

Wittgenstein's Ladder: The Coming Irrelevance of Knowledge Managers

In 1920, the brilliant Austrian philosopher Ludwig Wittgenstein abandoned philosophy after having written what he felt was the ultimate analysis of how language and meaning work (*Tractatus Logico-Philosophicus*, 1922). He first became a primary school teacher, but quarrelled with his colleagues and some of the parents, and turned to gardening. It was nine years before he just as suddenly decided to return to philosophy, taking up a fellowship at Cambridge University, declaring that he had got it wrong the first time round. He spent the next twenty-two years quarrelling with students and colleagues and working on his next work, *Philosophical Investigations* (1953).

What is remarkable about Wittgenstein is not merely that he wrote two masterpieces, but that his second work completely destroyed his first. In the *Tractatus* of 1922, Wittgenstein believed that meaning could be defined, objectivised, and structured, and that it worked in direct relationship with the world. By the 1930s, he had abandoned that position, stating instead that meaning cannot be objectivised – it is arrived at depending on the context of the language or the situation in which the language is used, or the rules of the "games" we play in navigating and interacting with reality. Eerily, he prefigures this easy discarding of the earlier philosophy at the end of his first work. The penultimate section of the *Tractatus* suggests teasingly, "He who understands me finally recognizes [my propositions] as senseless, when he has climbed out through them, on them, over them. (He must so to speak throw away the ladder, after he has climbed up on it.) He must surmount these propositions; then he sees the world rightly."

Knowledge managers are just as likely to be the useful ladder that is thrown away after getting organisations to new economy readiness, for rather similar reasons. The rules of the game are moving on, and what organisations need are broader clusters of skills and aptitudes than knowledge managers bring – and just like Wittgenstein's *Tractatus*, it is the knowledge managers themselves who will deliver their own irrelevance.

Digital Divides

Following Tapscott, Berreby and others, I have recently written on the notion that the so-called "digital divide" is much more than a gap in access to technology or IT know-how. There is a profound generational gap growing in the workplace, between internet-cultured, relatively young people, and those who grew up or are still growing up, in a pre-connected world. The two "generations" perceive reality very differently. The opportunities of the new economy landscape are much more visible to the network culture generation, where the pre-internet older workers, supervisors and managers see only confusion, challenge and risk. The differences between the two generations play themselves out in distinctive and opposing workplace behaviours.

The Net generation worker typically	The pre-Net generation manager typically
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demands immediacy • ignores boundaries • values independence • values openness and curiosity • interprets 100 emails a day as "being in the loop" • is young, lacks life experience • is intolerant of adversity • throws energy into projects • is prone to attention deficit, multitasks easily, lacks sustained analytical and reflection skills • collaborates indiscriminately • collaborates with peers • values respect from peers above all others • knows how to authenticate people's trustworthiness, gives 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • mistrusts haste • relies on boundaries • relies on dependencies • is trained to consider risk, confidentiality, and "need to know" • interprets 100 emails a day as information overload • is experienced, relates to the big picture • has learned how to work with and sometimes leverage on adversity • rations energy • prefers mono-tasking, is dissatisfied with a lack of focus and time to devote sustained attention to issues • collaborates selectively • competes with peers • values respect from superiors above all others • is conditioned against personalising work relationships

<p>trust</p> <ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gives respect based on performance (by own standards) • innovates • values questions • sees self-learning as central • mistrusts and challenges systems • is self-directed 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • gives respect based on status and performance (based on corporate standards) • standardises • values answers • sees self-learning as an add-on • values and defends systems • looks to superiors for direction
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The interesting thing about this for knowledge management is that many of these behaviours are **knowledge behaviours**.

Net generation worker knowledge behaviours	Pre-Net generation knowledge behaviours
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • demands immediate knowledge gratification • ranges widely for knowledge • values new sources • values openness and curiosity • interprets 100 emails a day as "being in the communication loop" • lacks sustained analytical and reflection skills, makes hasty decisions based on incomplete knowledge, improvises • collaborates and shares knowledge willingly • values respect based on knowledge sharing from peers above all others • knows how to authenticate people’s trustworthiness, gives trust, networks easily 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • is prepared to search at length for the right knowledge • looks for structured knowledge • relies on tried and tested sources • is trained to consider "need to know" • interprets 100 emails a day as information overload • decides carefully, uses more knowledge, searches longer for the "right" knowledge • competes with peers, propagates knowledge silos • values respect based on just in time information delivery, from superiors above all others • is conditioned against personalising work relationships, inhibits collaboration and networking

<ul style="list-style-type: none">• values questions, new ways of doing things• sees self-learning as central• mistrusts and challenges systems	<ul style="list-style-type: none">• values standardised answers• sees self-learning as an add-on• values and defends systems
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If you look at these behaviours carefully, you should see two things. First, the behaviours of the net generation worker are pretty closely aligned to the productive behaviours of the new economy organisation – stressing open networks rather than closed structures, collaboration rather than competition, innovation rather than standardisation, flexible approaches to rapid forming, disbanding and reforming of project-oriented teams; ie., they are pretty much tuned into current needs already.

