

Knowledge in Action - Issue 17

Swarm creativity

Historically knowledge management has focused on what we know and enabling critical knowledge flows. But we live in an increasingly ambiguous and unpredictable world where there may not be an accessible knowledge base to draw on. To sharpen foresight we need to redirect our attention and learn how to work with the unknown, the unspoken questions and assumptions and undercurrents in the collective unconscious.

Henley's Knowledge Management Forum brought together 15 experts, with at least 300 years' experience in the fields of knowledge and learning, to uncover what is holding their attention in terms of the challenges of a disorderly world. Through 'swarm creativity' they helped us understand where knowledge management could support organisational foresight. Vital lessons emerged with respect to the findings and the process itself.



We live in a complex and ambiguous world. We have to embrace the unknown as well as the known, sharpen our instincts for differences between what works now and the factors that will reshape the future. Then we can prepare for what is to come. Within organisations we develop a fairly singular perspective of our industry system, which can blinker foresight. Attention to the present may narrow expectations of the future. Looking forward realistically needs more than a single mind or established teams to recognise the possibilities. It needs real progress in collective sense-making between dispersed thinkers in order to understand what is required for intelligent enterprise.

“Part of the answer is the permission to talk about the elephant in the room, the broccoli in the milk, the taboos, the nonsensical, the moose on the table. How do you get permission to talk about these forbidden topics? It is difficult because of the relationship capital and the individual’s lifetime investment.”

Karl-Erik Svelby, Professor in Knowledge Management, Hanken Business School, Helsinki



Henley’s Knowledge Management Forum brought together leaders in the field, to consider new ‘truths’ for knowledge management. Rather than research which looks backward, our aim was to search forward to establish a collective sense of the future agenda for managing knowledge. Professor Leif Edvinsson labelled it a ‘Fore-search Fiesta’. Both the process and the foresight that came out of the session offer essential food for thought for knowledge managers.

The process

The event was designed to encourage ‘swarm creativity’. This draws on lessons from ant and bee colonies, which adapt and thrive by acting together without everyone deliberately working in harmony, and without any individual having a disproportionate influence on the collective action.

A human swarm of motivated experts brings different perspectives to bear. In their daily practice, they make independent choices about what to pay attention to. When they come together, in a process that encourages them to gather around what fires their imagination, their disparate views and experience can coalesce without a predetermined end game. In a high trust environment, governed by few rules, they edge towards uncovering new ways of working effectively. Their divergent views and expertise creatively confront existing assumptions, yet they maintain coherence by adhering to a simple set of rules about respect, courtesy, mutual help and concern for other’s time and energy.

At our event, each invited expert spoke for five minutes to share a belief about KM that they had changed and describe how they felt their new ‘truth’ would create new priorities for KM. The subjects they covered are outlined in the box (on the back page). Delegates then clustered around speaker topics that fascinated them, to develop each insight further by applying their knowledge, experience and understanding to the issue. Throughout the afternoon every speaker hosted a discussion, and every speaker had the opportunity to follow their passion to develop others.

The benefits of fore-search

All the speakers felt that they had engaged in a stimulating afternoon of mental gymnastics. The stretch came from the breadth of well-respected experience in the room, combined with a relative unfamiliarity with each other’s perspectives.

Within this event, participants found that by focusing on the unknown, the unquestioned assumptions and unspoken questions, it helped break the connections that tied them to the past and to discover hidden patterns and ideas in their fragmentary discussion. Together they re-envisioned knowledge management, identifying the unresolved challenges and how they interlink.

Organisations benefit from this sort of process as a way to develop foresight, because it moves attention beyond preconceptions. Those involved are unbound by a collective sense of what is currently sacrosanct, or by rules for a predetermined outcome. The diverse perspectives help everyone get a measure of the bigger picture, whilst their shared foundation gives the experts a common understanding of the past and present that can be woven into future thinking. Each participant goes away with a different perspective, but the resonant experience provides a foundation for building a change momentum rooted in the combination of their collective common sense.

Implications for organisations and knowledge practitioners

Managing may feel like a daily battle to restore order to the growing messiness of business activity, but potentially we need the opposite: intelligent ways of making sense of the mess in the message. To manage the often unacknowledged messiness in organisations requires redirecting attention at the level of strategy, processes and operation, until fore-search becomes an institutional capability, which requires some different knowledge management activities.

Teasing out the meaningful patterns entangled in social webs provides foresight about what needs to change. Some have called this capability 'disciplined speculation' – a systematic way to surface and articulate the unconscious preferences which could become new waves of opportunity. It's different from scenario planning, but helps the organisation redirect attention towards an underlying momentum for change. Yet much depends on how we use metaphor to communicate the message. Because metaphor affects the way we view what is possible.

