

Personal Knowledge Management

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The Basis of Corporate and Institutional Knowledge Management

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What is personal knowledge management?

Each of us has a lifetime of experience, education, anecdotes, stories we have never told anyone, memories, cultural resources and mental baggage that our families and society have left with us. We also have rooms full of books, papers, birthday cards, photographs, and notes from the classes and workshops we have taken, income tax forms for the last twenty years (if we are Canadian), and a computer full of files, memos, what-once-was-new software that we still have not tried or mastered, and the names and addresses of most of the people we know.

We know far more than we remember: those of us who are old enough know where we were when we heard that John F. Kennedy was shot and, if we are Edmontonians, we know where we were when we learned that Wayne Gretzky was traded. I can remember random facts from University classes and the names of most of my classmates – and I remember enough about economics to know that I will never become an economist. However, I have a blend of experience and skills which is different from anyone's – and so do you.

How can we use these resources effectively? How can we even know what our resources are? Personal knowledge management is

"To conceive of knowledge as a collection of information systems seems to rob the concept of all of its life...Knowledge resides in the user and not in the collection."

– Wes Churchman, in *The Design of Inquiring Systems*, 1971

knowing what knowledge we have and how we can organize it, mobilize it and use it to accomplish our goals – and how we can continue to create knowledge.

Most of the papers about knowledge management discuss it in terms of companies and institutions, even though they say that most knowledge exists in people’s minds, not the files of organizations. So knowledge walks around every day, and if employers do not recognize it and champion it that same knowledge walks out the door and down the street.

What is personal knowledge?

It’s more than facts

Davenport and Prusak, in their book *Working Knowledge: How organizations manage what they know* define knowledge as “a fluid mix of framed experience, values, contextual information and expert insight that provides a framework for evaluating and incorporating new experiences and information.”

Academics spend a lot of time developing definitions which they hope will encompass everything, but such definitions never get used on coffee row.

My father is a farmer, and while he no longer drives a tractor he still knows how to do that and several thousand other tasks that were once his business and his life. He knows how many bushels of grain will fit in the box of a two ton truck, and he knows when a hailstorm is imminent. He has an abundance of personal knowledge and he also knows who to phone to learn more about various aspects of agriculture. Let’s use him as an example of someone with personal knowledge.

Personal knowledge includes knowledge gained from formal and informal instruction. Personal knowledge also includes memories, stories we have been told or have told, personal contacts and relationships, books we have read or written, notes, documents, photographs of us or by us, intuitions, what we have learned from our colleagues yesterday, and what we know about everything in our



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world, from garden plants to nuclear physics. My father learned about farming from his father, from his neighbors, and from extension workers. Some of what he knows could be written down (explicit knowledge) and some cannot (tacit knowledge).

How much of our knowledge is explicit and how much is tacit? Which is the most important type of knowledge? These are academic questions. The point is that we have both and they both are essential to our business, professional and personal lives.

Knowledge management to some people is finding all the information we have, storing it and calling it knowledge. Then they wait for someone to use it and are critical of their co-workers for not recognizing the wonderful database they have created.

Other knowledge management specialists make lists of people with expertise and then use the data base to access the appropriate people for particular jobs (“Jones seems to know something about the price of rice in China. Call him.”).

How should we as individuals manage the knowledge we have?

What do we know?

Each of us has an incredible knowledge base, but we do not use all of it regularly so we do not know where the volumes, chapters and margin notes are.

Think about the experiences you have had, the reports you have written, the classes you have taken, and all the books and files organized neatly in your office (or stacked in your basement). How can we use knowledge if we do not know that we have it or, if we have it, where it is?

Knowledge and place

Knowledge relates to place and context. For example, my father's knowledge about farming is specific to a particular place and a particular time: southwestern Saskatchewan, from the 1920s to the 1990s. Some of what he knows about farming could be adapted to other circumstances, but most of his knowledge pertains directly to wheat and cattle production in a dry part of the North American Great Plains.

My knowledge and yours also is related intimately to the areas where we grew up and where we live.

Managing personal knowledge

Personal relationships and networks

You may have thought that I would start with the heavy information: books, reports, copies of the minutes from the last bored meeting (no, that's not a typo).

I am starting with relationships and networks because I feel that these are more important than any other source of knowledge or information that we have.

