



New Year 2013 - Knowledge and Networks



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Knowledge lives in Networks

Networks have been a core component of Knowledge Management since its inception in the 90s, and are seeing a renaissance at the moment due to the easy availability of networking technology. However what is new, is the recognition that networks and knowledge are inseparable, and that networks are the home of knowledge - where knowledge is created, shared, validated and re-used.

Knowledge is now increasingly seen to live within Networks.

This newsletter explores many of the implications of this new idea.

The culture change - seeing knowledge as collective property



[Nick Milton](#)

Perhaps the most important culture change required to support Knowledge Management in an organisation, is the shift to seeing Knowledge as something that is not individual property, but collective property - something that is held within the practitioner network.

This is a big culture change for companies where individuals are promoted and rewarded based on "what they know", for companies with an "expert culture", and for companies which rely on rigid adherence to manuals and to Standard Operating Procedures. But if we are to deliver the value that collective knowledge can deliver, we need to recognise that knowledge lives in the network.

In [this blog post](#), I describe the necessary culture change as follows;

- From "I know" to "We know"
- From "Knowledge is mine" to "Knowledge is ours"
- From "Knowledge is owned" to "Knowledge is shared"

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- From "Knowledge is personal property" to "Knowledge is collective/community property"
- From "Knowledge is personal advantage" to "Knowledge is company advantage"
- From "Knowledge is personal" to "Knowledge is inter-personal"
- From "I defend what I know" to "I am open to better knowledge"
- From "not invented here (i.e. by me)" to "invented in my community"
- From "New knowledge competes with my personal knowledge" to "new knowledge improves my personal knowledge"
- From "other people's knowledge is a threat to me" to "our shared knowledge helps me"
- From "Admitting I don't know is weakness" to "Admitting I don't know is the first step to learning"

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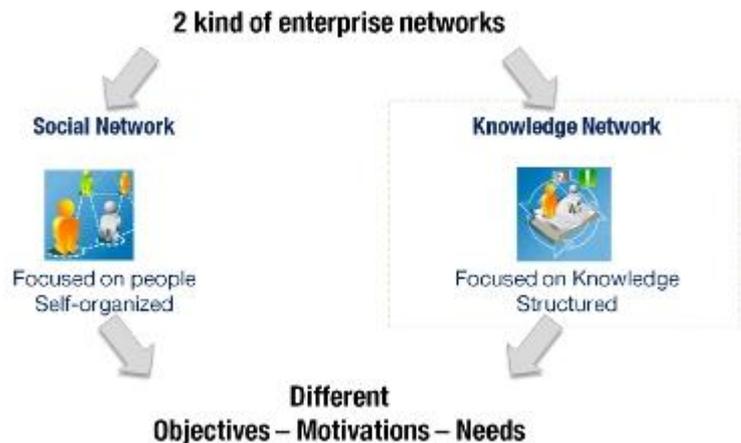
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Knowledge networks and social networks - a graphic

The graphic below is from our colleagues in Knoco france, and was drawn to illustrate the difference between the [Vedalis knowledge networking tool, "AKH"](#), and ordinary social networking tools.



Click on the picture to access the FAQ

"Knowledge in networks", a report from KM World



Stephanie

[Barnes](#)

One of the themes at KM World in October 2012 was that the value of knowledge management is in the network, i.e. the value comes from the connections and the collective whole, rather than individual people, activities, processes, or technology. This was a shift from previous years where there was more focus on technology.

That the value of knowledge is in the network, is something we have known for a long, long, time. There has long been acknowledgement that "it's who you know," in business and in life. What has changed in the last 10 years is the ability to stay connected to people and to connect with people in geographically diverse locations through the use of technology, but it's still about, "who you know."

Our networks provide access to opportunities that we might not have been able to discover on our own. They pass along interesting articles, books, and other pieces of knowledge and information. Someone says something and that makes us think of something else, or ask a question that's not been asked before. Someone else builds on our ideas, it becomes an iterative process and suddenly we have created something new, some innovation that didn't exist before. When someone in our work network moves to another company or role, we all-of-a-sudden have to fill the void left in our knowledge network: who else knows what that person knew, how long will it take their replacement to learn the things we need them to know, what do we do until the gap is filled?

Organizations that go through down-sizing/right-sizing/lay-offs/retirements all have to figure out what to do about the impact on the knowledge networks of their organizations. Those that don't take the loss of knowledge and the disruption to the network into consideration are negatively impacted by the loss/turn-over. So what can organizations do to try to keep some of that knowledge when people leave the organization or create opportunities for innovation?

Knowledge management activities like [communities of practice](#), mentoring programs, [lessons learned processes](#), [after action reviews](#), expertise location activities, to name a few, and the technology that supports them, all help to capture and share knowledge as well as make connections that might not happen otherwise. Knowledge management activities also give the knowledge longevity that it might not have otherwise.

Once the knowledge management practices are in place there is a need to make sure that it remains relevant through regular review and updating processes. This relevancy check could be as simple as reviewing documents and knowledge bases, or sending staff to conferences and training courses. It all becomes part of the learning and continuous improvement that the organization desired by implementing knowledge management in the first

place .

The new role of the expert



[Nick Milton](#)

In many organisations, knowledge is traditionally seen as the property of the experts. If you want knowledge, you go to the expert, rather than to the expert. In companies with relatively inexperienced staff, due to high turnover or high growth rate, you can understand this viewpoint, but taken to extremes, it becomes short-sighted. For example, one company we have worked with puts its best experts in the toughest projects, which effectively leaves the rest of the company short of technical leadership.

So if knowledge is held by networks, what's the role of the expert in the new KM world?