A key catalyst is a climate where people have the confidence to speak out and act from positions of uncertainty. Another catalytic condition is when everyone feels leadership responsibility for re-envisioning what matters, where they have influence to create momentum for change.

Web 2.0 enterprises will then evolve different forms

The social media are stirring up forces for greater democratisation and challenging some established views of leadership. Ultimately some small organisations will become leaderless in the conventional sense of the term, but leaderful in the sense of operating through disaggregated decision making that senses and experiments at the edge in response to external developments. There are issues of scalability, how to retain passion when distanced from the immediate issues. Possibilities for larger organisations include deliberately opening option spaces for individuals to colonise, mining self-tagged fragments of personal narratives to find the patterns in the collective stories, facilitating large-scale conversations and encouraging the randomness of social media. These apparently messy activities have the potential to catalyse curiosity, confidence and courage, which increases the capability for new insights and innovation.

“One thing that keeps you focusing on the incremental rather than the radical is that the measures make it easier to show ROI. You already know what you are aiming for, and the gauge is already installed. The efficiency box traps you.”

Julia Kirby, editor at large, *Harvard Business Review*



“A social capacity does something to the organisation. It has value in its non-controlled hit-and-miss randomness. Can the focus on the customer and the focus on random interactions between internal people co-exist?”

Steve Andrews, University College London Hospitals



Most organisations are just starting on this journey. Some have already embraced the challenge of engaging the passion of people in webs of relationships, but still define their purpose and focus in industrial economy terms. Others have moved to a stage prioritising knowing and learning as the underpinning of business success, but still focusing on owning and protecting the resultant knowledge.

One future organisational format our Knowledge Management Forum members foresee from these dynamics is something like an archipelago, which members called the 'state of mine'. For details of how to access the research on the state of mine, please call or email using the contacts below. If innovation and change continue to escalate, the organisational form most suited to adapt and thrive will be the one where thinking differently about knowledge and learning in relationships is deeply embedded in a structure of connected islands of engaged passion. Swarm creativity is one way to institutionalise the process of thinking ahead to say 'where next?' and constantly take the overview to see where the future lies.

The issues explored in the session

- Hidden messiness blocks the efficiency of formal processes. **Verna Allee, co-founder and CEO, Valuenetworks.com.**
- Convergence of 'agile' organisation thinking and social collaboration. What is required to link the two activities and place them on the corporate agenda? **Raj Datta, vice president and chief knowledge officer, MindTree.**
- How do we systematise future search to find the best options? **Leif Edvinsson, Professor of Intellectual Capital, Lund University, Sweden; inspirator and CEO of Universal Networking Intellectual Capital.**
- How do you shift from a pure 'labour' strategy to a labour and knowledge strategy? **Richard McDermott, president, McDermott Consulting.**
- Working with fragments not overviews. How do we break the connectivity and find the coherence in fragmented material through micro narratives? **Dave Snowden, founder and chief scientific officer, Cognitive Edge.**
- Leadership by the many. Where do you find the leaderful organisation? **Karl-Erik Svelby, Professor in Knowledge Management, Hanken Business School, Helsinki.**
- How do you find unconscious patterns and undercurrents in organisations? **Daan Andriessen, Professor of Intellectual Capital, INHOLLAND University of Professional Education, The Netherlands.**
- Why aren't we learning from crises? Emergency may be the source of insight for emergence. **Elena Antonacopolou, Professor of Organizational Behaviour, University of Liverpool Management School.**
- Can an organisation be focused on incremental innovation alongside heightened awareness to outside knowledge and radical innovation? **Chris Collison, independent consultant and adviser.**
- How can knowledge deep in organisations about the impact of strategic decisions be heard at the top? **David Gurteen, independent knowledge management consultant, speaker and facilitator.**
- What does strategy that really uses knowledge involve? **Victor Newman, author, business consultant and speaker.**
- How do you transfer the essence of what is important to those who aren't involved? And how do you decide what is important? **Geoff Parcell, knowledge management consultant.**
- Achieving true open mindedness. **WB Lee, Professor, Knowledge Management Research Centre, Hong Kong Polytechnic University.**
- Maintaining the momentum for change. **Steve Andrews, knowledge management practitioner, University College Hospital.**
- Why do we not recognise businesses are part of an ecology rather than an enclosed system? **Ron Donaldson, knowledge ecologist and independent consultant.**

Henley Business School

Founded in 1945, by business for business. Henley's full-service portfolio extends from undergraduate and postgraduate degree programmes to a world-renowned executive education offer, from cutting-edge research spanning a broad range of fields to specialist consultancy services. Henley develops leaders to make the right choices: right for themselves, right for their organisations and right for the wider community in which they exist.

Henley Knowledge Management Forum

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

For more information visit www.henley.reading.ac.uk/kmforum or email kmadmin@henley.reading.ac.uk for an information pack.

Publishing services provided by Grist. www.gristonline.com

