

# REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



## Fifteen Years Archived on DVD (Knowledge Management, Part 1)

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*Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.*

*Andrew Abbott showed that a key component of professions and professionalism was jurisdictional claims. The domains of expert knowledge that the profession sought to control implied was the necessity for each profession to actively sustain its expert knowledge for ease of recall and application among professionals. Now, some professions do this better than others, but arguably none do it perfectly. Busy professionals are so awash with information, much of it irrelevant or uninteresting, that they rarely have time to go back and sort through it all and make sense of it. Instead, all this stuff ends up occupying storage space or sitting somewhere in the cloud. Well, I undertook a project to dive through an archive of this stuff, and I learned a lot about what it means to gain, sustain and use expert knowledge.*

*My name is Tom Galvin and these are my Reflections on Management.*

In this program, I've talked before about problems of organizational forgetting, which you have experts in the organization who have certain skills and knowledge that are really important to retain. But eventually they leave the organization, whether that's through retirement or just natural attrition. And the organization loses the expertise. The expertise simply walks out with the expert. But another one is just the simple fact that knowledge accumulates so rapidly, or I should say information accumulates so rapidly that we don't have the ability to take the time and think more abstractly how it turns into knowledge.

We end up with a whole bunch of stuff after, say, the end of the year or at a regular interval where we dump all kinds of information onto DVDs uploaded into the cloud or whatever. And it's just simply a snapshot of what was collected at the time. It's just hard. It's hard to do as you go because when you're doing something, when you're busy making decisions and whatever, you just don't have time to step back and figure out what's important and what's not important. You're just hopeful that you can remember where you put stuff in your file structure so that you can find it later.

But as a profession, you have all sorts of issues with individuals who separately collecting stuff--archiving stuff--and you really have to put a lot of institutional energy to be able to try to sort through it and say, okay, this is the real knowledge of the profession. This is the real knowledge that we need to retain and sustain and make it available to everyone.

I work in education, so I have a particular interest in this because certainly we as educators get overwhelmed very easily with all kinds of information and trying to capture knowledge for retention,

and especially just for the simple task of being able to generate useful material for students. If you have that kind of stuff on the shelf somewhere in a library or online or whatever, then that's one thing.

But what if your organization is [supposed to be] the leader in a particular domain of expert knowledge? Well, then it becomes really incumbent upon you to put that energy in and develop and sustain that knowledge. So what I did was undertook a project for an institution in which I basically dove into the online and physical filing cabinets where we're talking about an institution that is a leading institution in a particular professional domain that had never really taken the time to organize its expertise into a simple reusable form. The institution was doing pretty well [at] generating educational materials. It was able to do a lot of stuff. But there was no sense of continuity. There was no sense of history to the point where one could actually go back and find things that were, say, even just a few years old that may not have been superseded. But let's just say that maybe [the old knowledge] lost priority at the time -- and then things change and what was lower priority is now high priority. And you wind up having to go back and reconstruct from scratch rather than go into the archive, find something useful, and then modify it for the present context.

This was sort of the reason why I undertook this project, and it was about roughly 15 years worth of material collected. I had no idea what was in some of these DVDs, just because they were just simply archived as a snapshot of how the file structure was established for someone at the time. You can imagine some of the things that I ran into there was tremendous variance in the way that the files and folders were structured.

So trying to come up with a simple, reliable architecture was just a natural challenge. Some things were unmarked. I mean, [it] was just a plain DVD and there was no indication as to what was on it. You had to just simply go through and read through every single file. [It] was just very fragmented.

Anyhow, the end result was the development of an intranet. It's a site where I basically took all of the information, sorted it into buckets of subdomains of knowledge that I knew would be somewhat enduring. And the buckets were then associated with those things that were government documents, things that were public domain, open source, all the way to full copy. Did you know? I was also looking not just for the stuff that the institution was producing internally, but also all of the stuff that it had linked to over time. [These were] readings that were being used or reports or other things that were out on the web that where the links had long broken. [In] some cases the source material, the reports, are not even available anymore online because they're they were just never archived when an organization either went away or decided that it wanted to dissociate with a product and just deleted it.

The process of physically coming up with the intranet is not really what I want to talk about, because that's not so much the lesson learned. All organizations, when we think about their domains of knowledge, has an intuitive approach to how it buckets information and how it handles the chronology of information. But what I do want to get into is the thought process of organizing it for re-use. You can come up with a folder that contains about 20 to 25 files and each one of which is pretty interesting. But what's the meta structure that you put over top of all of these files that basically say

that this is important, here's the important concepts, this is the way we think about the information now -- as opposed to just lay it all out in a folder and have everybody sort through and try to figure out what they think is important. There's a lot of challenges with that because that is a whole stream of writing on its own. Why does an organization find something important? -- [specifically] that writing task is what disincentivizes people from even getting started. We think that, "well, I know exactly how I store information, I know exactly how I use it, that this is what it means to me," and it may not mean the same to anybody else.

