KNOWLEDGE SHARING—THE VALUE OF STORY TELLING

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ABSTRACT

Knowledge sharing is recognised as being critical to the ongoing development and growth of an organisation. Sharing knowledge occurs in many ways and story telling, often regarded in a light-hearted way and frequently accompanied by wry comments, or even scepticism, is now being recognised as having a place of value within the knowledge sharing environment. This paper will consider situations affecting knowledge sharing, examine issues surrounding story telling, the place of technology in the story telling environment, and the value to the organisation of story telling will also be discussed.

Key words: Knowledge sharing, story telling, characteristics, patterns, technology, value.

INTRODUCTION

As a catalyst for organisational growth, the sharing of knowledge is vital to an organisation. Allee (1999) promotes knowledge as increasing in value because 'Knowledge expands with use' (p. 123), and says, 'sharing knowledge allows both parties not only to retain the resource but to amplify and expand it through the exchange process itself' (p. 123). Carnerio (2000) supports Allee's comment, saying, 'In some organizations, information sharing should be stimulated, because it is one of the most important tools of creativity and, moreover, intellectual assets, unlike physical assets, increase in value with use' (p. 90). The importance of knowledge sharing is also referred to in the literature by a number of writers such as Davenport and Prusak (1998), Kluge, Stein, Licht (2001), Metcalf and Grant (2002), and Wright and Taylor (2003). Sharing knowledge within organisations provides the opportunity to discuss know-what and know-how practices to direct the organisation towards future development and growth. The act of sharing involves the transfer of knowledge from one person to another or among many people adding value to organisational activities (Mitchell 2003).

It is pointed out by Bender and Fish (2000) that although people may transfer data or information, 'the knowledge itself has to be created in the head of the individual' (p. 3). Clarke and Rollo (2001) promote the view that sharing provides the opportunity for knowledge generation through which the future success of companies is determined. The act of sharing knowledge develops a more dynamic environment that has the ability to create its own momentum and encourages an environment in which knowledge sharing is valued, and working in such an environment has positive outcomes for employees and the organisation.

Difficulties associated with knowledge sharing

Marshall et al. (1996) indicate that it is not easy to encourage voluntary sharing of knowledge by employees, particularly in financial trading firms where competition is fierce. According to an example given by Marshall (1997) one reason for lack of knowledge sharing by

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information professionals is that people are not interested in sharing, and a second impediment is seen as the 'knowledge is power' syndrome. Allee (1997) refers to the old knowledge equation 'knowledge = power—so hoard it', however, she suggests with today's extensive use of technology and the impact it has had on organisations, the old equation is rapidly being put to rest and provides a new one.

> Today, the new knowledge equation is knowledge = power—so share it and it will multiply
> (p. 10).

Davenport and Pursak (1997), Kluge et al. (2001), Kankanhalli, Tan and Wei (2002), and Lee and Al-Hawamdeh (2002), all refer to the 'knowledge is power syndrome'. If the view of employees is that knowledge is power this will make sharing of knowledge 'an unnatural act in most organisations', and if knowledge is seen as a valuable resource then any situation that may allow knowledge to become public could be seen as threatening (Lee & Al-Hawamdeh 2002, p. 50).

Kluge et al. (2001) refer to the 'not invented here' syndrome which they explain as 'the tendency to neglect, ignore or, worse still, disparage knowledge that is not created within your own department' (p. 33) and say the situation can arise through a mistrust of external knowledge. Lee and Al-Hawamdeh (2002) also make reference to the 'not invented here' attitude saying that this attitude can have a detrimental impact when striving to promote knowledge sharing.

Concern about job security is another aspect of sharing that brings a strong resistance to sharing of knowledge (Darling 1997). Darling continues, 'A knowledge culture devotes itself to increasing and sharing knowledge and involves every person in those vital tasks' (p. 10). Resistance to knowledge sharing is evident in comment referred to by Darling, 'this stuff about knowledge sharing is nothing more than me dumping what I know in a pool so I will become dispensable' (p. 11). It may be that if their employment is threatened people will not be inclined to share their knowledge and may even leave the organisation taking with them the very knowledge that could have given value to it.

