

Knowledge management under siege

It's time to go 'soft' and answer the fundamental question – 'What is knowledge?' – before concentrating on how to manage it with the ever-increasing selection of fancy solutions on offer from consultants. Dr Leandro Herrero explains

If you have been on planet Earth for the past decade, you won't need an introduction to the concept of the knowledge economy and its derivatives: knowledge workers, information society, knowledge management, or even post-industrial knowledge revolution. Today, knowledge is the agenda.

It is not surprising that knowledge management conferences have now become common occurrences. Recently, I found myself at one described ambitiously as a 'summit'. After a rather unpromising opening session I opted for one of the so-called 'parallel tracks', a workshop on another permutation of 'knowledge', 'development', 'management' and 'advantage'. The workshop was led by a senior consultant from one of the top consulting firms, who went straight to 'delivering knowledge management solutions'. I did not make myself very popular when I interrupted: "If you are talking about solutions, could you please tell us first, what is the problem?"

Well-trained in consulting skills as he was, he turned the question back to the audience: "OK, let's talk, good question, what do you think?" We were not short of answers. Most of them fell into three categories, either the 'problem' was (a) to connect as many people as possible or (b) to share as much information as possible. The third category (c), which included both a and b, was defended by the consultant himself.

Let's reflect on these categories. Connectivity is rationale number one. Under this school of thought, the issue is to connect – with or without wires – as many people as possible with as many computers and databases as possible. The tendency here is for bigger

servers and bigger intranets, more IT power and more technological gadgets, the goal of which is to serve a 24-hour/seven days a week connected knowledge worker. However, it is often forgotten that when the only tool available is a hammer, everything looks like a nail; equally, when the only knowledge management approach is IT, everything looks like a bigger server and a multimedia webpage.

Sharing information is the second rationale. From this perspective, people usually talk about availability of information, use of multiple sources, intranets, portals that let you get anything you need, and, above all, unlimited access to all the information you want. However, as the saying goes, it just may be that 'the information you have is not what you want, the information you want is not what you need, and what you need...may not be available'. Yes, pollution by white noise is often an unintended consequence of the sharing philosophy.

But, isn't it true that connectivity of people and sharing of information must be the two main pillars of any knowledge management strategy? It would be ridiculous to argue against the fantastic opportunities that the new technologies offer us on the information side. They have transformed work and jobs. Research that took days or weeks can now be done in minutes using Internet sources. You can work real-time, online, with colleagues in Sydney, New York and Rome. If you need software support, or to buy an airline ticket or sell some shares, just dial a number with no geography attached, and someone will answer in your own language. From where? From a San Francisco office or a Dublin call centre depending on the time of day. If you need more convincing, you have been holidaying on that desert island for too long.

Putting the literal into literature

However, it is possible that the knowledge-consulting industry, among others, is providing beautiful solutions to the wrong problems. Connectivity and multi-source sharing is perhaps a given. I happen to support any possible sophistication in this area. But connectivity is to knowledge management what grammar is to literature. Imagine English literature taught with no reference to Shakespeare and total focus on punctuation and the misuse of the passive sentence, or Spanish literature without Cervantes but with plenty of ready-made phrases of the type needed to order a *cerveza* in a bar in Marbella.

In its drive to get the nuts and bolts of connectivity in place, the IT/knowledge management consulting/solutions industry has forgotten the crucial characters in the plot: people. Instead, we are provided with highly sophisticated, internally consistent, super-integrated, elegant, attractive and very impressive plumbing systems. If MIS stands for Management Information Systems, knowledge management, as Yogesh Malhotra (www.brint.com) says, may be just MISunderstood.

Let me go back to the sharing issue. The ultimate goal, according to many of the delegates in

It is possible that the knowledge-consulting industry, among others, is providing beautiful solutions to the wrong problems

that workshop I attended, was to share the maximum amount of knowledge with the maximum number of people. As one of the delegates put it: "Everybody wants to share all possible knowledge, if only we all could be well connected."

Facing some uncomfortable truths

That level of naivety made me restless again. Having earned the reputation of being a disruptive member of the audience, I pointed out that it was not by any means clear that the delegate's words were true. Knowledge is after all the only proclaimed asset that the worker/manager/employee has. Therefore, 'total sharing' must surely occur only under certain conditions – say, in high-trust, high-loyalty and reasonably stable organisations. At least, I proposed, this should be considered as a reasonable working hypothesis. And, since I have mentioned it, "What about discussing trust first?"

I did not win that one. The 'summit' went on for another day. I raised the question again, this time with the conference organiser. I suggested that applications and solutions were only one side of the knowledge management equation, that I had heard no-one refer to knowledge itself, cognitive models, people's cognition, let alone philosophy or any single reference in passing to, say, Plato. Yes, I wanted to be provocative again. I said that, surely, one could not market the event as a knowledge summit with only a plate full of Intranets and connectivity. This was like a gastronomic menu composed only of desserts. Where were all the human knowledge disciplines?