Universities and colleges try to attract students by telling them what they will learn if they enroll. I think that the people I met at University were far more important than any classes that I took. Similarly, the people I met when I worked in the public and private sectors were very important to me and, like my fellow students and professors at University, are some of my closest friends and colleagues.

Old friends and trusted colleagues are my most important knowledge management resource. My PalmPilot (more about that later) contains the names, addresses and information about virtually all the people I know. My most important task each day is to maintain those friendships and networks and to expand my list of people who make my life richer.



See Natalie Goldberg's book
Writing Down the Bones

www.nataliegoldberg.com/books.html
for more information on 'free writing.'

Organizing personal knowledge

Managing your personal library (books, files and digital material)

How many books do you own? Most of us own hundreds, probably thousands, some of us have tens of thousands. We started with bookcases made from bricks and boards, then moved to real bookcases that we then moved from living rooms to bedrooms to offices and basements.

But can you find the book you want to quote in next week's presentation? Also, are there books in these stacks or boxes that we once thought were full of wonderful ideas or information but which we have now forgotten? How many of those books would you miss if they vanished? How many have vanished without us knowing?

In addition to the hundreds or thousands of books which adorn or clutter our offices, homes and basements, most of us have file cabinets and boxes of documents that range in value from essential to useless. I have moved offices several times in the past five years and, as a result, have had significant effects on the paper recycling industry in my city. Most of our files are irrelevant and out-of-date.

How do we deal with the knowledge in our books and in our files?

First, we might sort our material into that which we use on a regular basis and that which is part of our archives. Both categories deserve some sort of database, whether it is computerized or simply handwritten.

There are several bibliographic software programs, such as ProCite which are useful for references, especially those used in academic papers. However, a more general database such as FileMaker Pro may be more useful for one's entire library, including files, photos and letters from Uncle Charlie. Databases can be designed to include graphics, photographs, data, and comments that relate to books, files, reports, and virtually anything else in your personal and professional library.



www.procite.com

www.filemaker.com

Take the time to design your database carefully, leaving categories for all the information you may wish to add. Entering the material is the easiest part. Consider hiring someone to design the database for you. Why waste your time entering all the data if you find that you cannot find material easily or you have not included important information.

Putting thousands of books, files and photographs on a database is a large task. You may wish to organize your books on a subject basis in your bookshelves, culling books as you go. If books are holy objects to you (some of mine are to me) try giving a few of the least valuable ones away to a good home. It's painful, but it's easier than therapy. Remember that you are making room for the really great books you plan to buy next weekend.

Bytes are smaller than atoms

Use electronic storage where this is easy and appropriate (but don't scan the first edition of *Who Has Seen the Wind* and then give the book to cousin Harry). Store reports, important letters, data etc. on your hard drive, then back it up at least twice (another hard drive, zip disks or CDROMs). Store one copy of important material off site: take it home from the office or ask someone you trust to keep it for you. If your office burns – or if some other tragedy strikes your computer or your employment status – you still have a copy of your material.

Unfortunately, electronic storage is not necessarily permanent. Disks, hard drives and even CDROMs may deteriorate. Furthermore, if you have your great Canadian novel on a ZIP disk will there be a machine available to read the disk if your grandchildren discover it in your desk after you have died?

We know that paper, particularly archival paper, will last hundreds of years and will be readable. Thus, as strange as this sounds, very important material should be kept on paper as well as on disks.

Most material we have in our offices, however, should be kept only in electronic form. Remember to update it when new software comes along so that you can access it when you need it, (Could one open a Microsoft Word 1.0 document with current software?).

Organize the material on your computer so that you can find what you are looking for easily. Get rid of old e-mail messages that are of no value, organize the ones that are, and keep only final versions of reports.

Organization and creativity:

You can't be creative if you can't find your car keys

"I haven't got time to organize my desktop or my desk. I'm a creative person, you know. That's why I have all these piles of paper on my desk."

I've become a great fan of David Allen, a consultant who helps companies and individuals become more organized. Organization leads to increased efficiency and creativity.

We become more creative when we can access our data, information and knowledge quickly and easily. Organizing our desks and our computers and dealing with tasks on time gives us freedom to think and create.