The ageing population of many industrial countries is a further aspect of knowledge sharing that needs to be addressed and is raised by Lee and Al-Hawamdeh (2002). So often the knowledge accumulated over many working years is not captured so that the considerable pool of knowledge and experience possessed by such employees is lost to the younger generation. They also indicate the detrimental effect on the organisation of the loss of knowledge when resignations, and promotions occur. Redundancy is yet another issue. However, for those who are made redundant there is perhaps a more difficult situation to deal with—they frequently harbour feelings of resentment and asking them to share their knowledge before leaving is likely to be a difficult task.

Resistance or lack of interest in sharing knowledge deprives others of the opportunity to gain knowledge and can in fact rebound on those who are not very willing to share. Many organisations have intranets to enable employees to share, exchange, and access knowledge, but if a non-sharing culture exists there will be little benefit for the organisation or its employees. It is possible that employees may not find the intranets user friendly, therefore, there is likely to be resistance to sharing knowledge through that system, or for some it may simply be too much of a hassle to try to find what is being sought (Mitchell 2003).

Where resistance to sharing knowledge attitudes exist, organisations need to consider undertaking an approach to implementing behavioural patterns amongst staff that are conducive to knowledge sharing. Regular meetings for the purpose of discussing work-related experiences provide an avenue for sharing knowledge that generates a collaborative environment and one through which everyone benefits. A valuable avenue for knowledge sharing occurs during social interaction be it in the corridor, or at the water cooler, or a chat over lunch, and it is not uncommon in those discussions for story telling to be used to illustrate examples of points to be made.

STORY TELLING

Storytelling is regarded by Gabriel (2000) as 'an art of weaving, of constructing, the product of intimate knowledge' (p. 1). He says good stories entertain, and inspire, and are not something that can be mass-produced. Allan, Fairtlough and Heinzen (2002) support Gabriel's view that stories should be entertaining and also they should memorable, economical, and people centred. They also suggest that stories 'encourage creativity, help in handling emotion, help to make sense of puzzling situations, co-evolve with the organisation's culture' (p. 10). The same story repeated often, Gabriel says, sends signals about the cultural life of an organisation. According to Gabriel, stories and experience are linked, meaning stories transform into experience and experience turns into stories and says that storytelling goes on almost continually. It is evident from those views that stories carry a tremendous responsibility and not enough attention is being paid to their value.

'Organisations are finally waking up to the power of stories' (Snowden 2001, p. 1). Literature relating to knowledge management very often includes reference to stories and their use in the area of knowledge sharing, and this has generated a growing interest in story telling. The telling of stories in primitive societies is a valuable approach for the passing of knowledge through the generations, and as a means through which the traditions of societies' culture are preserved. It is also recognised and accepted as providing interest and colour to events in organisations, giving an insight into their culture. The tradition of story telling spans over eighty years at 3M and is illustrated by Brand (1998) when he refers to the repeated telling of a story originating in the 1920s relating to the developing of Scotch™ masking tape. The story was in use in the 1950s, and was still regarded as being sufficiently effective to be taken note of in the 1990s.

We tell stories—why? Is it to educate, illustrate for effect, entertainment, to get out of an uncomfortable situation, or to pass on knowledge. Conventional communication is often stale and stories add interest and spice. Effective communication needs a story to be told in a convincing way and telling stories, be they fact or fiction, is a powerful way of stimulating interest (Snowden 2001).

Everyone enjoys listening to stories, and there is interest in hearing about the experiences of others. It is not unusual for a story to take up variations to meet the particular needs of the audience. Snowden (2003) refers to fables giving the message as the story comes to an end, whereas communication in the corporate world delivers the message at the beginning providing the audience with the opportunity to decide early whether it will accept, or not, the message being given. The system of communication, the way the message is being transmitted, and how it is presented, is frequently anchored in the history of the organisation. Allan et al. (2002) provide a descriptive scale for different kinds of stories from real to unreal:

Factual account ⟷ Legend ⟷ Myth ⟷ Faction ⟷ Fantasy (p. 11)

Allan et al. suggest that while legends may at times be exaggerated they are generally accepted as being true. Myths on the other hand may be regarded as true by some people but not others, and are open to questions about their truthfulness. However, as Allan et al. point out 'stories that fall right across the scale can be told in organisations, to good effect' (p. 11).

