Competing affiliations to models of KM

# Emotional Critiques

Helen Hasan

**2003: Interim AS5037**

"too simplistic," "too rigid," "too mechanistic," "too linear,"

it would "reduce KM to the lowest common denominator,"

"it would exclude legitimate approaches to KM,"

"it would be compromised by the commercial activities" of Business Excellence Australia (the commercial division of Standards Australia),

"too much jargon"

(Hasan 2004; Ferguson 2006).

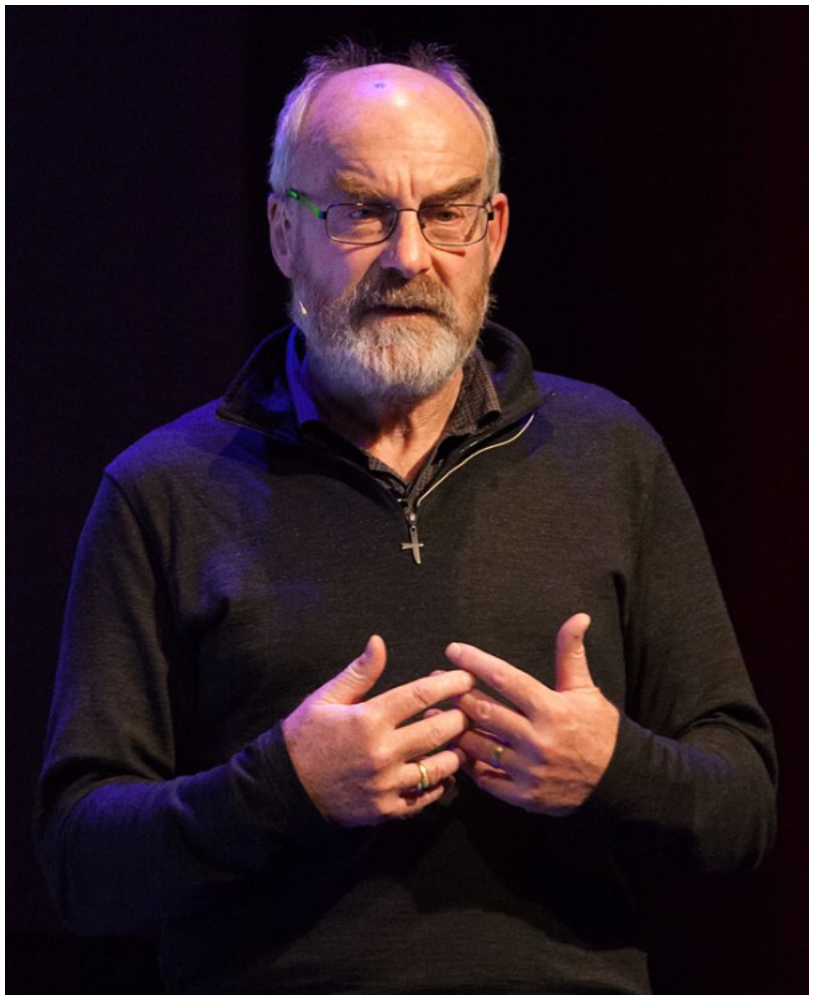
# Reasoned Critiques

Joseph Firestone

## Complexity of KM

- KM as a field is too broad and complex to be captured in a single standard (or certification)
- It is possible to hold equally justifiable but opposing views on KM decisions
- KM is still evolving
- There is no consensus on KM (and insufficient trust to reach consensus)

# Reasoned Critiques



David Snowden

## Complexity of Organizations & Knowledge

- Organizations are complex adaptive systems – future oriented
- Standards assume predictability and consistency – past oriented
- It's not possible to be prescriptive in KM, which is led by variable contextual needs

# Responses

## Complexity of KM

- KM as a field is too broad and complex to be captured in a single standard (or certification)
- It is possible to hold equally justifiable but opposing views on KM decisions
- KM is still evolving
- There is no consensus on KM (and insufficient trust to reach consensus) – except at a very general "common-sense" level

- It should be possible to map the landscape at least at a high level, leaving scope for variation and adaptiveness
- Not to capture whatever consensus exists leaves innocent buyers vulnerable
- In-principle resistance is a self-fulfilling prophecy but standards development process can nudge a field towards common reference points and add stability
- What is obvious common sense to practitioners may not be obvious to others – e.g. senior leadership teams

