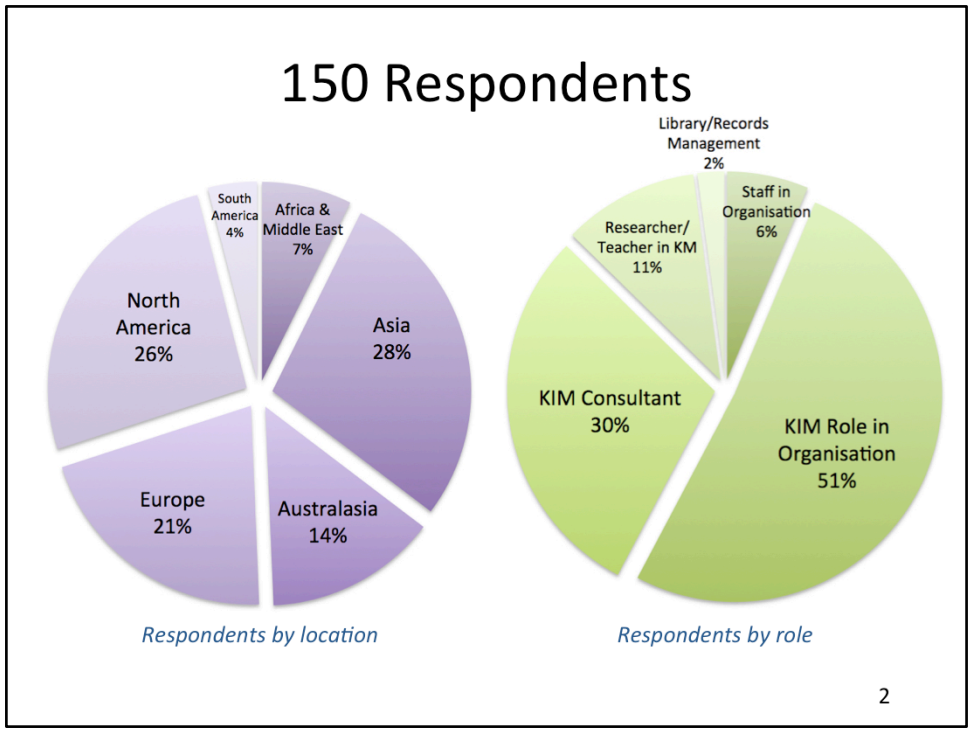
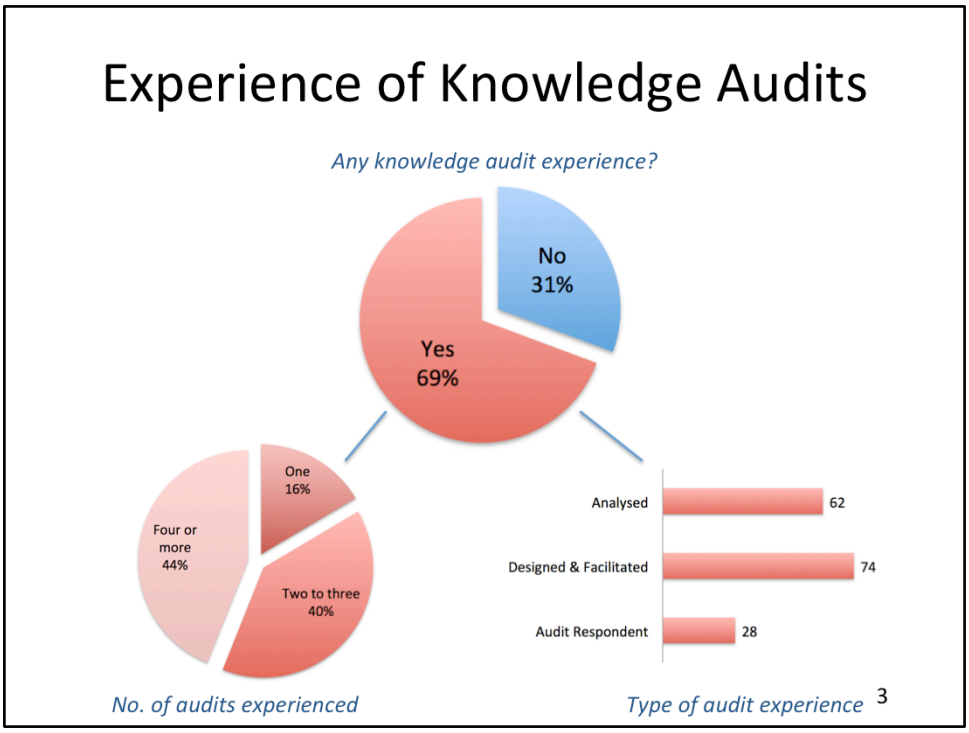
Knowledge audits in practice: report of a global survey on knowledge audit perceptions and experience