Senge (1990) highlights the use of story telling to provide a reason why an organisation exists and to reveal the direction in which it is heading. Leaders frequently use stories as a motivational tool to illustrate how success can be achieved. In all organisations there is always someone who has a story to tell. A good story may be simplistic, yet it can illuminate the minds of listeners and drive home an important point.

According to Boje (1991), story telling is 'the preferred sense-making currency of human relationships among internal and external stakeholders' (p.1 06). Boje suggests people engage in and enjoy the dynamic situation of gradual refinement of their stories as events evolve and that in the decision making process stories are often told to prevent a poor choice being made, or to call for a repeat success. The organisational grapevine also provides an avenue for stories, usually with sceptics remarking that they might contain an element of truth. When an incident occurs in the workplace, but people are uncertain about what has occurred, stories begin to circulate. As the stories continue on their travels, it is likely they will be embellished with the thoughts of others attempting to work out what it is that has happened.

Storytelling occurs when people engage in conversation. It is not uncommon to hear remarks such as 'You've heard the story', or 'I can tell you what happened', or 'That's not the version I heard', sprinkling through a conversation. Stories add colour to a conversation and people engage more readily in a conversation enhanced by stories illustrating moods, tragic or humorous events, successes and failures. Referring to the contextual nature of human knowledge, Snowden (2001) indicates it requires stimulation if that knowledge is to be revealed, and says that stories, whether fact or fiction, are a powerful means for achieving stimulation.

Narratives are as useful for analysing organisational processes by virtue of the fact that people enact stories, rather than tell them (Pentland 1999). A story gives an account of something that has occurred. Although the stories may not be factual they do provide a means through which knowledge about the organisation can be given, exposing good and perhaps not so good aspects of its functioning as an entity. Stories, according to Gabriel (2000) do not necessarily stem from major events, but in fact frequently are the result of a relatively insignificant one.

Stacey (2001) refers to narratives and stories being 'socially constructed' through the relational aspect of interaction between people, and not just situated in the minds of individuals. He goes on to say, 'Narrative knowledge takes the form of anecdotes and stories, interspersed with evaluations of them' (p. 35). The view of a narrative is that it gives facts about a sequence of events. Connel, Klein and Meyer (2003) also identify narrative as a social construction, but is based on other social constructions which they suggest are language, shared meanings and values. A narrative, they say, can perhaps be regarded as a process and be defined by certain form and recognisable content.

The work of Gabriel, cited by Stacey (2001), suggests stories are a sub-set of narratives and are a traditional community activity, whereas myths and fairly tales tend towards being didactic and have a moral or meaning. Modernists regard stories, as well as myths and fairytales, as either fictional or 'subjective accounts of personal experience', and postmodernists' stories, not facts, make experience meaningful and are the privileged mode of sense-making. Gabriel regards the purpose of stories not only to be entertaining, but also to be a means of stimulating the imagination and providing reassurance to people. Allan et al. (2002) also point to stories as a way of fuelling the imagination, and refer to the meeting between Swanson, a banker, and Boyer an inventor that led to the founding of Genentech, 'the first true research-based bio-technology company' (p. 150), and how their story of vision has influenced start-up companies involved in leading edge innovation

According to Davenport, Prusak and Wilson (2003), 'Narratives provide a rule structure within a recognizable, action-oriented context' (p. 109). Explaining this, they say that 'idea sellers' always include a rule in their stories—'when this was done, this was the result'. They also say that narratives have greater credibility when coming from more senior people. Davenport et al. make reference to Denning and his experience at the World Bank. The bank prided itself in employing only the very best people, but even with such people things did go wrong, and Denning—who found the usual presentations of various charts somewhat boring for himself and his audience—turned successfully to story telling to illustrate the messages he wanted to give.

Snowden (2003) discusses the usefulness of technology to provide narrative databases. Their purpose is to try to create the ways people share knowledge in their work by attempting to capture their stories by tape recorder or interviews, then indexing them. Through queries, anecdotes emerge—giving users different perspectives—and this is the value of using databases.

Narrative databases provide a means for observing how lessons can be learned and suggests use of such databases are worthwhile. The volume of material that can be captured in narrative form is far higher than can ever be formally codified and there is value in capturing such material.