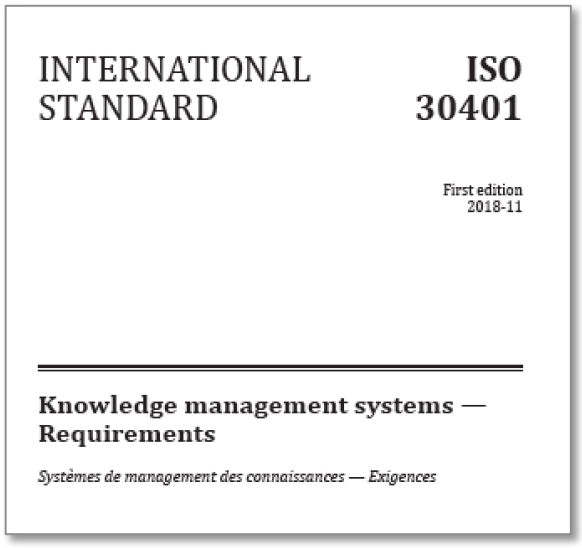
# Responses

## Complexity of Organizations & Knowledge

- Organizations are complex adaptive systems
- Standards assume predictability and consistency
- It's not possible to be prescriptive in KM, which is led by variable contextual needs

- Not all aspects of organisational life are complex – some are well structured and predictable
- Even in complex adaptive systems, some practices become habituated and stabilise over time, and become normative

*KM standards are likely to work as high-level framing and orientation devices for KM practice, and they are likely to work best for those aspects of organisational life that are stable, routinized and relatively predictable. They are less likely to be useful to structure or govern more complex, emergent and adaptive practices and contexts.*




# 3. ISO 30401

Why did it succeed?

What it says

Limitations

# Why did ISO 30401 succeed?

- ISO as an institution – separation of the standard from commercial exploitation (e.g. certification)
- Imposition of a consistent management systems standard template – "framework-free"
- Committee work was disciplined and planned
- The standard is principles-based rather than rules-based
- Debate was channeled into public comment

# ISO 30401 Principles

1. **Nature of Knowledge**: intangible and complex; created by people.
2. **Value**: knowledge is a key source of value for organizations to meet their objectives.
3. **Focus**: KM serves the organizational objectives, strategies and needs.
4. **Adaptive**: there is no one knowledge management solution that fits all organizations within all contexts. KM adapts itself to particular needs.
5. **Shared understanding**: For shared understanding, KM should include interactions between people, using content, processes and technologies.
6. **Environment**: knowledge is not managed directly; KM focuses on managing the working environment, and nurturing the knowledge lifecycle.
7. **Culture**: culture is critical to the effectiveness of KM.
8. **Iterative**: KM should be phased, incorporating learning and feedback cycle.

# ISO 30401 Requirements – "Shall"

1. **Determine**: the org. purpose, business environment and stakeholders to determine goals of KM
2. **Scope and prioritise**: the knowledge domains to be covered
3. **Cover**: processes for knowledge acquisition, application, retention, discarding, human interaction, codification, synthesis, learning
4. **Include and integrate**: all enablers – people, process, infrastructure, governance, culture
5. **Leadership**: values, policy, integration of KM into business processes, resourcing, KM roles and responsibilities, communications, change management, metrics, continual improvement
6. **Planning**: define objectives and outcomes, manage the plan and document outcomes
7. **Resource**: resourcing, competencies, awareness, communications
8. **Monitoring and evaluation**: improvement, internal audit, management review

# ISO 30401 Limitations

ISO 30401 is a prescriptive standard and is written in compliance language – "shall"; **BUT because it is**

- principles-led rather than rules-led
- intended to allow for a variety of KM practice and approach,
- lacking in specificity and granularity…

it is highly dependent on auditor experience, interpretation and judgement. This can lead to three audit-related issues:

1. **Ambiguity**: where the underlying principle is so vague or ambiguous that it provides no substantive guidance for action or for audit.
2. **Decoupling**: where the visible things you can document don't guarantee the real (invisible) effectiveness of the practice;

leading to…

3. **Audit inconsistency**: where the same practices may give rise to different interpretations by different auditors.

# Ambiguity examples

1. **Nature of Knowledge**: intangible and complex; created by people.

Not all knowledge is in intangible form. It's much easier to measure management of tangible forms of knowledge  than intangible forms. There is no guidance on how to audit intangible forms, and the requirements as written would "pass" organizations that mainly manage tangible forms as long as they also manage interactions between people.

2. **Value**: knowledge is a key source of value for organizations to meet their objectives.