Patrick Lambe

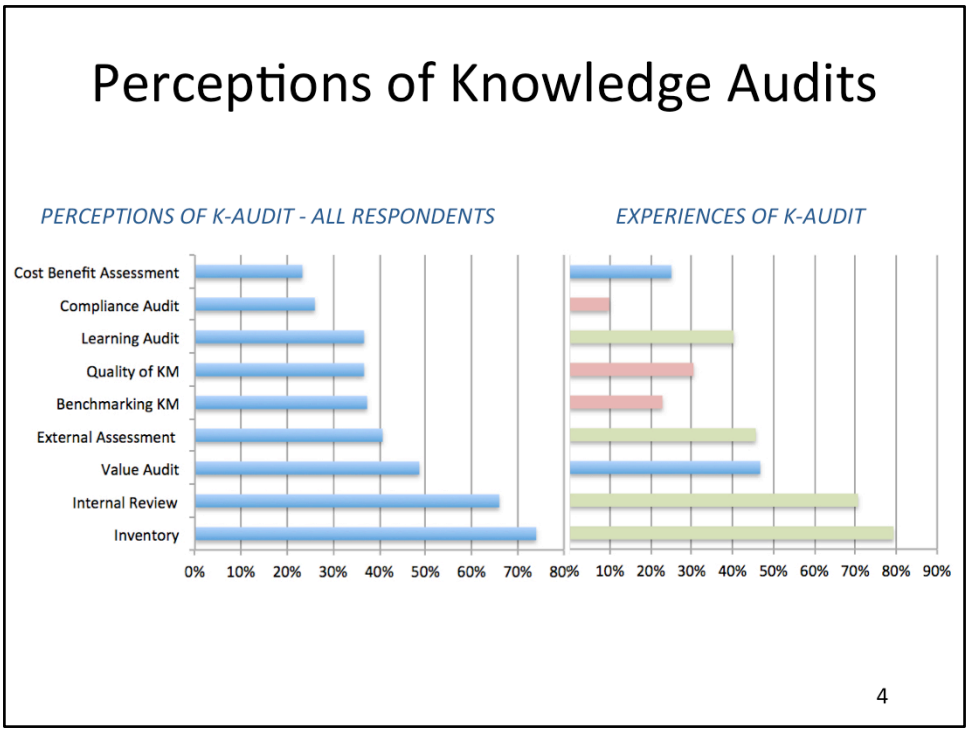


The largest representation came from Asia, North America, and Europe. Slightly over half of the respondents were responding from the perspective of a knowledge and information management professional in an organisation, while slightly less than a third were responding from the perspective of a knowledge and information management consultant.



More than two thirds of respondents had some experience of knowledge audits. Of those with experience, 84% had experienced more than one audit. Most experienced respondents had designed, facilitated and analysed one or more knowledge audits. A minority had also been respondents in a knowledge audit.

There are significant differences in perception between people who have experience of knowledge audits, and those who do not have experience as we will see in the following pages.

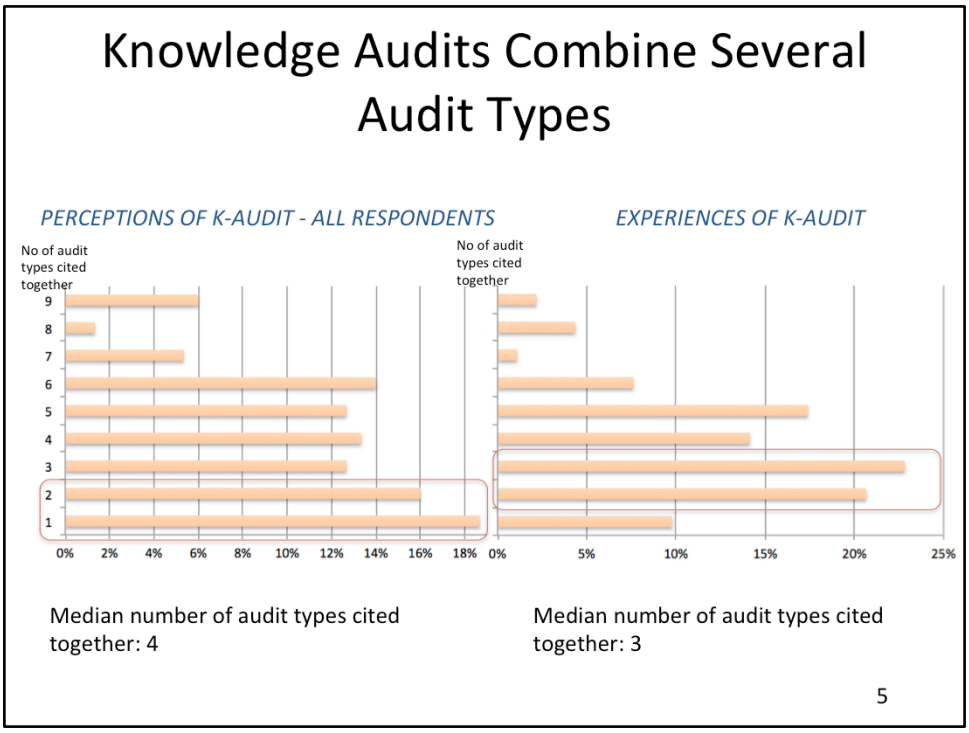


We asked respondents what their understanding of knowledge audits was. They were able to select any number of definitions evidenced in the literature of knowledge audits. We compared the general responses against what experienced practitioners said their experience of knowledge audits was. There are significant differences between how people in general perceive knowledge audits, and how audits are experienced in practice.

In people with experience of knowledge audits there is a narrower range of perceptions of what a knowledge audit is. Experienced respondents are significantly less likely to see a knowledge audit as a Compliance audit, a Quality audit or a Benchmarking audit. Experienced respondents are more likely to see a knowledge audit as an Inventory audit, an Internal KM review, an External assessment of KM, or a Learning audit.