And so I wouldn't want to say come up with some sort of a superstructure that speaks only to me and isn't helpful for others who think differently than me. I was reminded during this effort about organizations that I had been in where there were very, very strong incentives not to store information or not to not to keep information. Sometimes the information that you keep is stuff that you don't want to be made available for whatever reason. There was this one organization that I was in long time ago where I came in as a staff officer and was basically told when the previous boss had left directed all of the archives to be destroyed. Some of it was actually retained. And I actually found it useful for trying to understand what my job was. But there were some perfectly understandable reasons why they didn't want anything to be left behind because of the potential for that information to be misused.

And so as I was going through the DVDs, you know, I'm thinking with some of the knowledge gaps, was there something that an individual or organization was even trying to withhold? And certainly individuals, if, you know, when they leave an organization, if there are things that they don't want to have archived, you know, better, better off not putting on anywhere in the first place. But the you know, the point is that's itself is a disincentive because you're talking about the need to actually go through and sort through the stuff that you think you would want to have released versus those things you really want to keep private.

And then another thing is, you know, another disincentive, of course, is the reward system. What do we actually reward people for? And certainly what is novel, what is newly created, what is you know, that's the sort of stuff that we reward. We don't incentivize or in any way reward people's efforts to do what would seem to be just basic housecleaning. So, for example, "publish or perish" that you see in academia is a good example of this. Very, very busy professors, especially where a lot of independent work or small group work working very hard on a project that can take years to work through the peer review system. You know that all of the energy goes into there because that's what people are measured against. How many articles did you publish here or what did you create over there? There's not generally a service chit for archiving or sifting through DVDs. If anything, the only reason why somebody would want to do that would be to find stuff as part of a particular research project.

The finding stuff is not a reward or an incentive [on] its own. [It] also, you know, sort of spills into our cultural approach to it. [You] know, that sort of housekeeping function is just not that interesting. You almost have to force like -- as an organization, you almost have to force people to do it. And in the military, in my past military experience, we used to have those types of incentives. We called them

inspectors general. When an inspector general was visiting a unit decades ago, its purpose was to make sure that an organization's activities, a unit's activities, were in compliance with regulations, which meant going through all of the files and making sure that the paperwork was straight. For just about every transaction that was performed, it was considered as an indicator of poor leadership or poor management skills if the paperwork was not done correctly. And the reason for this was, oddly enough, the same as my intention for or desires for undertaking this project. The importance of organizational continuity, recognizing that when you're in a high turnover organization, the ability to pass knowledge about what you did as an organization over to your successors was considered vitally important. And the way to do that was, unfortunately at the time, heavy on standardization, heavy on uniformity, heavy on documentation, which [made it] hard. No one, nobody enjoyed doing it, but it was necessary because of the importance of continuity. These disincentives, what sort of comes to mind was what was I sort of swimming up against as I undertook this this project? And and I'm going to go through in much more detail the specific things I learned in future episodes.

This is the first of a series on knowledge engineering and knowledge management, where I will talk about what I learned as I went through and try to explain how I sorted through and develop this body of summary knowledge or meta-knowledge about all of the stuff that we had, for the purposes of developing processes and systems to sustain and maintain this particularly unique domain of expert knowledge. It will make it possible for an organization or a profession to do this, sifting to understand what it knows, why it knows it, what is important versus what is not important, and to posture it for being reusable so that the organization can sustain continuity. This episode was just sort of introducing the problem, the problem of sustaining expert knowledge and also the barriers to doing so or the barriers to getting started. I'm going to basically take the next several episodes and I'm going to focus on how we stifle conversations that allow us to argue over the knowledge that we have collected.

And I'll talk about how that differs from times past when the water cooler conversation or the officers call was a place where we would get together and we would talk about our knowledge, our profession. Then I'll do discussions about the challenges of dealing with gradations of knowledge, separating beginner knowledge from expert knowledge. And then I'll do an episode on formal and informal knowledge of the the published work versus the reflective writing and diary and other informal works. And then what I'll do is I'll conclude the series with several episodes where I will explain how I use metanarratives to develop storylines by which all of the knowledge can be sorted by level of expertise and by level of formality. With the idea being that once you have these native and meta narratives in mind, it actually gets easier to start thinking about how do you take disparate bits of information and collect them into something that could be enduring and reusable? This is not the most glamorous topic that I suppose I could devote an entire series to. But it is actually important because especially nowadays where we are so overwhelmed with information, it becomes that much more important for us. To be able to do this sorting function, even if it's for just ourselves and our immediate colleagues. I think that these lessons will be very, very valuable.

*... And that's all for now. The views expressed are my own and do not necessary reflect the United States Army War College, the United States Army or the Department of Defense. Thank you for listening and have a great day.*

**All the Best!**

**Tom Galvin**