She looked into my eyes, hesitated and asked, "As in finance, HR, IT?" I took her aside to cover my own embarrassment. "Not quite," I said, "I meant psychology, social sciences and even, if you want [note my capitulation], artificial intelligence." She became very confused, almost upset, and assured me that the programme had been compiled after months of thorough customer research. Defeated by the overwhelming supremacy of customer satisfaction that legitimises everything, but was never the source of the Walkman or the Post-its of this world, I made for the biscuits. They were the best part of the conference.

I have recounted my two-day conference in some detail because I think that it is typical of the current approach to knowledge management: domination by the applications and solutions world and virtual ignorance of the role played by individuals and their brains. Indeed, knowledge management runs the risk of being trivialised as it was during that meeting. The applications world, the connectors, intranets-only-minds, and ever-bigger data warehouse practitioners, have no time for 'philosophical discussions on knowledge'. There is plenty of grammar, but not much literature.

I have an old, personal, management rule: the most important management question is 'What's the question?' (My collateral rule is that the most dangerous answer to any management question is 'It depends...'; but that is a topic for another day.) Before embarking on another expensive IT project



The tree of knowledge: but with knowledge management, what question are we trying to answer?

for a multimedia and fancy corporate webpage, in the pursuit of knowledge management, leaders and managers must ask loudly, 'What is the question that we are trying to answer?'

Peter Drucker has his own way of describing how knowledge was first applied to tools, products and processes (industrial revolution), then to human work (Taylorism and others in the so-called 'scientific management' movement) and, today, knowledge is being applied to knowledge itself. But what amazes me is how knowledge is absent from the knowledge management applications industry – and how the concept is taken for granted. What knowledge is, how it is created, how it can be transferred, how it works in people's brains, etc, is largely ignored. If Drucker is right, I don't see how we can 'apply knowledge to knowledge' without studying knowledge itself, let alone bring it to the management table.

We have plenty of questions and an unsolicited supermarket of prêt-à-porter answers from the commoditised knowledge management industry. For many of those questions I personally have either a

**I don't see how
we can apply
knowledge to
knowledge
without studying
knowledge
itself**

suspicion of what the answer is not, or some clues as to where to find the answers. I must confess that only a limited path takes me to the IT arena – and this is the easy route, it is concrete and reachable, provided that I know what the question is first.

Henry Mintzberg, business professor at INSEAD (France) and McGill University (Canada), says, “The real challenge in crafting strategy lies in detecting the subtle discontinuities that may undermine a business in the future...and for that there is no technique, no program, just a sharp mind in touch with the situation.” Sharp minds are not the exclusive prerogative of a management tribe: none of us is smarter than all of us. Only the serious collaboration of the IT technocrats, the business leaders and (social) psychology/cognitive professionals can convert knowledge management initiatives to a level of true core competence for the firm. Leave the whole thing to the ‘techies’, and you will get brilliant plumbing systems; leave it exclusively to the ‘philosophers’ (probably not a serious threat in your company) and you won’t get the business done; leave it to consultants, who regard knowledge management as manna, and you will get someone else’s intranet and a pristine electronic brochure in cyberspace. If there is a management area desperately in need of synthesis, this is the one.

As for a knowledge management strategy for your firm, Mintzberg also says, “Strategy-making

is an immensely complex process involving the most sophisticated, subtle and at times subconscious of human cognitive and social processes... While hard data may inform the intellect, it is largely soft data that generates wisdom. They may be difficult to analyse, but they are indispensable for synthesis – the key to strategy making.”

The only way to rescue knowledge management from its siege is to bring the ‘soft’ of knowledge-on-knowledge to the party. My question remains, “What’s the question?” SM

Further reading

- L Edvinsson and M S Malone. *Intellectual Capital*. Piatkus, (1997).
- D Leonard-Burton. *Wellsprings of knowledge*. Harvard Business School Press, (1995).
- H Mintzberg. The new management mindset, *Leader to Leader*, Spring (1997).
- H Mintzberg. *Mintzberg on Management*. Free Press (1989).
- T A Stewart. *Intellectual Capital: The new wealth of organisations*. Batman Books, (1998).
- J Seely Brown and Paul Duguid. *The social life of information*. Harvard Business School Press, (2000).
- K E Sveiby. The new organisational wealth. Berrett-Koeler, (1997).

•Dr Leandro Herrero is a UK-based senior executive in a leading, global pharmaceutical company and a visiting professor at DUXX Business Leadership School (Mexico) where he teaches human capital architecture: building corporate IQ.

For further information about

**SCRIP
MAGAZINE**

or any of our products, please contact
Diana Yates on Tel/Fax: +44 (0)1908 508551
or e-mail: dianayates1@supanet.com