The full wording for the types of knowledge audit is based on a literature review and is given below:

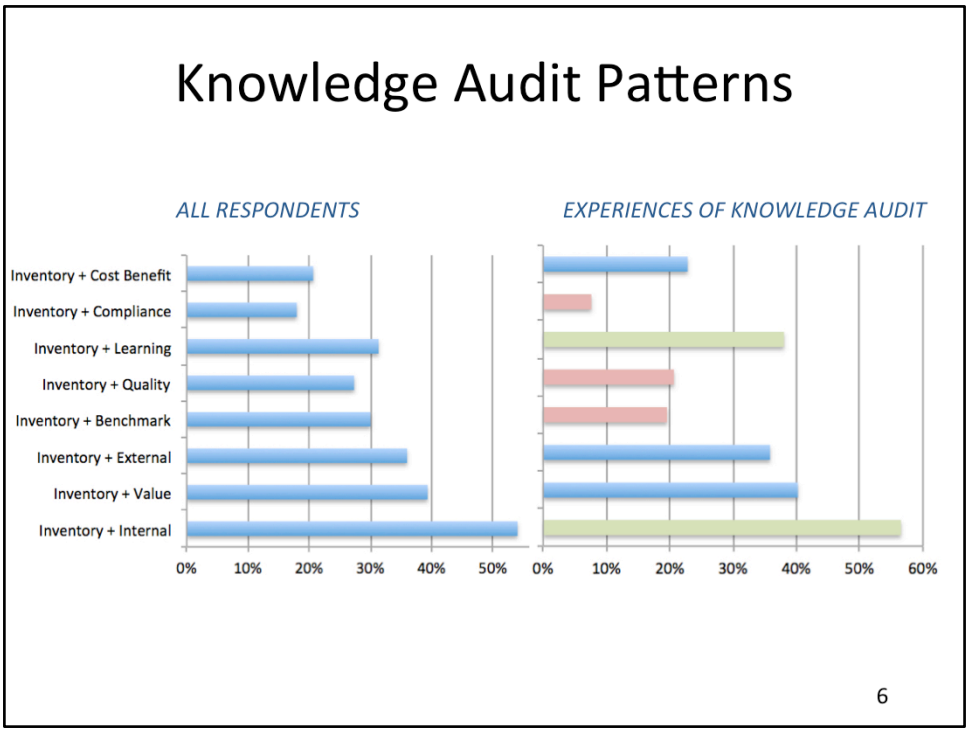
- A cost benefit analysis of the way that knowledge and information are exploited in an organisation
- An assessment to measure compliance with an external knowledge management standard
- A review of records and/or data in a specific practice domain with the goal of identifying lessons and improvements in that domain
- An assessment to review the quality of knowledge management practices against an external standard or framework
- A way to benchmark the way an organisation manages knowledge against other organisations
- A discovery exercise using an external facilitator looking for ways to improve the way that knowledge is managed in an organisation
- An analysis of the way that knowledge creates value for the organisation
- An internal review of the way that knowledge is managed in the organisation, supported by management, with the goal of developing a knowledge management plan or strategy
- An inventory of knowledge stocks and flows in an organisation



There is a very wide spread of perceptions of what a knowledge audit is, and it is clear that knowledge audits are seen as compound activities, blending a number of audit types into the same overall programme of investigation and analysis.

The respondents with experience of knowledge audits were generally more focused in how they saw audit-types being combined. They usually saw 2-3 audit types being combined in an audit exercise, with a slight rise again at 5 audit types. In general respondent perceptions, the spread of audit types is wider. Less experienced respondents were also much more likely than experienced people to see a single audit type being conducted alone.

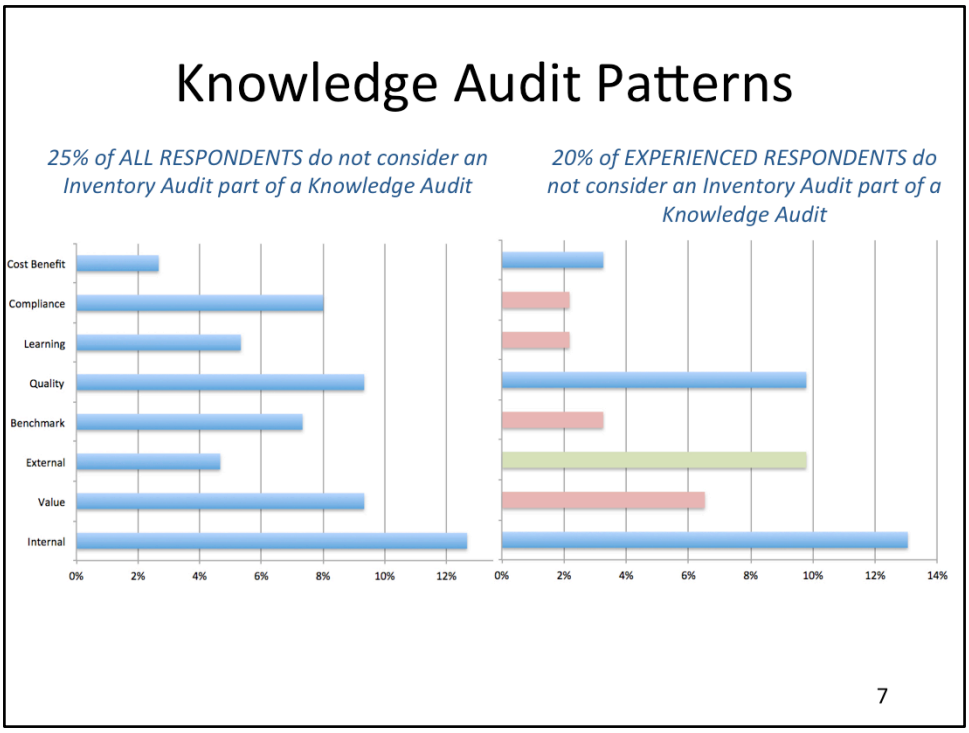
Less experienced people tend to see more audit types as being potentially used in combination - the average number of audit types cited is 3.9 with a median figure of 4 audit types. More experienced people cited an average of 3.7 audit types being used in combination, with a median of 3.