The new role of the expert, is to move from being a Doer, to being a Teacher; from being an individual who applies their knowledge to do a good job, to an individual who shares their knowledge with the network, and develops the knowledge of the network, so that everyone in the organisation can do a better job. The expert is no longer the person who holds the most knowledge, but the person who shares the most knowledge.

You see this model in many companies. In one oil company, the most experienced staff become Network Leaders, who have joint accountability for maintaining the knowledge base, and the knowledge assets, and for building the learning networks and communities of practice. In a leading FMCG company experts from all operating hubs work within "Centers of excellence" who maintain company standards and Best Practices. In a third example, the role of Global Consultant is the pinnacle of the technical ladder, where the expert consults to many projects, and plays a key role in the Communities of Practice and in developing content for the company Wiki.

Collective knowledge - a sports analogy



[Javier Martinez](#) No one works alone. Quite the contrary, we work in teams, we work on projects and often with several members geographically spread across the globe. The problems we face are so complex and change happens so quickly that no individual has all the knowledge needed to solve them properly. Moreover, in many cases we have to generate knowledge on the fly because we face new situations for which we don't necessarily have the knowledge that could apply.

Historically, companies were designed hierarchically, so that work happens in specialized silos that barely relate to each other in order to avoid ambiguity. What's more, no one ever taught us how to work in networks and share knowledge, as the entire educational curriculum is based on individual performance. The challenge of collaborative work is to give access to the collective knowledge that emerges from the interaction between people. That collective knowledge cannot be generated separately by each person because it is built from the sum of different knowledge, is created from the relationships established, challenges encountered and solved, mistakes made and learned, the experiences that each employee brings, etc.

These instances of collaboration break down the silos and hierarchies and lead the company towards horizontality. As proverb says "I do not need to know everything but to have the phone number of the one who knows." The big challenge is how we make the whole to be more than the sum of its parts.

Sports teams are great examples of knowledge organizations working as a network. In a football team, the players, who are the key roles as they hold the most valuable knowledge, are located in the lowest place in the organization hierarchy. However, no one has more power and they are, by far, the best paid professionals. Nevertheless, the performance of a team cannot be explained by the sum of the knowledge of each individual component (and history is replete with examples). The team's performance lies not in the knowledge of each individual but in a higher level, the collective knowledge, which is the result of how the players relate and interact with each other.

It is perfectly possible that a team with low individual knowledge and high collective knowledge regularly defeats other teams that have better individuals. How is that collective knowledge generated? By collaborating and sharing. Professional teams train every day, they practice for thousands of hours not so much because they need to

improve the individual knowledge of its members but to increase their collective knowledge. In order to achieve that goal, although some part of the training session is devoted to improve each specialist specific aspects of the game (the forwards to shoot at goal with their weaker leg, goalkeepers to learn to play with their feet, etc.), most of the time is spent on learning to function as a team, to automate all movements and ultimately, to achieve memory play. Our companies have a lot to learn from professional teams of any sport.

Networks and Manuals



[Nick Milton](#)

If Knowledge lives in Networks, then what is the role of the manuals, the procedures, and the standard operating procedures?

The answer to this question is easy - the manual becomes the documentation of the knowledge of the network. Let me explain, using the story of the Xerox Repair Technicians.

The Xerox technicians used to keep 2 sets of manuals. One was the "official head office manual", and was kept in pristine condition. The other was the "working manual" - full of annotations, with bits crossed out, and new bits of paper inserted. When managers came to call, the working manual was hidden under the desk, and the official manual brought out. When the engineers met a difficult problem, it was the working manual that came to the rescue.

This was an example of where the official manual was NOT "the documentation of the knowledge of the network." In the end, Xerox decided to create an online system, called Eureka, where the network could document their knowledge, and which could supplant the official manual.

So if the manual is to reflect "what the network knows", then that knowledge needs to be sought, gathered and validated, and the manual needs to be constantly checked, discussed, reviewed, and updated as new knowledge is discovered. Then the knowledge can live in the network, and still be documented in the manual.

Introducing Newcomers to the networks



[Ian Corbett](#)

If Knowledge lives in Networks, then the way to introduce newcomers to knowledge, is to integrate them into the relevant networks.

Whenever we take visitors to see the work we are doing to develop pre-schools in the South African Townships, 9 times out of 10 they will comment on the sense of community they experience there. And underlying that is the sense that everyone knows everybody - it is a network. If you need something, all you need do is ask and quick as a flash you have the name of who can help you. From there, technology takes over, in this case a cell phone - everyone is connected!

So imagine, for a moment, being catapulted from this connected world into a space devoid of familiar faces. At first it is a scary space to be in, but as you look around, you realise that the other people in this void, unlike you, are connected, just like you used to be. The sense of loss deepens, and gradually as you feel opportunity after opportunity slipping away, a sense of frustration begins to take hold. You begin to disengage.

Interestingly, this experience (described by a young chemical engineering post-graduate) mimics that of many young professionals from non-township environments entering closely networked organisations. I often wonder whether organisations in which situations like these arise have ever taken the time to calculate the "opportunity cost". I also wonder how many potentially good newcomers are unnecessarily lost to organisations in these early stages of onboarding, which also comes at a high cost.

Knowledge Management to improve networking skill and early knowledge transfer can play a key role in overcoming such problems, particularly when it is integrated with Human Resource and Organisational Development practices. When it is done well, it is possible to significantly reduce the time to productive competence in a new environment. But perhaps more importantly, it accelerates the development of a sense of belonging, putting a great platform in place to build a career going forward whilst underpinning the investment in employment.

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