

## Knowledge Management - the Next Generation?

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My wife has a new occupation. From 9.00 to 3.00 during the weekdays, she has been entrusted as the sole carer for Freddo, our 9 year-old daughter's Tamagotchi. For the uninitiated amongst readers of *Update*, a Tamagotchi is an electronic pet, which requires feeding, praise, discipline, medicine and play at frequent intervals. In return for this attention, your Tamagotchi matures, and changes its character until (oh joy!) it has a baby of its own - a second generation, and the cycle continues. Last month we reached the sixth generation until tragically, Freddo was left alone for five hours, and died tragically in Louise's handbag. It was a dark day in the Collison household.

So what of *our* occupation as information or knowledge management professionals? How effective are we in developing "next generation" capabilities on our organisations? Let us explore the generations in a little more detail; I'm going to deliberately simplify this into three caricatures in order to draw some distinctions.

### **First generation's focus on Information - exploiting what we already have**

First generation knowledge management works on the principle that *knowledge already exists*, and can be managed in explicit form - the world of codification. It's about making the most what you already have, rather than eliciting or synthesizing anything new. First generation organisations place their emphasis on lessons learned databases, best practice templates, enterprise intranet portals, document and content management systems, taxonomies, metadata and search engines. These vital capabilities have been the preserve of information management professionals

### **Second generation's focus on learning and connecting information with individuals.**

Second generation knowledge management adds two new to the foundations of the first generation knowledge management:

Firstly *new knowledge can be generated through learning*. Second generation organisations invest time in learning - learning before, during and after activities. BP's Peer Assist process, bringing together expertise in person from around the globe right at the start of a project, the US Army's "After Action Review", and post-project appraisals in many organisations are examples of this.

Secondly, *knowledge is "sticky"*, and must be linked to an individual or community of practice. Unless it is a core policy, historical record or legal document, the explicit knowledge captured as information - particularly the unstructured variety - has a finite "half-life" - it decays as people change roles, organisations change shape and markets change emphasis. One way to extend the "shelf-life" of this information is to link it to its originator. Rather than becoming an end in itself, the unstructured information on many corporate intranets becomes an advertisement for a conversation with its originator to gain deeper or more current insights. *Isn't that the ultimate in information provenance?*

The idea of partially out-of date documents on an intranet operating as conversation calling cards might raise the hackles of purist informational professionals. I can

understand this, but having spent fifteen years employed in two major corporates, and worked with many others - I believe it's a pragmatic way to extract more value from the unstructured information which will inevitably exist. Lord Browne, BP's CEO described the light-touch approach to the evolution of BP's intranet as "letting a thousand flowers bloom". By this he was implying that over-zealous information governance might stifle the culture of information-sharing which the organisation needed so badly. So does BP have the "best" intranet in its class today? Probably not. Does it have a workforce who have a heritage of ten years of direct engagement in content creation and sharing? Absolutely yes.

Second generation organisations choose to invest in networks, communities of practice and the technology which makes and supports connection and collaboration between people. It raises the requirement for new capabilities in the support functions - facilitation of learning reviews, and the ability to connect people with others - matching supply with demand, and enabling networking.

### **Third generation's focus on embedding KM into processes and leadership behaviours.**

This is where *sharing knowledge becomes part of day-to-day business*, embedded in processes and reinforced by leadership behaviours, ultimately a part of the culture. In some organisations, financial authority to proceed with project investment will not be granted unless the person seeking funding can demonstrate how they have already learned from others as a part of the business case. This is by leaders who habitually ask "who else might have this problem, and have you asked them?" rather than feeling that their role in life is to provide the answer.

Here's a typical scenario from Centrica to illustrate this point.

A senior director visits a British Gas call centre as part of their induction. They are given the "royal visit" treatment, sat next to the best customer service agents, listen to all the best calls - but sooner or later (often with barely concealed glee) they identify a problem.

*"Aha! I see that your performance figures on key performance indicator x are down this month. Have you applied six sigma and lean manufacturing principles to tackle this yet? I really think that you should."*

How much more powerful if they were heard to say: *"Hmmm. It looks like you have a problem with key performance indicator x. Have you talked with your counterpart in the call centre in Newcastle or Southampton to see if they have similar issues? You don't have to solve this yourself you know..."*

What a difference. Rather than providing the answer, this leader encouraging the person concerned to demonstrate that asking for help isn't a sign of weakness - it's a sign of strength.

### **Four knowledge-sharing syndromes.**

Knowledge-friendly leaders acknowledge and take responsibility for addressing the syndromes which impact groups of people in organisations, and suppress sharing. We often see them taking hold of struggling communities, rampant during benchmarking activities, and contagious whenever the words “sharing good practice” are mentioned.

Let’s look at four of them.

**Not-invented-here.** This is one of the better-known syndromes and one which successful, intelligent people are susceptible to. NIH presents such symptoms as *“Ah, but we’re different here”*; *“You’d have to work her to understand why that approach wouldn’t work”*; *“We have unique problems”*, and an unspoken *“Actually, we like coming up with unique solutions!”* NIH can build momentum over time, causing a business unit to develop strong resistance to any external ideas, sometimes under the cover of “having a culture of innovation”. The reality can actually be a “culture of re-invention”.

