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The Noncanonical Newsletter of SIG-KM

by Darin Freeburg

Brown and Duguid (1991) wrote that “reliance on espoused practice (which we refer to as canonical practice) can blind an organization’s core to the actual, and usually valuable practices of its members (including noncanonical practices, such as ‘work arounds’)” (p. 41).

Knowledge Management (KM) is a large tent, with both theorists and practitioners. Yet the important interplay of theory and practice is often lost in the ideological divide among purists on either side. Academics love theory, often overemphasizing what should be done and ignoring complex organizational realities. Practitioners are more pragmatic, yet can get stuck chasing management fads that lack the explanatory power of theoretical claims.

Both sides have their canons—their espoused practices and assumptions that become so routine, it can be nearly impossible to think of alternatives. And, possibly more dangerously, both sides convince themselves that they are being innovative, yet do so within a very small world of possibilities bounded by these canons. For instance, it is unwise to do anything in research without an extensive literature search. Similarly, it is unwise to do anything in practice without an extensive search of best practices. Ensuring the fit of one’s propositions within the existing canon of research—or one’s activities within the existing canon of best practices—is not inherently problematic. It becomes problematic when one feels restricted by these canons. Thus, both researchers and practitioners need to broaden their focus to see the “work arounds”—the ways people actually conduct research and practice.

The SIG-KM newsletter is the place for these workarounds. It is the place for the honest reflection and reporting of how things are actually done. As such, it seeks to become the place where these noncanonical solutions can be collated to produce brand new insights and solutions that match lived experience. It is the place for ideas not yet ready for the primetime of peer

reviewed journals. It is the place for the sharing of activities outside the scope of best practice.

Although Wilson (2002)—in a highly cited article that made several good points about misuse and conceptual misunderstanding—called it nonsense, the KM discipline has staying power. Yet this power goes only as far as its flexibility—its ability to both expand and focus itself. And this power comes from engagement with noncanonical practices and ideas.

I invite you to join in this discussion by submitting ideas for columns, volunteering to write book reviews, or becoming a regular contributor to a recurring column. The SIG-KM newsletter is the collaborative arm of the SIG, bringing members together in important and exciting ways. Send us an email, and let’s get started.

SIG.KM.info@gmail.com

References:

Brown, J.S. & Duguid, P. (1991). Organizational learning and communities of-practice: Toward a unified view of working, learning, and innovation. *Organization Science*, 2(1), 40-57.

Wilson, T.D. (2002). The nonsense of ‘knowledge management.’ *Information Research*, 8(1).

We want to know more about you! Our five-minute survey is intended to inform the content and direction of the newsletter. One lucky respondent will win an exclusive SIG-KM coffee mug!

Visit this link to get started:

goo.gl/xeR6LK

I am a KM practitioner. Here's why I feel like Mary Poppins.

by Carissa Dougherty

1) Our job descriptions

They're complicated, all-encompassing, and understood differently by different people. I'm fortunate to have been able to define my (and KM's role) within my organization, but my job description is nothing if not ambitious. Mary Poppins, of course, was variously requested to "mold the breed," "play games," and "never smell of barley water." And I, as a KM practitioner, am responsible for everything from "capturing and collating institutional expertise" to "pursuing funding opportunities," from "building staff capacity" to "evaluating relevant dissemination channels."

Don't get me wrong; I love the challenge and variety of my work. But a big part of what I do is managing expectations. Although we KMers are "practically perfect in every way," we do have our limits. We can't have a one-size-fits-all approach, nor can we ignore the very real—and sometimes very complicated—personalities, relationships, and politics that come with working for and with other human beings. It requires empathy; we need to listen to what they say they want and then deliver what we know they need, drawing upon our unique set of skills (many of which are still not enumerated in our job descriptions). Mary Poppins excels at this... and KM practitioners should, too.