The most likely combination of audit types across all responses, both experienced and less experienced, is the Inventory Audit with the Internal KM Review.

Inventory audits are almost never conducted alone (only 3% of actual cases cited). Inventory audits are usually used as an evidence gathering mechanism for another complementary audit type.

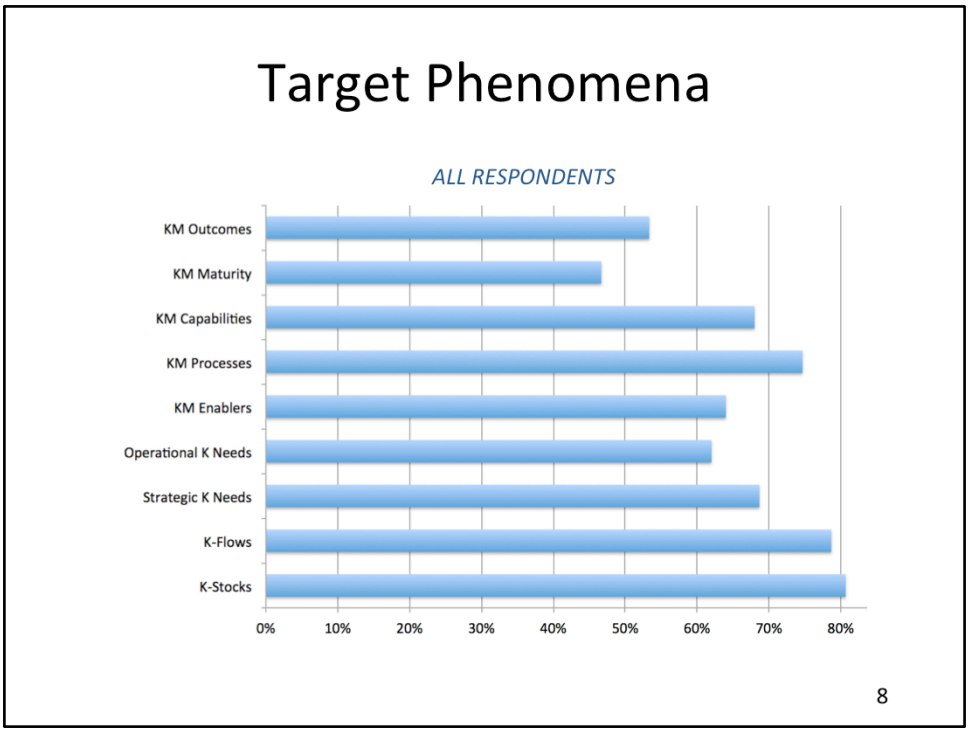
More experienced people are more likely than average to use Learning Audits with an Inventory Audit, and they are significantly less likely to use Compliance, Quality or Benchmarking Audits with an Inventory Audit (matching the way they report their use of audit types in general).



People with experience of knowledge audits are slightly more likely than average to conduct an Inventory audit as part of their Knowledge Audit.

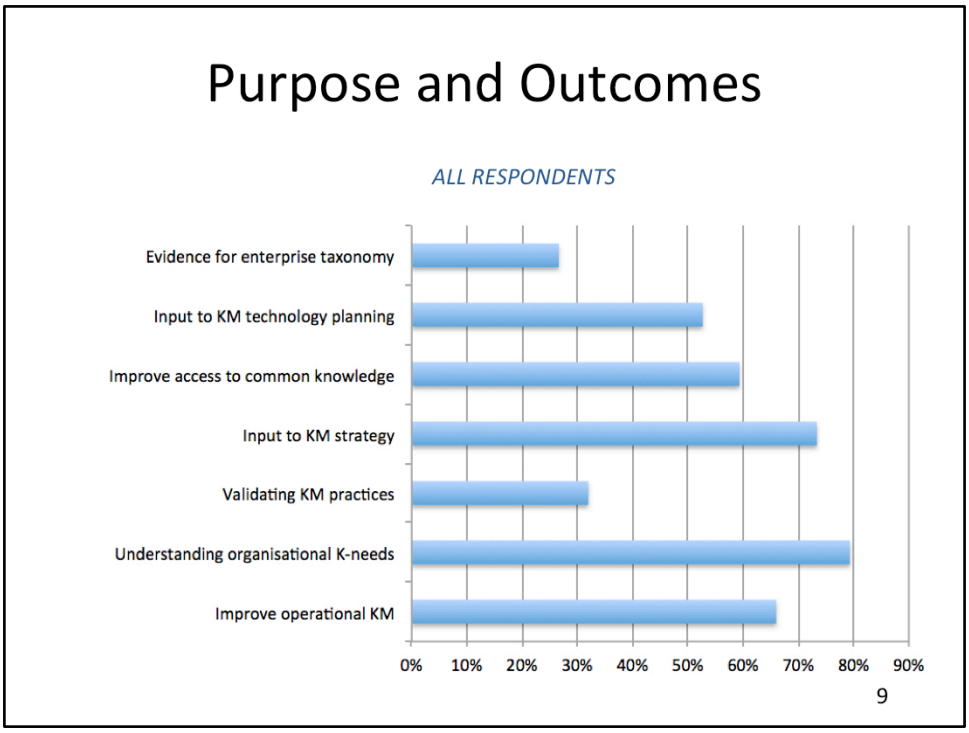
If an Inventory audit is NOT conducted, less experienced people are more likely to conduct an Internal Review, a Value Audit, a Quality Audit, or a Compliance Audit.