**Big-boys-don’t-cry.** “I didn’t get where I was today, by asking for help!” is the sentiment at the heart of this one. John Gray, bestselling author of “Men are from Mars, Women are from Venus” would position this as more of a male problem, and I suspect he’s correct. *“My colleagues will think I’m incompetent”* lies beneath the surface, and the strap line could read *“Success = Self-sufficiency”*. But it’s not all introspection - “Once I’ve solved my problem in my own way, I’ll be happy to share my solution.” Hmm. Isn’t this why real men never ask for directions, and that the TomTom In-car navigator was the best-selling gadget last Christmas?

These two syndromes attack the demand-side of the knowledge-sharing equation, but what of the supply-side?

**Shrinking violet syndrome.** This is a subtle ailment, manifested in such words as *“Oh, we’re not doing anything special here.”* or *“We haven’t got anything that would work for others - our approaches are very context-sensitive.”* Sometimes a deflection response will kick-in: *“Why not talk to the real experts - we’re just a bunch of amateurs”*.

**Tall poppy syndrome.** A close relative of shrinking violet, the tall-poppy sufferer fears attention, scrutiny, critique or any call upon their time. *“I’m not going to say we have good practices here - I’ll get shot down in flames!”* is typical. Alternatively *“If I share this, we’ll get inundated with phone calls and site visits - let’s just keep our heads down and get on with it.”*

So with threats to the supply and demand-side of knowledge-sharing, is there a cultural antibiotic which can be prescribed? A knowledge-sharing “flu jab”?

We all know that there isn’t - but there are conditions which can increase the organisation’s immune-system.

Creating a **common language** is a great place to start. The use of common frameworks to internally benchmark performance can make a huge difference. You've probably seen these in action - any good consultant worth their salt has a "maturity model" in his or her back pocket to suit every occasion. Typically they work in the same way as competency frameworks, breaking a particular capability down into a series of levels, with descriptive text for each one. When used at the organisational level rather than the individual level; in different departments, divisions or business units, people realise that they have a currency for sharing ideas because they can all relate to the same set of definitions and levels. With a common language in place, it is then easier to elicit **offers and requests** in the way BP did through their Operational Excellence programme. 100 business units around the world used the same framework to assess their performance level for a series of key areas: managing corrosion, forecasting production, managing contractors, and employee engagement - 26 areas in total. Having completed the self assessment, it was then easy for one business unit to discover other parts of the company from whom they could learn to improve an area of weakness, and others with whom they could share a particular strength.

*"You mean you've got level 5 performance for managing corrosion? Fantastic! Can I come over and see how you do it?"* Simple eh? Well almost, except that the world of operations in the oil industry is a pretty macho environment, and big-boys-don't-cry and not-invented-here go hand-in-hand with a macho culture. We found a way to combat this by asking every business unit: "What three offers of help does your business unit have?" and "What three requests?". When all of a manager's peers are part of the same process, they find it much easier to share, and talk about where they most need help. That's right - we're not just asking you to bare your soul - all of your peers are doing the same thing. This simple intervention yielded 300 offers and 300 requests for help, and spawned an internal dating agency operation that Cilla Black would have been proud of! More to the point, it got 100 operations managers to swallow their pride and start talking with their peers.

As with any syndrome, a key step is to get the sufferers to recognise and discuss it. Just hop up on the couch, would you please?

So am I suggesting that information professionals now need to become industrial psychologists in order to preserve their careers? Not for a moment. For me, true knowledge management has always been a holistic, hybrid discipline of information management, organisational development, social anthropology, behavioural psychology, change management and process engineering - a heady cocktail! As a one-time chemist, research scientist, engineer, IT professional, internal organisational development consultant, change and KM director, HR professional and now independent management consultant - I can certainly vouch for the fresh light that a multi-disciplinary career throws on this subject.

For those information professionals who chose to focus and hone their skills on first generation knowledge management, I'm sure that there will continue to be many

opportunities and rewarding challenges for years to come ahead. However, I would encourage you to consider whether you could enlarge your role to participate in the creation of new knowledge, the elicitation of vital lessons learned for your organisation, the facilitation of knowledge exchange through communities. Perhaps it's time that we took some steps to keep up with more aspects of the exuberant social life of information in our organisation, (as John Seely Brown might have put it), rather than paternalistically waiting up for that information to arrive back home, late again?

In closing, which generation(s) of knowledge management do you see at work in your organisation? Could it be that there are people who have a vested interest in stunting its growth? Technology vendors perhaps queue up to persuade us that only their portal will give us the edge. Members of an internally resourced team might be reluctant to develop the capability in others, and to embed knowledge management "into the line".

Are you, or could you chose to be responsible for nurturing knowledge management in your organisation? Or are you keeping it firmly tied to your apron strings?

We would all do well to reflect on the fate of Freddo!

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