

REFLECTIONS ON MANAGEMENT

WITH TOM GALVIN

AUDIO TRANSCRIPT



Transforming, Not Sorting, the Information (Knowledge Management, Part 2)

Season 7, Episode 2 – originally released 31 May 2022

Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

In the first episode of this series, I spoke from the perspective of someone who undertook the task of sorting through an archive of DVDs to find what was valuable so it could be stored for easier retrieval. Now I found that there are two approaches one can take. There's the simple way of structuring it so that each item in the archive is just sorted into what appears to be its proper place in the new archive. And then there's the harder way where the material and the knowledge within it is transformed. Many of us would never think about the harder way because sorting through the archive is already daunting. But I went the harder way because if all I did was rearrange everything, there's a good chance that what I came up with would not last. And someone 5 to 10 years ahead of me would have to redo exactly what I did. What do I mean by transforming the knowledge? It means conversing with it in much the same way as conversing with people. But it is also a skill that takes a lot of practice.

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

Now going through an archive can be very interesting. I don't look at it so much as a window to how an organization or a unit or a team thinks so much as how it behaves. And I'm not just talking about what you find there, but what you might expect but don't find there in an archive.

I have to put some context into this. The archive in particular that I was looking at is one that is a collective archive. So this is when you take the shared drive of a unit level repository and you put it onto DVD. So what typically happens, of course, is that the sorting doesn't happen before you put it on the DVD. [You] copy over how it is, what however the file structure is, however the information is whatever is on there. Obviously, a lot of things that individually might not be placed in the repository. They are kept on the individual's own disk space or perhaps they have their own individual DVDs and there's the only things that they contribute to the to the unit archive is something that they think has unit level value. It turns out that there were, in fact, some members of the organization that over time had kept just about their entire individual archives in the central repository. And so those got copied over onto the DVDs.

It just as the archive itself offers a glimpse of unit behavior, it also shows these particular file folders or segments showed a bit about individual behavior. One of the things that I found interesting is just how much contextual information is not transferred to these archives. So in essence, whether

it's the individual archive or a unit archive or a team archive, it just seems like the tendency is to post only finished products and there's a philosophy about draughts and whatnot.

I tend to keep them. I don't always tend to share them myself, but I do keep them because I always felt that it was important to maintain some sort of a history of the thought process. And invariably there are opportunities when you create something and you're on your fourth version and then you realize that after the fourth version, you've taken a direction that you didn't necessarily want to go with subsequent versions, and then you go back and rely on where was the point where I steered wrong. And so, you go back to that version of the document and you keep going. But I just found it fascinating that that was something that I really did not see anywhere in the archives that I was working with or sorting through. And the reason why it struck me was because when we're dealing with finished products, we only see a small portion of the thought process. And of course, when you're talking about an archive that dates back, these DVDs are dating back to 2003. There's no way to go back to the person, whoever was managing those files or managing that information. If you have a white paper or you have some sort of a product that is posted on this drive, but you don't understand why it was written, what makes it perhaps different or unique from others.

And you have no way of knowing. You have no way of capturing that sense of history unless you're able to track down the individual. Now, of course, my project was quite a bit limited, so I did not do a whole lot of such pursuit. But in previous instances where I've had to go through a unit archive of some kind, the lack of you almost have to rebuild the context, try to reinterpret what went into the finished products as they went. That I was reminded of several places where I've where I've worked where there you were actively discouraged from maintaining old versions. Version control was a significant watchword, and I can understand why in earlier days, when email was still kind of new, not everybody was using it as a primary means of office communication. And when you send something out, of course, it was the first time I think people were really recognizing that once you put something into an email, you lost control of it. And how many times would you send out version 6 of a file and then somebody else is acting on version 5 of the file, because that was emailed about three or four days earlier. Whoever was raising questions or whatever had not opened email three or four days, you know, until three or four days later. And then they're asking about version 5. You're thinking, "what are you talking about? We're on version 6!" -- it just all goes sideways.

I was in some organizations where the supervisors were just telling people, *do not maintain old versions*. You keep only the last version, only the version that is current. Everything else needs to go away. Well, if we're talking about draft products, that's probably OK. I can understand the need to keep some sort of a control in terms of what is the official version - so, we avoid staff miscommunication or unit miscommunication or what have you. But then when it comes to other documents, like for example, if you have in in my line of work where you're dealing with a lot of regulations, the tendency is, is that once the regulation is superseded by a new version or an update of some kind, the old versions disappear or they're hidden away precisely to avoid confusion. Not everything is in the archive, for example. There's a lot of secondhand references to things. If a document is written based on an earlier version of a regulation or an earlier version of a policy than what is presently available. If I don't recognize the reference, then I'm curious as to what that

regulation was. And so then I'm going back and I'm trying to find it in Google, hoping that somebody if it wasn't in the archive itself and a lot of times they weren't, you know, trying to go to Wayback Machine or some of these other long term archiving sites.

