



Reflections on the Future

Knowledge Management's Finest Hour ...

Chris Collison

Visiting Faculty, The Henley Forum

Knowledge Management Consultant, Knowledgeable Ltd

One of my favourite film moment comes towards the climax of Apollo 13, as the returning module commences three minutes of radio silence upon re-entry. A top NASA director turns to flight director Gene Kranz and says; *"This could be the worst disaster NASA's ever experienced."* Kranz's response: *"With all due respect, sir, I believe this is gonna be our finest hour."*

To some extent, the recent weeks and months in lockdown have been Knowledge Management's moments of radio silence. Will KM functions be incinerated as collateral damage as organisations reinvent their proposition and cut costs preparing for their own re-entry? Or might we emerge with a 'finest hour' story of our own? Our future might depend upon it. Logic and science don't always predict the outcome for organisational change, but we can only enhance our position if we set out clearly how our services and products can directly support our organisations during and after the pandemic. Let's look at a just few areas.

Learning from past experience.

We have a wealth of data, much of it in the public domain. There is a huge volume of learning from previous pandemics, analysis and simulation exercises. As KM professionals, we have an opportunity to promote the use of trusted research and evidence. Curation and librarianship and specialist information services have never been more valued.

Peer Assists.

We are not alone in this pandemic; neither are we at exactly the same stage as other countries. What a huge opportunity to learn from the experience of those just ahead of us. Sadly, the UK government's penchant for exceptionalism suggests that they have little appetite to learn from their peers. Thankfully, out of the populist media spotlight, at an organisational level, there is far more evidence of a desire to listen, learn and share.

I facilitate a number of communities of practice for KM practitioners in specific sectors (e.g. Sport, International Development), and have had the privilege to host conversations where

the recurring questions is “What are you doing about *this*?”, “We haven’t got there yet - have you had to deal with *that* yet?”, The appetite for learning is so strong – the challenge is knowing how to stop the Zoom call!

Learning whilst doing.

As our organisations seek to do things differently, learning *in the moment* is so important. After Action Reviews (and similar rapid reflections structures) are an easy win for us, and the opportunity to embed them is now. The cement is wet. As we navigate the complexity of today – is it safer-to-fail than it has been in the past. We’re all feeling our way in new territory so the psychological safety for teams to reflect quickly and honestly and to work out loud is greater than in the old steady-state world. The construction and preparation of London Nightingale Hospital owes some of its success to the strong commitment to a daily learning forum – a collective After Action Review.



Learning after doing.

Whilst the immediate focus might be on responding and acting – underpinned with continuous learning – we know that there is a high likelihood that Covid-19 will be followed by Covid-20 and Covid-21. I know of some organisations where their KM teams have been asked to learn about and document the decisions and steps which are being taken in order to build up ‘institutional memory’ ready for the next wave. Even though our starting point for ‘next time’ will be very different, can we offer to help our organisations reflect, learn from the lessons of this dramatic, rapid change – increasing our readiness to respond next time?

Surfacing expertise and building communities.

With the loss of corridor and water-cooler conversations, our ability to ask ‘who do you know who might know about...’ is restricted. At the same time, as we see into each other’s home lives more and more – there is a growing atmosphere of disclosure. We have a golden opportunity to ask again for people to update their profile pages. After all, they’ll happily spend 15 minutes pimping their Zoom background!

Similarly, this is a great time for connecting people to communities of practice – safe places to ask for help – to learn, to empathise and encourage each other. AS KM professionals, are we signposting the communities which people can connect to? More importantly, are we promoting CoPs as a flexible organisational intervention to gather people on new areas of knowledge and learning during an ongoing crisis. Are they on the radar of those making organisational design decisions?

Capturing, co-creating and co-curating knowledge.

Navigating our corporate information landscape with precision has become more critical. Where is that single source of truth? What can’t I find what I need? We have opportunities to support (knowledge navigators anyone?) and revitalise our approach. If there is ever a

good time to get buy-in to a more robust KIM policy – it’s probably now.

Looking beyond the organisational boundaries, be inspired by the [Coronavirus Tech Handbook](#), which is the world’s largest repository of tools relating to the pandemic. It’s a crowdsourced wiki-based library of tools, services and resources relating to COVID-19 response which is rapidly evolving resource with thousands of expert contributors.

Of course, there is more. We could go on to look at knowledge retention, collaboration, virtual facilitation, personal knowledge management, Cognitive Edge’s journaling and sensemaking activities...

Finally, as a discipline, Knowledge Management isn’t standing still as the world moves on apace. We should be open to revising, refining, reimagining, combining and adapting our offering to meet an ever-changing set of demands. Gene Kranz says it best.

“From this moment on I want you to forget the flight plan. We are improvising a new mission.... I don’t care what anything was designed to do. I care what it can do.

Author bio:

Chris Collison



Chris is an independent consultant and business author with 25 years of experience in knowledge management, facilitation and organisational learning. His corporate experience comes from long careers in IT, HR and Organisational Change at BP and Centrica, during which time he wrote the business bestseller Learning to Fly.

Since 2005, Chris has been working as a consultant in the field of knowledge management and organisational learning and has had the privilege of advising over 150 organisations around the world. Clients range from World Rugby to the World Bank, NHS and ten UK Government departments.

Chris is a Chartered Fellow of the Chartered Institute of Personnel and Development, works as an external advisor to the International Olympic Committee and has been an associate or visiting faculty at a number of business schools around the world. His most recent book - the KM Cookbook, which is a celebration of good practice in knowledge management - was published in 2019 to correspond with the new ISO standard. Further details are available at chriscollison.com and kmcookbook.com