If there are tensions in an organisation that is making a transition to a new economy model and process, those tensions are internal to the old economy heads, or between the old economy "senior" staff, and the newer, less experienced but more perceptive net generation workers.

Second, you should see that the preoccupations of knowledge managers over the past five years have been distinctively on the old economy side of the digital divide. It's a striking realisation, because we associate the rise of knowledge management with the rise of new economy organisations. It is somewhat disconcerting to realise that the discipline has been defined by predominantly old economy concerns.

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Let's check the allegation. First there would seem to be some prima facie justification. Insofar as knowledge management can be called a skilled profession, its skills have been derived variously from the skills and tools used in librarianship, information science, data systems design, and (arguably) consulting. Few knowledge managers started their careers as "net-heads" – most of them grew up, were formed and habituated in a TV and newspaper culture, and they had their formative working induction in structured, bureaucratic, and not especially KM-compliant organisations. I know I did. We can hardly be blamed for obsessing about old economy issues while net generationers look on, amused.

Second, the two principal concerns of knowledge management over the past five years have been (1) knowledge collection and access, and (2) promoting collaborative, knowledge sharing cultures. These are actually distinctively old economy concerns – or more precisely, the concerns of old economy heads when challenged by new economy changes. Collaboration is not an issue for net generation workers – collaboration and open knowledge sharing is the bedrock of internet culture: you don't need systems to promote collaboration, simply

because it is taken for granted. The tools for collaboration are pretty useful, but when non-collaboration-trained old economy heads design or commission them, they end up as emasculated versions of what the net-heads design. Knowledge or data aggregation is a sorry habit, a relic of a generation that grew up when information was scarce and cost money. We hoard knowledge in vast databases, knowledgebases and warehouses as if the world were going to end tomorrow, and we cast about the confusing new economy landscape to find out how we can possibly make money from it.

What then will knowledge management for a new economy generation look like? It's a fair bet that three key trends will emerge over the next five to ten years as internet-cultured workers ascend the scale of experience and seniority.

From Aggregation to Access

The focus of both technology and techniques will shift from aggregation of data, information and knowledge, and move towards an emphasis on access to information, data and knowledge, irrespective (and uncaring) of where it is. Crawling search engines, intelligent personal search agents, and knowledgescape navigation and hunting skills will predominate over the traditional functions of storing, categorising and giving access to knowledge objects. Open standards in knowledge object labelling will become a more important issue than ownership of knowledge objects. Knowledge possession will still be an important function of the firm, but it will be a highly defined function focussed on defensible intellectual property.

From Information to Time

The focus of knowledge workers will shift from seeing information and knowledge as their primary resource, to seeing time as their primary resource. Information plentitude has not yet destroyed our old economy perceptions of information as a precious resource. The newer generations take this more easily for granted, and worry only about the time they have to find, deploy and create value from the right knowledge. Tools, technologies and corporate initiatives will focus much more on three areas of concern:

- reducing **time-to-knowledge** (through broadband technologies, clearer differentiation and definition of synchronous / asynchronous communication conventions, wireless technology, more powerful access engines)
- increasing **time-to-action** (as the net generation matures, "quality thinking" time will emerge as a prime asset, to be achieved by reducing time-to-knowledge and simplifying or compressing incidental or peripheral communications)
- expanding **time-leverage** by more sophisticated delegation-collaboration tools and techniques such as jigsaw meetings, distributed decision-making, consensus and difference sensing

technologies.

From Tools to Skills

We have already reached a stage where the technological tools we have built enable us to do far more than we have the physical or mental capability to process. The next five years will see a more intensive focus on defining and propagating the skills and conventions we use in virtual communication and knowledge exchange, interaction with knowledge engines of various sorts, and gaining time-leverage over our activities. The crying need for a new focus on skills is well documented in the Jensen Group's research on simplicity in the new economy workplace.

The Dissolution of Knowledge Management

In early 1999, it struck me forcibly that the movement of KM thinking had to be in the direction of social capital. It is an inevitable consequence of a focus on human and intellectual capital, together with the work done on fostering collaborative communities of practice and tacit knowledge sharing. Social capital is the next big thing to hit KM simply because it defines and promises to quantify the assets a firm must have in terms of the components of relationship-building, trust, influence, co-operation and leadership within its culture, its environments and its systems. There is already a short tradition of social capital thought in relation to societies at large, but the literature on social capital in organisations is already starting to burgeon.