2) Our bag of tricks

KM practitioners have—while perhaps not as bottomless as Mary's satchel—an endless array of concepts and tools at our disposal. But here's the thing: In order for my work to truly have an impact, everyone needs to internalize some aspects of KM as a part of their own job. My goal, like Mary's, is to give my organization the tools and wherewithal to put their house in order; if I'm successful, they'll be better connected to one another, understand what they value, and know how to tidy up their own nursery.

I often think that if I'm really doing my job properly, someday I'll be able to pull a Poppins and say: "My services are no longer needed here." The things I do—shaping organizational learning structures, defining information

architectures, and designing strategic knowledge processes—would be absorbed by leaders throughout my organization and become essential to everyone's work. Do I actually think that's going to happen? Not. A. Chance. But Knowledge Management (and its vast toolkit) should be viewed as neither miraculous nor proprietary; KM initiatives only truly work if they're distributed and acknowledged as essential at all levels of an organization.

3) Our status as outsiders

For all of my work in collaborating and communicating with other staff in my organization, I often feel like the



odd person out. Just as Mary Poppins will never really be friends with Cook and Ellen, or belong to the same social class as the Bankses, I'm often treated with a strange mixture of skepticism and awe that sets me apart from my peers. I view things through a different lens than many of my co-workers and organizational leaders; KM gives us a singular way of looking at the world. Adding to this, organizations like mine (cultural heritage non-profits) don't often have KM positions—or even someone doing KM work under a different name. It's a field that is fertile for KM ideas, but it can be lonely.

Being a part of the SIG-KM community, however, reminds me that there *are* other people out there doing what I do, that there *are* other KMers facing (and solving) similar challenges. I hope to use this group and this newsletter as an opportunity for practitioners, leaders, and academics to connect and share our experiences managing our (sometimes dysfunctional) organizational families.

Trautman's *Do You Have Who It Takes?*

by Nithyanandam Mathiyazhagan

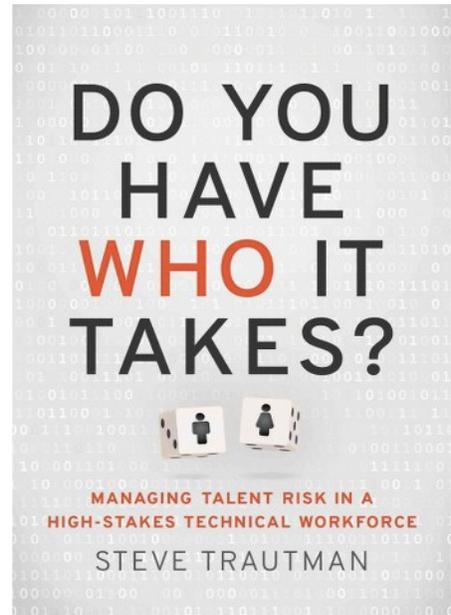
The topic of talent risk, which hasn't been on many organizations' radar screens in recent times, has resurfaced in Steve Trautman's *Do You Have Who It Takes: Managing Talent Risk in a High-Stakes Technical Workforce* (Greenleaf Book Group Press, 2017). This book is a timely addition to his pioneering work on knowledge transfer process as outlined in *Teach What You Know: A Practical Leader's Guide to Knowledge Transfer Using Peer Mentoring* (Prentice Hall, 2006), which is used by blue chip companies around the world.

Talent risk can be defined as the potential for gaps between current professional capacity and the resource demands of the future. In this book, Trautman establishes a rationale for elevating conversations about talent from a tactical, knowledge transfer perspective to a strategic, talent risk perspective at the executive and board levels. It's easy to see why this shift is occurring: the increasing digitization of businesses, baby boomer retirements, and new global work practices significantly contribute to knowledge gaps that need to be identified and addressed to achieve business objectives.