Story Characteristics
Examining what makes a good story, Klein (1999) says that people link ideas, concepts, objects, and relationships and make them up into stories that will stimulate interest and motivation. He identifies the following characteristics for a story as:

- Agents—the people who figure in the story
- Predicament—the problem the agents are trying to solve
- Intentions—what the agents plan to do
- Actions—what the agents do to achieve their intentions
- Objects—the tools the agents will use
- Causality—the effects (both intended and unintended) of carrying out actions
- Context—the many details surrounding the agents and actions
- Surprises—the unexpected things that happen in the story (p. 178)

While revealing drama, empathy and wisdom, good stories package differing causal relationships; they are plausible, consistent, economic, and have uniqueness, and they also contain an element of surprise (Klein 1999).

According to Snowden (2002), when sharing with an audience there are aspects that need to be given consideration such as, the audience 'needs to share the same language, also the same education, experience, values, etc.' (p. 102). He goes on to say:

> The ability to convey high levels of complexity through stories lies in the highly abstract nature of the symbol association in the observers mind when he/she hears the story. It triggers ideas, concepts, values and beliefs at an emotional and intellectual level simultaneously. (p. 105)

Story-line patterns
Brown and Duguid (1991) suggest stories have a 'flexible generality' enabling them to be both adaptable and particular, and that in many ways they are similar to common law providing a means through which different situations can be interpreted, while at the same time knowledge is developing and increasing. What emerges is a pattern of process. Telling stories helps diagnose the problem. If there is a puzzling problem, people frequently ask a colleague for help. Dialogue takes place and through working collaboratively to try to reach coherence from what may appear to be a random sequence of accounts they use this knowledge to drive them towards a resolution. The comment by Brown and Duguid is that 'What the reps do in their story telling is develop a causal map out of their experience to replace the impoverished directive route that they have been furnished by the corporation' (p. 45). While the manuals issued have told them 'what' to do, they did not give the 'why' and the experience of the 'rep' and the specialist came into play enabling them to overcome the problem.

Brown and Duguid illustrate their view through the work of technical representatives who used story telling to help diagnose a problem with a troublesome machine by citing an example given by Orr (1990). A 'rep' who had a problem beyond his experience called upon his technical specialist, but he too was mystified. However, through a somewhat protracted story telling process they worked through various scenarios and testing procedures, and with the final trouble-shooting session lasting five hours, they finally resolved the problem. During the process, many stories were told of their separate experiences of the problems they had encountered and how they were resolved, and it was from those accumulated experiences and through the sharing of their knowledge, a resolution was found. The gain for the two people involved was an increase in their understanding of the equipment, but they also added to the collective knowledge of their community.

From the research into storytelling in an office-supply firm carried out by Boje (1991), he found that stories were told in 'bits and pieces' as people interrupted, or added their part, sometimes resulting in the aborting of the story. He also discovered that there are 'story-line' patterns. Patterns, he said, are used to find, elaborate and match an episode in order to make sense of organisational processes and relationships.

Klein (1999) refers to people seeing the world in patterns. Patterns, he says, appear to relate to the ways our eyes work. They are organisers that are powerful in the way in which they enable people to naturally group things together that are close to each other. Patterning is used to resolve anomalies in puzzling situations. Snowden (2003), who also looks at the use

of patterns, refers to good designers observing patterns of human behaviour before beginning to design—for example, a path should not be laid between buildings until the pattern of traversing the terrain between the buildings is established. However, he also says that a bridge, for example, can be built to encourage patterns. Looking specifically at organisations, Snowden (2001) says that stories 'reveal patterns of culture, behaviour and understanding in a different and frequently more effective way than interviews and questionnaire based approaches' (p. 1). Undesirable behaviour practices can be changed through observing the patterns of people interaction and how, when and why they do certain things, and then use stories to adjust the behaviour.