Not all knowledge is of equal value. The standard gives no guidance on how to discriminate high value from low value. It just says the organisation shall identify critical knowledge. There is no consensus or clarity on how this principle or its requirements could be audited.

# What is Decoupling?

The marks of a decoupled measurement system are:

a) the use of general categories (or motherhood statements) in place of granular defined outcomes,

b) the use of ambiguous language that is capable of supporting multiple interpretations, and

c) a focus on measurement and documentation of observed behaviours, regardless of how well they reflect the real activity of the system. This measurement focus conceals the actual difficulties in measuring effectiveness of complex human systems.

The result is to create an **illusion of measurement** while the actual practice of interpretation and auditing is subject to informal negotiations, dependent on the skills of "specialist" (but opaque) expertise of auditors (Meyer and Rowan 1977).

# Decoupling in ISO 30401

Decoupling is a well-known risk in the auditing of management systems (Terlaak 2007). ISO 14001 on environmental standards is an oft cited example. Contributing conditions:

1. lack of consensus on specific best practices,
2. non compliance is difficult to observe or detect, and
3. there is a perceived reward for compliance (legitimacy effects).

E.G. ISO 30401 4.5 : "The organization shall demonstrate that organizational culture has been addressed as a means to support the knowledge management system". Annex C :

- defining a desired knowledge culture;
- running a gap analysis;
- creating a plan to address the gaps;
- acting upon this plan;
- revisiting and updating all previous steps at defined intervals.

# Audit Inconsistency

ISO does not certify its own standards. You can do internal audits or be audited by accredited national standards certification bodies affiliated with ISO.

Ambiguity and decoupling places a heavy burden on auditors' judgment and expertise – the auditor has to interpret what he/she sees using ambiguous guidance.

a) Knowledge of KM
b) Knowledge of contextual particularities of the organisation (stakeholders, business environment, structure, culture, history)
c) Insight into informal, intangible aspects of knowledge use in that org.

**BUT** – we know that vague standards generally lead to lower (external) auditor effort (it pays to check the boxes, it doesn't pay to investigate ambiguous areas)

# Will the Standard Distort Practice?

## Tale of two organisations:

# 4. Discussion

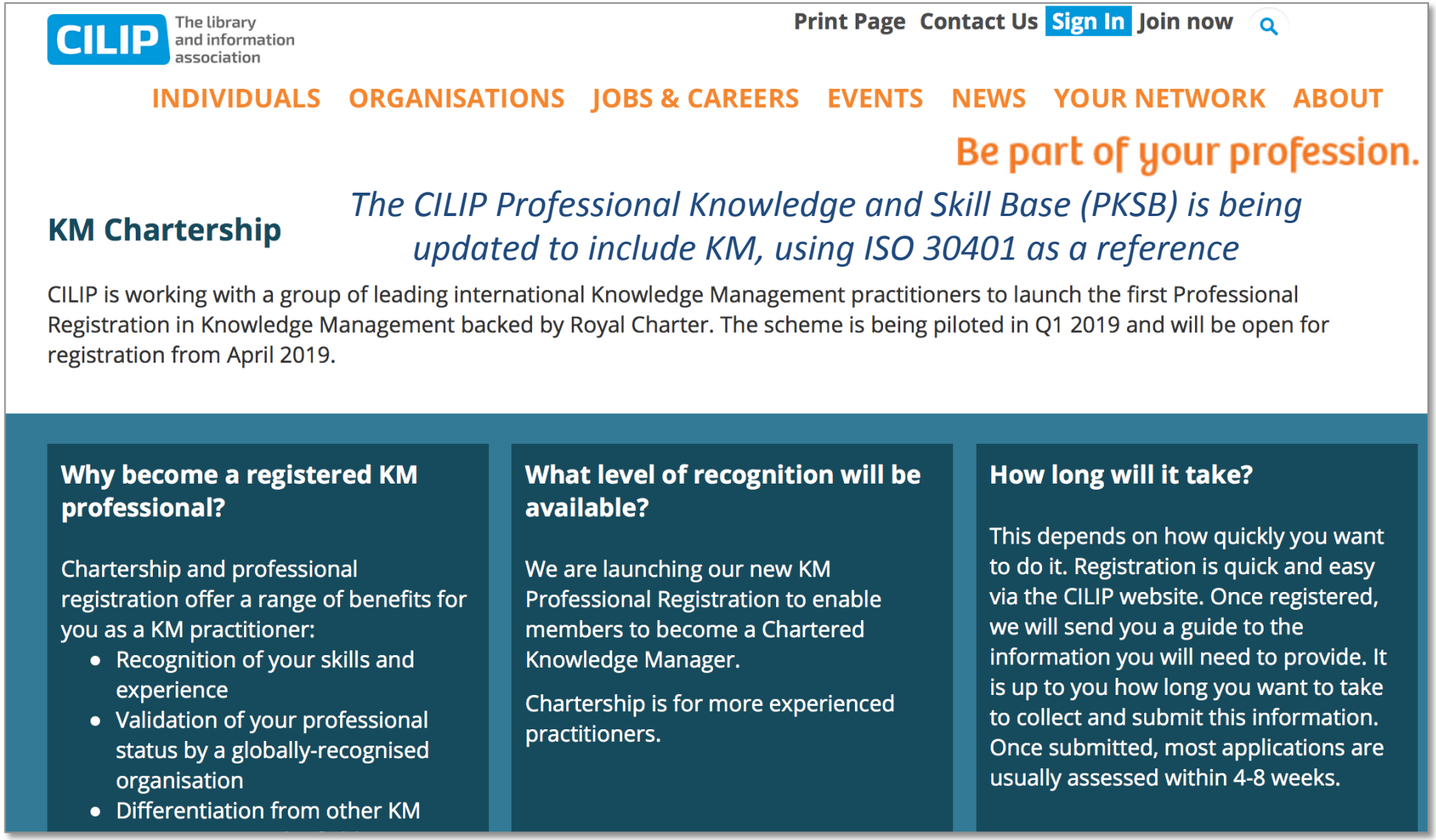
What are the Pros and Cons of having this standard?