The book is organized in three parts: defining the talent risk problem, outlining the solution, and presenting four case studies with clear outcomes for minimizing talent risk. In the first part of the book, the author presents the talent risk problem as eight myths and realities covering diverse organizational facets such as individual perception, management with hard data, and succession planning.

The author defines the term "technical fog" and articulates the "secret sauce" of experienced professionals who are the primary drivers of business transformations. Because technology enables business transformation, Trautman argues, establishing a clear understanding of deep technical activities and clearing the "fog" around technical nuances at all levels of the organizations is of paramount importance. He provides a comprehensive set of processes and tools to collect data to identify "knowledge silos" and visualize the significance of knowledge risk. Using these processes and tools, managers at all levels can establish an understanding of talent risk and prepare plans to combat them. The author backs up his findings with the recent survey research report by the Institute for Corporate Productivity (i4cp), his previous publications, and other credible sources.

The concepts and approaches outlined in this book are easy to follow and practical to implement within any organization. The major takeaways are: 1) an understanding of the significance of talent risk and its visibility at the board level; 2) a systematic approach to identify talent risks and mitigate them; and 3) the ability to achieve measurable results through rigorous application of processes and tools. Overall, this book makes an important contribution toward establishing a foundation for mitigating talent risk challenges faced by many organizations. Managers at all levels within an organization could benefit from reading this book and applying Trautman's practical solutions to the persistent talent risk problem.



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Denise Bedford

How would you describe the role of KM?

The role of Knowledge Management is to make the value of an organization more than the sum of its parts. It is a complex discipline. The focus is on developing the intellectual capital of individuals in an organization and creating an environment where they can grow. KM can be abstract but it has to be grounded in practice; it's a contact sport. Anyone who thinks they can do Knowledge Management behind a closed door needs to consider another discipline.

What are you working on currently?

One of the projects I'm working on right now is analyzing the design of workspaces and how it relates to the flow of knowledge within that organization. You can't change an organization's culture without changing its physical space. If you look at buildings that were designed in the 1950s and '60s, you can see the hierarchies that were so emblematic of postwar corporate culture. The bosses are physically isolated from their employees, on separate floors and in private offices; this



separation is mirrored in the "need to know" culture and design of that time. Today, we are focused more on the exchange of ideas and the free flow of knowledge; the old designs just don't work for that kind of knowledge ecology. Now we're seeing companies taking this seriously and designing workspaces that encourage interactions and "knowledge collisions" across all roles.

What excites you most about where KM is headed in the future?

I'm excited by what's happening in the informal knowledge society. There are so many groups out there—community collaboratives and innovative businesses, makerspaces supporting multiple generations—that are investing in the knowledge assets of the community. These are groups that are leveraging the intellectual capital of people who don't necessarily feel part of the traditional industrial or financial economy, whose contributions may be otherwise overlooked. Studying and learning from these types of groups gives us a good model for healthy knowledge neighborhoods.

This newsletter is by SIG-KM members, for SIG-KM members. We want to publish your work, initiate thought-provoking conversations, and create a community for practitioners and academics alike. Comments, suggestions, and contributions may be addressed to SIG.KM.info@gmail.com. A few features will be included in every issue:

Feature / Case Studies / Best Practices

What it is: Longer, more in-depth articles highlighting current research, significant projects, or KM in action.

What you can do: Submit an article or pitch us an idea. This is a place to get published, test out your ideas, and connect to other SIG members.

Practitioner Perspective

What it is: Challenging, thought-provoking piece by a KM practitioner.

What you can do: Submit an article or pitch us an idea!

Poll / Survey

What it is: A quick question (or three) to gain perspective on KM and SIG-KM members.

What you can do: Participate by responding to the survey question(s).

KM Spotlight

What it is: A chance for you to get to know some of the diverse people and perspectives involved in KM.

What you can do: Nominate someone—or yourself!

Reviews

What it is: Critical and illuminating reviews of publications, workshops, websites, videos, or other KM resources.

What you can do: Write a review or suggest a resource.