An example of how people work their way through a specific situation, particularly a complex one is given by Klein (1999) through discussing the work carried out by Pennington and Hastie in 1993 when studying how people make sense from the facts when making a decision about whether a defendant is guilty or innocent. During a trial, lawyers for both the defence and prosecution present a large volume of evidence to juries, and in their research Pennington and Hastie explored how members of a jury catalogue the information and its implications. Their research found people build stories, or mental simulations, in an attempt to fit the evidence into a situation that provide a plausible account of what led to the crime. They found that 'Instead of passively listening to the attorneys, the jurors are actively trying to build their own stories, their own explanations. Then they compare their stories to those presented by the two attorneys, and select the one that more closely matches their own story' (p. 90). Pennington and Hastie refer to this as a story model and using this model describes the way people make diagnostic decisions.

VALUE OF STORIES

Relevance of the practice and importance of story telling was referred to by Brown and Duguid in 1991 as a way through which knowledge can be shared and they refer to stories as 'repositories of accumulated wisdom' (p. 45). In an article in 2000, they highlight the value of social interaction when discussing how Xerox Corporation learned to 'foster best practice' (p. 74) and to make use of the expertise through sharing it across the organisation. The company discovered that 'a quick breakfast can be worth hours of training' (ibid). During the socialising process, questions, story telling, problems and solutions were discussed and knowledge exchanged in a way that is not captured through formal processes. Xerox created a database through which local knowledge could be shared around the world. What makes this database different from other organisational databases is that the 'Reps' supply the tips, and also vet and refine them. At a centralised point further refinement takes place before world release.

Through the medium of story telling it is possible to gain additional value from the expertise residing in the organisation. It is difficult, however, for experts to articulate their knowledge and to maximise the value to be gained and it is suggested strategies be developed for the gathering of articulate responses. Eliciting the right information needs training in interviewing techniques to know when the value of the expertise comes into play so that it is recognised what areas need further probing. Careful attention to planning what knowledge is being sought, keeping track when an unplanned and unexpected topic emerges, or topic planned but not covered, learning from trial/practice interviews, along with the refining of techniques to explore responses, requires time and effort.

Connel et al. (2003) refer to the situation where one story triggers another, thus introducing a perspective on knowledge exchange that is more than simply informing, and more acceptable in the organisational setting. As a result it can be said that 'Stories become knowledge-flow facilitation devices' (p. 159) and, as such, have a valuable part to play in the knowledge sharing process.

Snowden (2001) emphasises the importance of telling stories about failure, but it is a task that is very difficult to achieve because people do not like talking about failure, yet the stories about failure have greater value than stories of success. Snowden points out 'that storytelling originated in the need to recreate the circumstances of knowledge use, thus creating an early knowledge asset register and map' (p. 12). However, for those involved in knowledge management there are likely to be frequent barriers to releasing stories relating to failure. It is suggested by Snowden it is through trust that failure stories will emerge, but building the depth of trust necessary to enable those stories to be told takes a long time to build.

CONCLUSION

Stories it appears, offer value to an organisation. Knowledge sharing is key for the generation of new knowledge so important for organisational survival, and a way of generating knowledge is through story telling. Stories are becoming recognised as contributing greater value to organisations than previously given credit for. There can, however, be difficulties associated with getting people to share knowledge, not least of which are the 'power syndrome' and concern over job security, and it may be that stories can be the means through which knowledge sharing barriers are broken down.

People like to tell stories, and people enjoy listening to them even though there may be scepticism surrounding the truth of what is being said. Socialising in a formal or informal way provides opportunities for stories to be told as people relate their experiences and it is through the medium of story telling that people are encouraged to share knowledge. Experts hold considerable knowledge, but articulating such knowledge can be difficult. However, planning an appropriate strategy helps to elicit articulate responses, and successfully doing so creates value for the organisation. Technology has a part to play by storing and indexing stories that help to resolve common problems or provide clues to why something may be occurring, and there is value in building narrative databases because they can be accessed by people belonging to an organisation, but who may be situated in varying places around the world.

If they are to be successful in their aim, good stories must display the characteristics that help to stimulate interest and motivation, and story-line patterns provide not only the means through which problems can be resolved but also highlight successes. Undesirable behaviour patterns can be turned around through the use of stories, and stories giving reasons for failure in a particular situation also have value for an organisation. Stories have much to contribute as a means of sharing knowledge and the sharing of knowledge leads to the generation of new knowledge. New knowledge will determine the viability of the future of the organisation. The value of story telling in the knowledge sharing process should be given greater recognition.

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