In the absence of an Inventory audit, more experienced people are likely to focus on an Internal Review, an External Assessment or a Quality Audit. They are much less likely to conduct Compliance, Learning, Benchmarking or Value audits.



We asked respondents what they thought should be examined in a knowledge audit (the audit's target phenomena). We compared the general response with the responses of people who had experience of knowledge audits. In general, there is little difference between more experienced and less experienced respondents in relation to the phenomena to be examined in a knowledge audit.

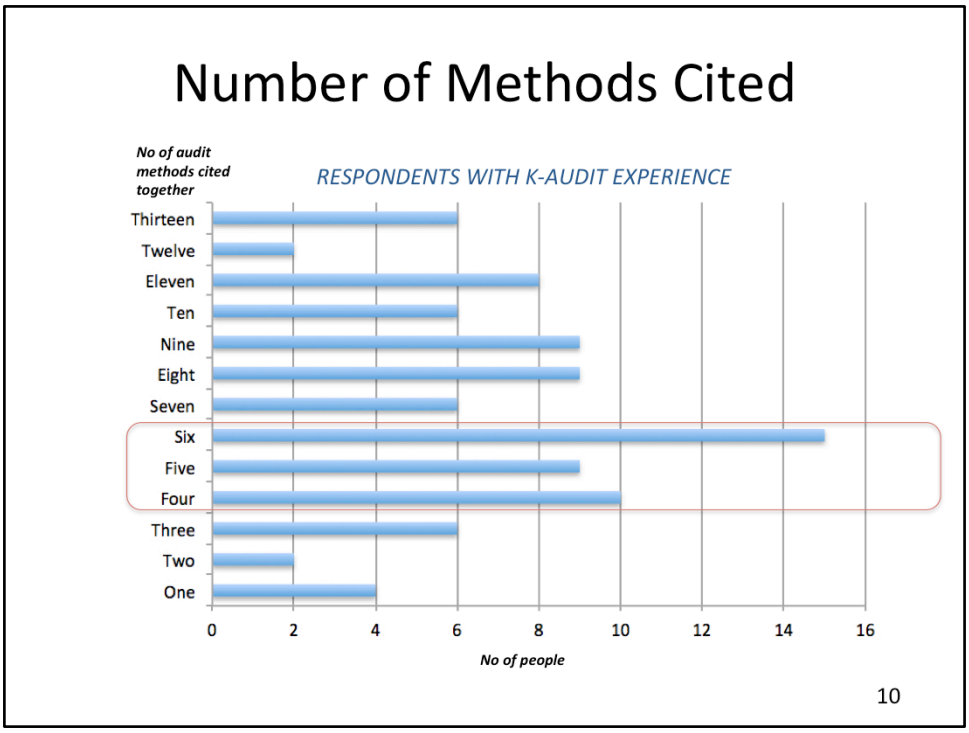
Consistent with the focus on Knowledge Inventory Audits, knowledge stocks and knowledge flows are considered primary foci for knowledge audits. Consistent with the focus on internal or external KM reviews, KM processes are the third most cited area to review, followed by strategic knowledge needs and KM capabilities.



We asked respondents what they thought the main purpose of a knowledge audit was. The options can also be considered outcomes of knowledge audits. We compared the general response with the responses of people who had experience of knowledge audits. In general, there is little difference between more experienced and less experienced respondents in relation to the main purpose and outcomes of knowledge audits.

