**IT Think Paper #9**

**Knowledge Management**

Edward G. Happ, Global CIO

*"In our organization, I believe every ten minutes, somewhere in the world, something is being reinvented poorly."*

*"When the next generation retires or leaves the organization there is a real fear that their knowledge will leave with them."*

*"Are we getting the right information to the right people at the right time to have the most impact?"*

These are some of the concerns voiced for which knowledge management (KM) is often the prescribed solution. But KM efforts have been overrated, and half fail within the first year of their launch[[1]](#footnote-1). Nevertheless, the problems persist. What's the alternative?

Knowledge management as an ICT category came into vogue in the 1990's[[2]](#footnote-2). The promise was if we gathered and organized the data, it would become a rich resource of shared experience. So it is not a surprise that early efforts took a top-down approach to categorizing information modelled after a library. However, this library mindset was flawed in that it assumed that there was one consistent way to organize information.

The failure of the early Yahoo search approach versus Google is a case in point. Deep indexing trumps categorizing. Why is that? One reason is that in an Internet world “there is no shelf[[3]](#footnote-3).” The library assumption that a book can occupy one space (category) on a bookshelf just doesn’t hold true in an ever-changing hyper-linked world. Users determine the relationships and categories with hard-to-anticipate grassroots organizing sometimes called “folksonomies[[4]](#footnote-4).” And the uncanny success of a Google search to find just what we are looking for makes collecting and organizing information superfluous.

For organizations that have succeeded with a library approach, they have had to make significant investment in librarians to maintain the base of information, refreshing and cataloguing it as it changes.[[5]](#footnote-5) Even with an adequate staff to attend to the care and feeding of a knowledge-base, it still begs the question about who has the best perspective and experience for a given topic.

If we look at the ad hoc communities of practice (CoP) that have organically grown in our organizations, we find that the relationships formed over time provide an important clue. We learn from these interactions, face-to-face and on-line, who the “go-to” people are in our organizations. In a fascinating study conducted by packaged food giant Mars, researchers invited the organization’s scientists to interact with each other at a conference, and tracked all the 1:1 meetings with smart nametags[[6]](#footnote-6). The results found that there were a few connectors who stood out, and they did not match the organization hierarchy. When traditional KM efforts fail, helping people find each other succeeds.

Such a “people network” approach lends itself to a non-profit ethos, where relationships form the backbone of a consensus management approach. Our network of contacts may just be one of our most important assets when it comes to sharing knowledge. Find the guru, and she will put you in touch with the best information.

So how do we do that in a widely dispersed global organization? If we can tap the rich directory information that we are each motivated to keep up to date on our Facebook, LinkedIn and Blog sites, we are more likely to find the pockets of knowledge that exist where we least expect to find it. How does the food security programme director for Amcross in Guatemala who has a specific, on-the-ground problem, find and connect with the Food Security expert for British RC in Mozambique, is the most important KM questions I can imagine.

Rather than creating massive libraries of information that no one has the time or budget to keep up to date, we need to leverage the information that already exists about who we are and what we’re interested in that on-line social networks already provide. And the side benefit is that the motivation for keeping my info up to date is my desire to be known, contribute and belong. Librarians need not apply. The bottom line is that a shared directory of rich information needs to be our #1 goal in managing our organizational knowledge[[7]](#footnote-7).

1. For example, see the article for the legal sector, *Managing Partner, posted 9 Oct 2002 in Volume 5 Issue 5,* “According to experts, more than half of all knowledge management initiatives fail to live up to expectations. Establishing sophisticated databases or repositories does not mean lawyers will use them. ‘Build it and they will come’ does not work for knowledge initiatives within law firms. When investing firm money – partnership money – in KM, return on investment is a very legitimate concern for managing partners.”

   Compare the Eseryel, Eseryel, & Edmon study, “Knowledge Management and Knowledge Management Systems”, 2006, p. 105ff, which notes “Ambrosio (2000) reports that at least half of all KM initiatives fail; some peg the failure rate as high as 70%.” [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. KM has been a discipline of study since 1991; see <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Knowledge_management> [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. Clay Shirkey, “Ontology is Overrated: Categories, Links, and Tags,” <http://www.shirky.com/writings/ontology_overrated.html> [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Folksonomy> [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. This is the approach Boston Consulting Group has taken with its KM initiative. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Susannah Patton, *Social Network Analysis Helps Maximize Collective Smarts,* June 15, 2005 CIO magazine, July 15, 2005, <http://www.cio.com/article/print/6956> [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. For an interesting historical comparison, note President George H. Bush senior who “relished his person-to-person contacts with foreign envoys and began assembling his legendary rolodex that would serve him well in the years to come.” <http://millercenter.org/president/bush/essays/biography/print> [↑](#footnote-ref-7)