Managing our knowledge takes time and effort. Take the time to do it effectively and give yourself the freedom of knowing what knowledge you have and where it is.

The cappuccino chronicles: personal knowledge management and communities of practice

Knowledge has to be shared if it is to be useful and if it is to grow and develop. I work with a number of colleagues on a regular basis. We have become what is known in business literature as a community of practice. We meet mostly in coffee shops, on the phone and on e-mail to discuss current projects and new developments in publishing, both paper and electronic. But we are also good friends who are excited about the same type of work. We



See David Allen's site
www.davidco.com/.

See the article "Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier" by Etienne Wenger and William Snyder (Harvard Business Review, January-February 2000) for a detailed discussion of this subject.

work irregular and often long hours, but we take time to meet several times a week.

Communities of practice develop spontaneously in organizations and amongst independent knowledge workers.

Random thoughts on personal knowledge management

1. Spend time with creative people

New ideas, information and knowledge come primarily from our networks. Spend time with productive and innovative people. Schmooze shamelessly with the best and the brightest. Ask their advice. Buy them drinks. Send them your résumé.

2. Go to conferences that are fascinating and apparently irrelevant

Don't go to another boring conference. Find something on the cutting edge, something that is advertised in *Fast Company* or your favourite magazine. Meet great people (see thought no. 1).

3. Learn about a new area

If you are a scientist, take a course in landscape painting. Join the local astronomical society. Take guitar lessons. Meet great people (see above).

4. Travel

Go somewhere new and exciting. I've heard so many people say that they would like to go to the south of France but they will never go, even though they have the time and the money. Nothing is as valuable as travel. Meet ... (you know the drill).

5. Read voraciously

Read what's new and what's old. Don't limit yourself to the books in the area in which you work. Read fiction, non-fiction and science fiction.

6. Use new technology

Let me tell you about my PalmPilot. It's my greatest personal knowledge management tool with the exception of my computer. I use it to keep track of my activities, my friends, my tasks and my projects.

Use whatever system works for you, but be sure to try the latest toys.

7. Create a private personal knowledge web resource

Consider creating your own private web pages that will reside on your computer and nowhere else. You can use these pages to make notes, to summarize your knowledge in particular areas, including hyperlinks to key sites, audio and video.

For example, instead of summarizing your business trip to Japan using a word processing package use a simple web authoring software such as Adobe PageMill. Include hypertext links to companies you have visited, appropriate electronic magazines and newspapers, e-mail links to the people you met, as well as links to sites with general information on Japan. Incorporate your photographs from the trip, graphics of business cards and maps etc. You could also include digital movie clips or digital audio.

To use the page, open a browser such as Netscape or Internet Explorer and open your page within the application. The links to web pages and e-mail addresses will now be live and you can use them easily. You can also add new links, text etc. and can also link to other similar pages that you have created on your computer. For example, you may have visited China earlier and created a personal site in which you have discussed the relationship between the two countries. You can now link your site on Japan to the site on China.

8. Tell your story



Knowledge management includes creating, organizing, and storing knowledge. But knowledge must also be shared if it is to be put to use. We share it through publications, presentations, conversations and stories.

What is special about your personal knowledge? How can you use that knowledge effectively in your professional and personal life? How can we reach our goals by sharing that knowledge? (See *Hole's Greenhouses & Gardens: Knowledge Management in Action* to see how a successful family business was built through sharing knowledge).

We learn from stories, stories about success, failure, choices and people. Storytelling is probably the oldest art form, and is just as effective today as anytime in history. People think in terms of metaphors and learn through stories.

Corporate storytelling is a new application of an old art. Politicians, novelists, playwrights and Hollywood producers have been our modern storytellers. Business and professional people are now realizing the power that lies within metaphors and stories.

Finally...

Remember that your personal knowledge is unique. No one else has the same mix of information, experience and know-how that you have. Understand it and make it work for you.

I would be pleased to learn about your ideas on personal knowledge. Feel free to contact me (jmartin@spottedcowpress.ab.ca).



See Ken Farmer's
Corporate Storytelling site
storytelling.iwarp.com/corp.htm

and the Fast Company article about
digital story telling
[www.fastcompany.com/
online/21/rftf.html](http://www.fastcompany.com/online/21/rftf.html)

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use a slide presentation.