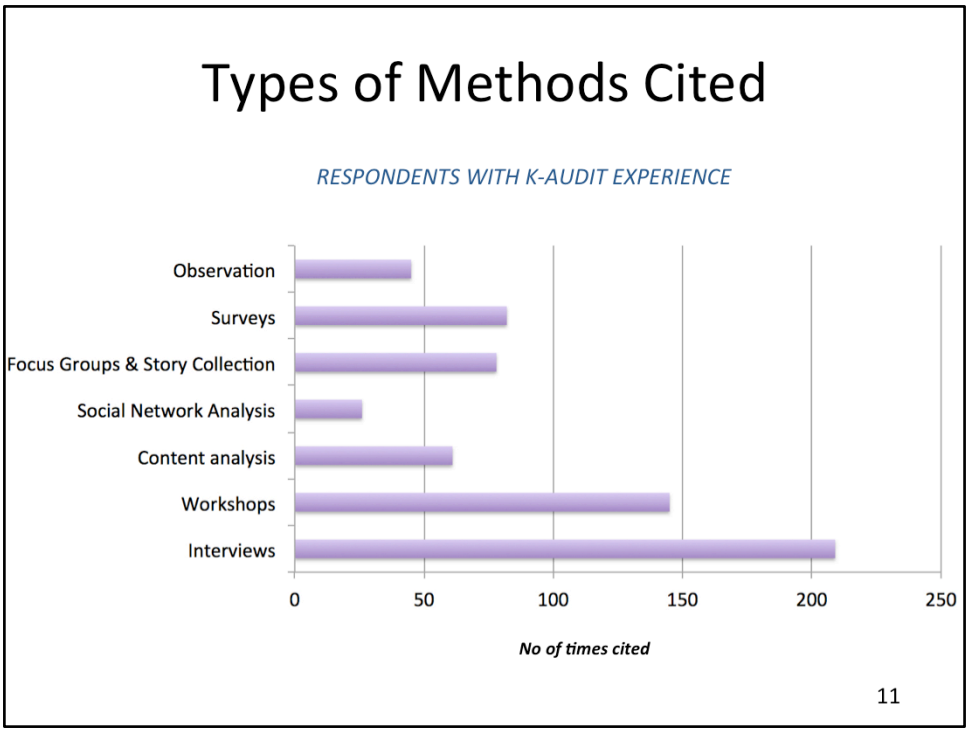
The most common purpose of a knowledge audit is thought to be gaining an understanding of the organisation's knowledge dependencies, risks and needs. This is followed closely by using the audit as an input to the organisation's knowledge management strategy and framework. Other main purposes include improving operational knowledge management practices and improving access to common knowledge resources.

The least cited purposes were using the knowledge audit as an input to an enterprise taxonomy (which is surprising, given the strong focus on a knowledge audit as an inventory of knowledge resources), and the validation of KM practices against external standards or frameworks.



We asked respondents who had experience of knowledge audits what methods they had seen being used in knowledge audits.

It is clear that knowledge auditing is a multi-method approach requiring a range of evidence collection and engagement methods. Most people said they had seen between four and six methods being used. The average number of methods cited was seven.

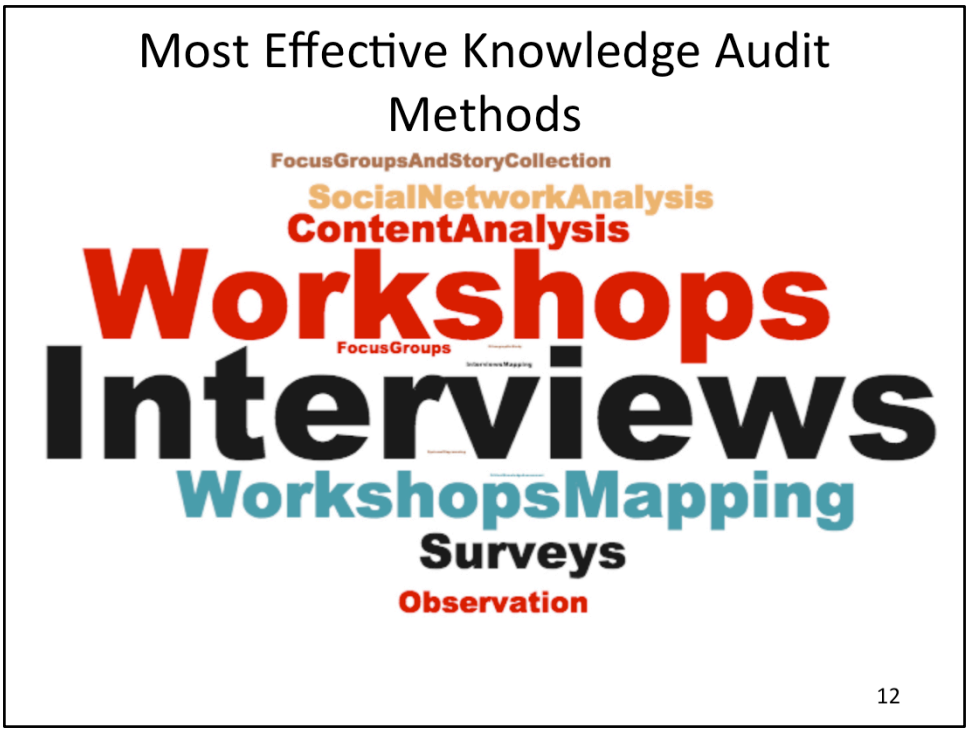


We asked respondents to indicate the methods they had seen being used in knowledge audits.

It is clear that interviews (with senior leadership, operational staff, subject matter experts) are the most favoured form of engagement, followed by workshops. In the mid range, we find use of surveys and focus groups, as well as content analysis. Direct observation and social network analysis were the least cited methods.

Some respondents cited more specialised methods that could be used with interviews or in workshops: systems diagramming, relationship mapping, concept mapping, flow diagrams, rich pictures, and topic clustering.

Some suggested additional methods that work as sensemaking, alignment and analytical processes such as definition of strategic knowledge areas, analysis of lessons learned and review of internal policies and procedures. One respondent reported using online focus groups.