But extrapolating beyond an immediate expansion of interest in social capital and how it works within firms, there is another necessary journey we must make to satisfy the final equation. Just as Peter Senge and his colleagues found that they could not pursue the goal of defining and supporting the learning organisation without first going backwards to the challenges of organisational change, so the social capitalists will start with relationships and they will end with systems.

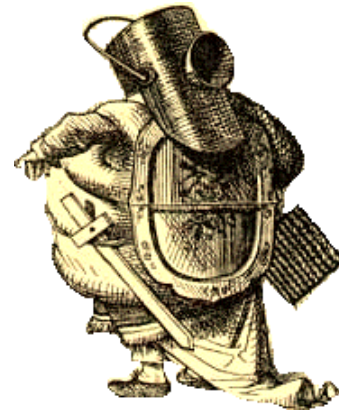
For it is the firm's structural capital that defines and supports all of the "soft" knowledge capital a firm has within its sphere of influence. It is the structural capital input (in terms of pay and reward, performance management and support, recruitment and induction, hierarchies and titles, ways of doing things, standards and procedures and codified values and goals) which feeds and influences everything intangible that happens in a firm's tacit knowledge sphere: from innovation, to human capital, to customer capital, to social capital.

Conversely, on the output side of the equation it is the design of the structural capital that defines an organisation's effectiveness in extracting either direct value or explicit knowledge out of the rich chemical ferment taking place within its "soft" knowledge base.

Hence, not long after the peak in interest in social capital, the pundits must return to a knowledge-based analysis of structural capital, the pipeline that provides input to the soft knowledge processes of a firm, but that also extracts value from that very process. But hold on: isn't structural capital suspiciously similar to the prime activity areas of a respectable discipline hitherto known as human resource management? To be sure, a knowledge-based approach to human resource would provide fresh insights and profitable new directions, but our suspicions must be aroused when the KM knight flings off his cloak and lays claim not to new territory, but to territory long and honourably occupied by one of his senior peers.

Approaching this conundrum from a different angle, let's look at the

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latest global initiative to help organisations move quickly into new economy mode: e-learning. It is a vastly immature and highly fragmented industry – not even the pedagogy can claim maturity or proven authority. But within the tools, techniques, better practices and programmes, we see more and more frequently KM tools, KM offerings – and they do not look out of place. The fact is, that e-learning, in its very connectedness and time-independence, transforms the role of organisation education from an old economy push-model into a new economy pull-model. Once we have worked out the tricks and techniques to overcome the inadequacies of the medium, and once we actually make our content attractive and effective, we will suddenly, and unexpectedly, be closer to Senge's dream of the learning organisation. Simply because the technology allows us.

When you look at this more closely, you realise that learning within organisations must inevitably become:

- pervasive
- multiple channel and adaptive, catering to flexible needs, preference and styles
- surrounded by an environment of related knowledge so as to ensure the learning is expansive rather than restrictive
- social, supported by communication and collaboration tools
- heavily influenced by project and team-based models
- hybrid, moving between real and virtual contact with peers, coaches, facilitators and authorities.

The traditional focus on learning in the organisation has, of course, been the training function, normally directed from within the Human Resource sphere. As e-learning and hybrid learning become more pervasive – partly because the technology allows it, and partly because net-generation workers demand continuous and diverse learning offerings – then the training function will diminish both in profile and resourcing. At the very least it will become a minor adjunct of the organisation's learning and knowledge strategy; at most it will dissolve completely into a broader learning sphere that will range from coaching, on the job training, induction, performance support, adaptive learning delivery, work redesign, decision support, project learning cycles, to what are currently defined as knowledge management practices, and competency planning.

Notice that KM too is merely one distributed ingredient in the new economy organisation's learning space. At best, like the training function, it will be a minor but still-defined component in the overall organisational learning landscape. More probably, it will disappear almost totally, with perhaps residual traces in a role that plays custodian to the firm's defensible intellectual property.

We need not be too despondent about this, for before they completely pass, Knowledge Management and Knowledge Managers will have played a critical role in helping old economy organisations and old economy heads make their transition at least part way into a new world of work, and a new world of value creation. As new economy human talent increasingly becomes influential in the workplace, first generation concerns of knowledge management will give way to more mature projects around the creation of value from knowledge. Ultimately, however, like Wittgenstein's very useful ladder, Knowledge

Knowledge Management Revisited: Part 3 – Wittgenstein's Ladder: The Coming Irrelevance of Knowledge Managers

Management as a discipline and Knowledge Managers as actors, must disappear from the corporate stage, gracefully or otherwise. Knowledge Management is a perspective, and not a discipline. It is a project, and not a career.

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