Knowledge in Action - Issue 25
Bridging knowledge orientations

How organisations gather, value and share their knowledge differs widely. Barriers to knowledge sharing abound: one individual’s certain knowledge can be another’s hearsay and supposition.

Henley’s Knowledge Management Forum investigated how organisations focus around two specific types of knowledge – objective knowledge and subjective knowledge – might influence how they approach knowledge sharing in four commonly found knowledge management contexts. The result: a diagnostic toolkit to help managers identify and overcome inhibitions to knowledge sharing.
For an organisation to be effective, knowledge must flow within it – between individuals, between functions and departments, and between different management layers. The more effective the flow of knowledge within and between knowledge production systems, the more effective the organisation will be.

In any given field or discipline, how we come to know what we know depends on a combination of how we are taught, how we learn, what we experience and our practices. The specific nature and combination of these various elements creates assumptions about what is worth knowing and how we can grasp new things. Together they form what has been described as a knowledge production system. The knowledge production systems that we have encountered and experienced affect how we communicate and share knowledge with others.

Research carried out by Henley’s Knowledge Management Forum has shown how a simple two-way categorisation of in-built learning styles and preferences can help to tailor knowledge dissemination processes for maximum effectiveness. Through early recognition of these in-built learning styles and preferences, knowledge managers – and managers generally – can customise knowledge-sharing approaches to the norms and characteristics of individual organisations.

Objective versus subjective

It is a fact of life that the flow of knowledge in and between organisations is often impeded. All too readily, barriers arise that prevent that knowledge flow. Different languages, different personalities, different skill levels, different functional priorities, different organisational structures and processes: each can slow down, or abruptly stop, the effective flow of knowledge.

In considering barriers to knowledge flow, the Henley research took as its starting point the subjective–objective distinction that has long been known in educational and academic circles. This distinction underpins both the way that the knowledge enshrined in a discipline is taught, and how it is produced through research.

Different educational and academic disciplines are likely to have either a high degree of objective knowledge associated with them, or a high degree of subjective knowledge.

Disciplines with a high degree of objective knowledge tend to be characterised by quantification, formulae, and the development of universal rules and laws. Science and engineering are typical of such disciplines.

Disciplines with a high degree of subjective knowledge tend to be qualitative, concerned with context and perspective, and depend upon interpretation, debate, and judgement. History, the arts, and literature studies would be typical of such disciplines.
Bridging knowledge orientations

Teaching and research in disciplines with a high degree of objective knowledge tend to be based on objective established facts and demonstrable theories. Logical reasoning is particularly valued, and teaching these disciplines tends to involve a linear process of cumulatively building upon prior understanding. Simply put, it is preferable to have first studied GCSE physics before one can progress to quantum mechanics.

In contrast, the knowledge base of other subjects can be described as ‘spiral’, rather than linear. Time and again, familiar areas are returned to, but with increasing degrees of subtlety. In short, the teaching of these disciplines is more open, has less structure, and possesses an emphasis on developing skills in critical thinking. Put another way, using the discipline of history as an example, it is possible to study the Norman Conquest at primary school, secondary school, and university level, as well studying it as an academic researcher.

Neither approach is ‘better’ than the other. Each has developed, over time, because it is considered appropriate in relation to the body of knowledge involved. But recognising the relative strengths of each approach – and how people stemming from a particular discipline or background prefer to approach knowledge – might be helpful in considering how barriers to knowledge flow arise, and how such barriers can be circumvented.

Of course, reality is not as simple as this model implies. In between the two extremes of ‘objective’ and ‘subjective’ are many shades of a mixture of the two. Neither individuals nor groups will fall neatly into one category or the other: many will fall in between. Nevertheless, the simplification imposed by the model can be useful, particularly when considering the broader issue alongside other considerations.

Knowledge management implications

Relatively few academic papers have considered the implications of this distinction between objective knowledge and subjective knowledge for organisations – and, in particular, for knowledge management.

Accordingly, the Henley researchers set themselves the task of exploring how these insights into objective and subjective knowledge might make themselves felt within four commonly found approaches to knowledge management: communities of practice; retaining lessons learned; peer assistance and peer reviews; and the use of collaborative working technologies.

The researchers considered the values underpinning the process of knowledge management in each of these contexts, and how they were affected by individual organisations’ respective alignment with objective knowledge and subjective knowledge.

Diagnostic toolkit

What are managers to make of these findings? And how can managers use these values to help them promulgate knowledge across the organisation? Bearing in mind the caveat that the model is a very simplified version of reality, and that real-life situations will often lie between the two extremes, the Henley researchers suggest a toolkit of three diagnostic questions to help managers identify and overcome inhibitions to knowledge sharing.

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• Is knowledge viewed as something abstract that can be codified, or something that is viewed as situational and context specific? If the former, then approaches such as databases and other formal repositories could well find favour. If the latter, knowledge may be more difficult to capture, making one-to-one conversation and person-to-person connection more important.

• How much knowledge is viewed as ‘sufficient’ in relation to decisions and actions? Different organisations have different norms in terms of the time and effort taken to ‘think about things properly’ before reaching conclusions. In an organisation characterised by an objective knowledge orientation, subject-matter experts may be viewed as providing definitive answers. In organisations characterised by a more subjective knowledge orientation, subject-matter experts may be seen as part of a wider mix of opinion.

• What does ‘evidence’ mean within the organisation, and how it is approved and valued? Differing norms in terms of the criteria to be met before something can be accepted as evidence impacts on individuals’ willingness to learn lessons from others. And where the bar is high, people in an organisation characterised by an objective knowledge orientation will have problems with credibility of the evidence supplied. Similarly, in organisations characterised by a subjective knowledge orientation, they will doubt its relevance to the current context.

In summary, knowledge production systems lead to assumptions that shape responses and behaviours in organisations. The starting point is to recognise this, and then create a basis for individuals or groups with preferences for different knowledge production systems to work better together by understanding and appreciating their relative strengths. In other words, reconciling differences, rather than just responding to them. Good facilitation skills have been shown to help with this.

### Communities of practice | Retaining lessons learned | Peer assists/ peer reviews | Using collaborative working technologies
---|---|---|---
Knowledge production systems that prioritise a high degree of objective knowledge | Community can be a mechanism for reviewing information and knowledge to maintain quality standards. | A more structured approach tends to be valued. The overall approach used is one of problem solving. | Experts’ credibility important. Providing a clear set of steps for peer assists helps overcome the risk of appearing ignorant. | Information and knowledge provenance matters. Quality assurance process must be associated with content in repositories.

Knowledge production systems that prioritise a high degree of subjective knowledge | Self-motivation from community participants is essential to engage others in discussing ambiguous and challenging issues where knowledge is evolving. | Tensions arise due to different perceptions of the same situation. The overall approach is one of improvement and incremental refinement. | Coaching approaches predominate in developing thinking. Too constraining a process can inhibit knowledge flow and exploration of new perspectives. | Version control tends to be used to make clear the ‘current version of knowledge’ that everyone is working with.

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**Henley Knowledge Management Forum**

The Henley Knowledge Management Forum, founded in 2000, is an internationally recognised centre of excellence in knowledge management. As a membership-based community, it is a magnet for leading business practitioners, world-class academics and thought leaders who collaborate to develop insights, understanding and practical guidance on knowledge management.

To discuss the benefits of membership for your organisation, contact Professor Jane McKenzie +44 (0)1491 571454 or Dr Christine van Winkelen +44 (0)1628 486849.

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