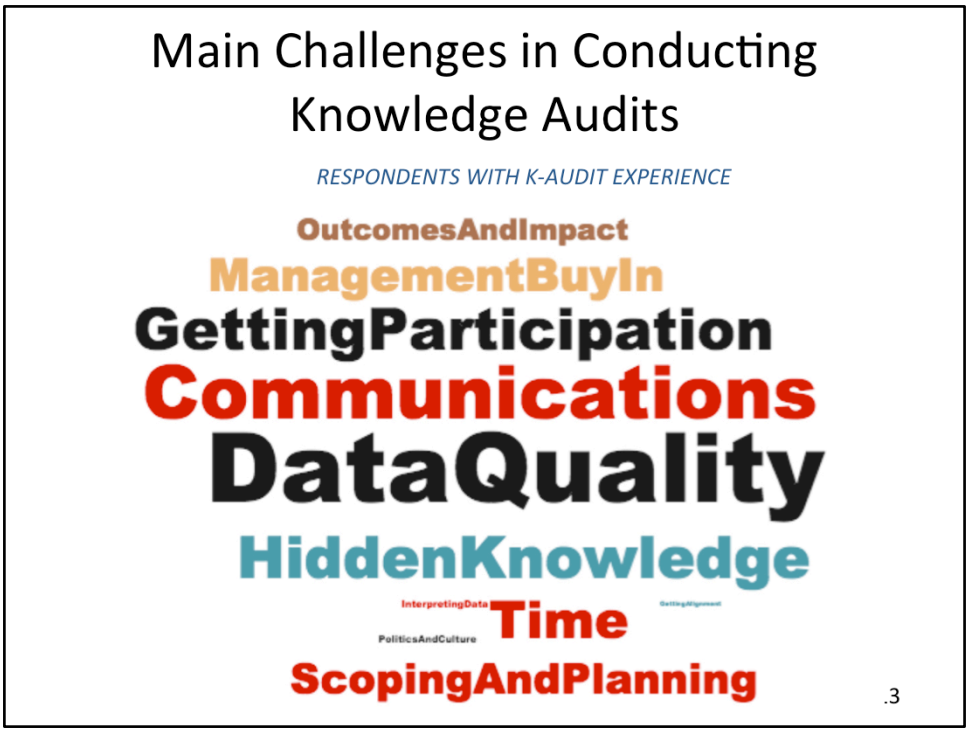
We asked respondents to indicate which methods they found most effective and why. Out of 82 responses, 41 cited two or more methods. Several respondents stated that a combination of methods was usually necessary, and methods would be chosen based on the organisational context and knowledge audit goals.

This tag cloud shows that workshops are almost as preferred as interviews in terms of perceived effectiveness. About half the workshops cited were knowledge mapping workshops. Less knowledge mapping tends to be done in interview format.

Where interviews are preferred it is because of their richness and depth. Interviews are often used in combination with surveys – either the interviews are conducted first to provide guiding questions for surveys, or surveys are used first and interviews are used to probe issues in depth.

Several respondents cited the need to control for bias or limited perspectives arising from interviews by using workshops, knowledge mapping, content analysis, and/or observation. Interviews can also be time consuming to conduct and analyse. This is why they are often used in conjunction with surveys and workshops.

Where workshops are preferred they are preferred for their ability to provide rich pictures of knowledge use and needs, and to get collective views relatively efficiently and effectively. Workshops can also be useful mechanisms for getting understanding and buy-in from participants.



We asked respondents to describe the main challenges they encountered in knowledge audits. This tag cloud describes the common themes.

Getting good quality data is the biggest challenge, and is closely associated with the idea of "hidden knowledge" – the fact that respondents may not be aware of the knowledge they use in their work, there may not be a common understanding of what knowledge is, or an awareness of the value of tacit knowledge, or the knowledge that exists within and between teams. Data for a knowledge audit is scattered and fragmented, and there is a need to know where to look, to build a reliable picture of what is happening at the enterprise level. There may be mistrust or misunderstanding about the goals of an audit, leading to less than honest answers. There is therefore a close connection between data quality and the need to communicate the intent and purpose of an audit at both senior and operational levels, and communicate a common framework for understanding what knowledge is, as well as its value. Politics and culture can also distort responses. There are minor supporting themes around getting alignment around a common understanding of the audit data and what it means, and the risk of a bias towards preferring the status quo, so another challenge is getting the organisation to act on the audit insights and to show useful outcomes and positive impact on performance.

The three themes of Management Buy-In, Getting Participation, and Time are all connected. Senior leadership need a clear picture of what they should expect from the audit, and what kind of commitment is required to conduct it, and they need to have sufficient confidence in the process to be able to act on its findings. Getting participation from a wide spectrum of stakeholders is critical for the quality of the data collected. Time is often a challenge, and knowledge audits often have to trade off the time taken against the quality of the data they want to gather.

Scoping and planning the audit is a mid-range theme, but it influences all the others. It determines the choice and sequence of methods, how stakeholders are engaged and communicated with, how the knowledge auditor analyses and understands the context of the data, and gets alignment around key insights.