How might you use it?

# Potential Benefits of ISO 30401

| Benefit | Observation | ISO 30401 Implication |
|---|---|---|
| **1. Compatibility and interchangeability** | Components and practices can be combined without error. | ISO management systems standards – enable org-wide approach not function-based |
| **2. Common understanding and consistent vocabulary** | KM practitioners, and management teams will use key KM terms with greater consistency and less ambiguity. | Despite some ambiguity the standard provides a comprehensive and reasonably consensus-based frame of reference for KM. |
| **3. Transferability of learning between contexts** | KM practitioners and organisations can compare practices more easily, and learn from each other. | Use the standard as a basis to benchmark and collect examples of KM practices from elsewhere |
| **4. Competitiveness and comparability between suppliers** | KM commercial tools and service providers use distinctions in language to confuse buyers, and justify one product or service over another. Partial approaches can't be distinguished from comprehensive ones. | The standard provides a comprehensive suite of hygiene factors for KM against which providers can define their offerings in a consistent and easy to compare way. |
| **5. Quality and safety** | Implementers have greater assurance of the likely quality of implementation, and their risk of a poor implementation is reduced. | The standard alone does not bring absolute assurance of quality. Superficial use of ISO 30401 could increase implementation risks - but if there is balanced and pragmatic use of the standard alongside other instruments, quality and risk should be better managed. |
| **6. Enhancing levels of competence among professionals (Skyrme 2002)** | Provides a profession-wide approach to describing competencies and skills areas for KM practitioners, identifying gaps, and providing development opportunities. | The standard describes a comprehensive range of activities that KM professionals and top management will need to be engaged in. |

# Competency Development




https://www.cilip.org.uk/page/KnowledgeManagementChartership

# Review (1)

1. The KM community has resisted prescriptive standards until very recently with fierce debate on both sides.
2. The history of standards development suggests that KM standards are likely to work as high-level framing and orientation devices for KM practice, and will work best for those aspects of organisational life that are stable, routinized and relatively predictable. Less useful for more complex aspects of organisational life.
3. A KM standard could easily be used inappropriately if these limitations are not recognised.
4. ISO 30401 standard for knowledge management systems is presented as a prescriptive standard with requirements that can in principle be audited – but it contains ambiguities, and has possible decoupling effects.

# Review (1)

5. Ambiguities/vagueness in the standard create a dependency on individual auditor judgement and experience – leading to audit inconsistencies and a retreat to the easily observed.
6. The standard formalises a number of well-known basic hygiene factors for effective KM implementation but does not capture all the necessary and sufficient conditions. It can guide competency development for practitioners.
7. The ISO 30401 standard might be useful as a framing instrument alongside other knowledge audit and KM assessment approaches.
8. Knowledge audits and knowledge mapping would help organisations to implement KM according to ISO 30401 requirements.

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*This talk is based on research for my new book*

*Knowledge Auditing: Principles and Practice (2020)*

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