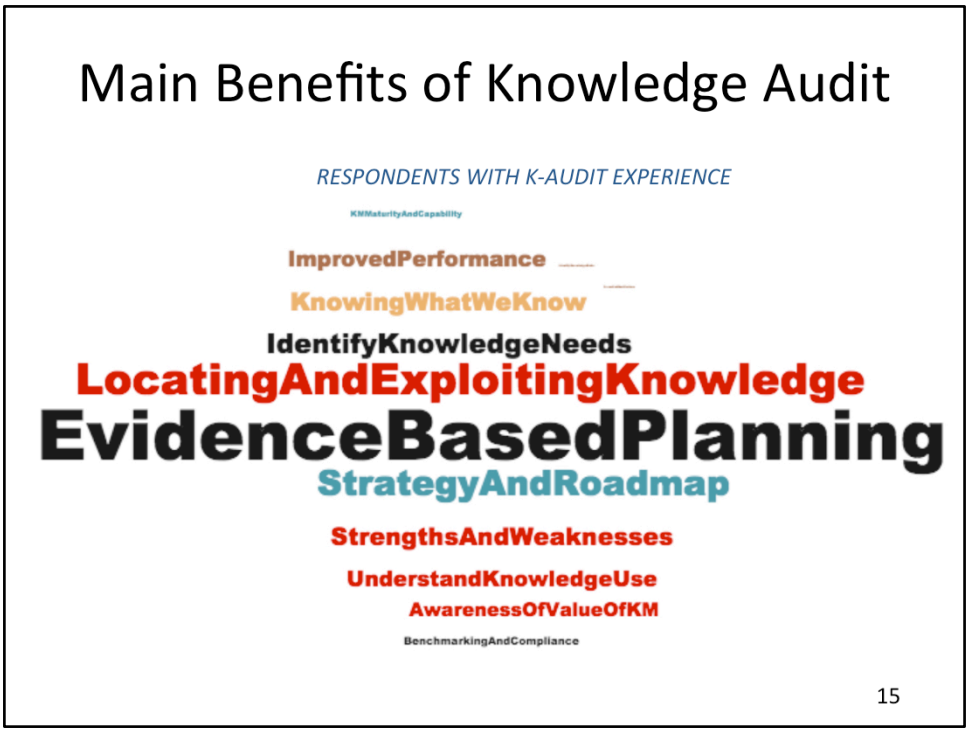
Quotes on Challenges

"The greatest challenge is in getting access to the whole scope of beneficiaries and contributors. Some audits are too narrow and prescribe point solutions to systemic problems." Kate Pugh, United States

"The greatest challenge is in reconciling the sometimes very different perceptions of senior leadership and operational staff." Christian De Neef, Belgium

"The greatest challenge in in deciding on how far to go, and the priority areas. These evolve as you conduct the audit and may not follow senior management assessment of issues, or the initial risk analysis." Ian Fry, Australia

Quotes used with permission



We asked respondents to say what they thought were the main benefits of knowledge audits. This tag cloud describes the common themes.

Providing solid evidence for planning effective knowledge management and better use of knowledge is the most commonly cited benefit. Good evidence can overcome inconsistent understandings of knowledge and how it relates to work, and it can mobilise consensus around action plans. On a larger scale, this can inform a KM strategy and roadmap, and this is associated with a sub-theme of improving organisational, team and personal performance. A side product of a knowledge audit is a better common understanding of what KM is, and greater awareness at operational and leadership levels of the value of knowledge, and of KM, to the business.

Another class of benefits is around the use of the Inventory audit, which provides insights into what the organisation knows, its knowledge gaps and needs, and its knowledge risks. Locating where the knowledge resides can aid in ensuring better knowledge use and improved knowledge flows.

Assessment of KM practices produces an understanding of how knowledge is used in the context of work, and this can aid in the minor sub-theme of assessing KM capabilities and maturity.

Using knowledge audits for benchmarking and compliance against standards is an infrequently cited benefit.

Main Insights

1. There is a wide array of understandings of what a knowledge audit is (both in the research literature and in practice).
2. People experienced in knowledge audits focus less on audits for compliance, quality or benchmarking – more general perceptions of knowledge audits amplify the importance of those types.
3. Knowledge audits are composite activities, combining several audit types, most usually an Inventory of knowledge stocks and flows, combined with an internal or external review of KM practices.
4. People experienced in knowledge audits tend to narrow the range of audit types used in combination, compared with general perceptions.
5. If an Inventory Audit is not conducted, the most common types used are internal or external reviews of KM practices, and audits of the quality of KM.
6. Knowledge audits most commonly focus on knowledge stocks and flows, KM processes, strategic knowledge needs and KM capabilities.
7. Knowledge audits are most commonly used to understand organisational knowledge needs, as input to a KM strategy, and to improve operational-level KM.
8. Knowledge audits use a very wide array of methods, with interviews, workshops and surveys being most favoured. The most effective methods are considered to be interviews for their depth and richness, and workshops for building knowledge maps and building consensus.

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Main Insights

9. The biggest challenges in conducting knowledge audits relate to getting reliable, comprehensive and accurate data covering non-obvious knowledge sources as well as the obvious ones. This is partially connected to how the audit is scoped, the engagement methods deployed, and how communications are managed, particularly in getting consistent understandings of the goals. The second major cluster of challenges relates to the time required for an audit, getting management buy-in, and getting participation from the right people.
10. The most cited benefit from a knowledge audit is its ability to build consensus and provide underpinning evidence for KM planning, and for a KM strategy and roadmap. A second major benefit (particularly relating to Inventory Audits) is its value in locating important knowledge and ensuring effective knowledge access and use.

Thank you to the many respondents who made this survey possible. Several of you indicated your willingness to be interviewed. I will follow up in the coming months.

April 2017

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This survey was conducted as part of my research for an upcoming book on knowledge audits and knowledge mapping. If you have a particularly interesting case study illustrating major challenges and/or benefits in conducting knowledge audits, or illustrating an innovative method or approach, drop me an email.

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April 2017.