And you can't find those old versions very easily. You know, the behavior where what this produces and in terms of understanding and trying to restore some sort of history, some sense of history, this becomes rather frustrating. That train of thought, that time in history really is kind of important, especially when we're talking about trying to understand why a particular policy or why a particular document or why a program of instruction, a syllabus or something else that gets updated routinely. You know, for example, that we used to teach or do certain things a certain way, and you don't have all of the information going back. The second problem that I had with with going through the archive is the fact that even though there's a somewhat of a structure to the suite of products associated with a lot of with a lot of activities in an education setting, for example, you anticipate that you're going to have a completed syllabus with reading lists, possibly even copies of the readings itself. Some other information that would be available to quite a lot of that was actually missing from the archive. There were gaps. There were very, very significant gaps. I mean, basically whole courses or whole things were not actually anywhere within the archive. There wasn't really a concerted or a consistent effort to maintain an archive. Now, when it came to those segments of the archive where it was very clearly a full data dump of an individual's own professional archive, there was some different things I saw.

I found it fascinating how some of the individual archives actually were a full copy of the unit level archive, almost as if the individual was uncomfortable with or they wanted their own space. But of course, when you're talking about gigabytes of information in a system that at the time, of course, could only handle a few gigabytes if I found the redundancy rather funny. A lot of individuals and I, you know, I am certainly no better than that at this. I think a lot of individuals don't really take much time to sort or sift through their files and try to make sense of them. I saw what looked to be about DVDs, worth of stuff just dumped into a file folder, just sort of like by year or by something or other. One case, somebody had copied about roughly 4500 files that came from one source. And it's these were all apparently the outcome of some sort of a visit to another place. And they came back with DVDs worth of stuff and just didn't bother sorting it. Many of the file names were alphanumeric codes. So I had to open up each file to try to figure out what it was. I'm not even sure why the files were named that way unless it was off of some sort of an old system.

Trying to sift through all of this was kind of it was kind of fun. It's okay, I suppose, if we don't think that there's a whole lot of value in storing stuff, we don't see the value in putting any effort into or putting in the necessary effort to try to ensure the completeness or the comprehensiveness of the archives that we store the meaning, the historical meaning of the archive of, of the information that's being stored. It is important, and it ought to be preserved in some way, and it's not going to be done through a simple file structure. I pretty much came to that conclusion. And I think an example of why I think this is so comes from, say, the case of a of an executive officer that I used to work for who was one of the one of the most disorganized or at least on the surface, looks to be one of the most disorganized people I knew ever, certainly ever worked for, who kept piles of papers just literally

scattered everywhere. The funny thing was, is that if you ever asked him a question, it involved finding a document somewhere. By golly, he could go to the right stack and dig his hand into the right level of the pile and pull out precisely the paper. And if you were to ask him, you know, how did he know that that paper was there? There was nothing. He couldn't explain it.

It was it was sort of like how experts of whatever sort have difficulty explaining what it is they do, how they do it and why. You know, kudos for him as an individual. Speaker1: But then what happens if somebody like that goes away? There's a there's an illness, there's an injury. The worst case, of course, being unthinkable. But when you have to think about the thing that I didn't see anywhere in the archive was a journal or a thought piece. Anything that could help somebody following with this archive actually navigate what's there, what's not there, and why a reflective journal can help with others with navigating through their piles of their office should something happen or navigating the decisions that went into a product. To think about why a product was written the way it was or what was not included, what was discussed, what was deliberated is something that just felt missing. I didn't expect to find it, but the more that I went through the archive, the more the questions that accumulated. Why did this organization do things a certain way? Why did the individuals do things a certain way? Is it something that we should be doing now? Have we have we gone like we're in version seven of whatever activity it is? Did we go off that wrong path and do we need to go back to the fourth iteration? We thought we might have had it right and say, let's go back to this and try again or go back to this and and branch off in a in a different way.

Continuity of information definitely is not valued, not in not to the extent that I wish it were or I hope it will be if I'm successful in doing what I'm doing. So what is it that I'm doing? The end product, as I said in the first episode, is is a library and it's more than just a library. It's also going to be built as as an encyclopedia in which all of the archive not only is the archive information there, but we want to build sort of a superstructure of journaling, meaning making Wikipedia page or a wiki page, sort of a structure where you not only have the products, but you have some sort of a context or a place where people can put notes as far as what what was going on, what was being tried, what are we doing? Why does this thing look different than all the other of the same things? Something that can help with building up an organizational memory that can be transportable from one person in the organization to another, especially if somebody is gapped in the organization, or if some function within the organization is gaps such as multiple times where I have taken over a course that the instructor had left 2 to 3 years prior on unthought in subsequent years, despite the topic being something of intrinsic value that we want students to be able to know.

And so I found myself resurrecting it and creating it somewhat anew or whatever. I still wondered, not having watched it being delivered by the previous instructor, wondered what was the thought process behind the way that items were presented? And it would have helped me think through things like, All right, is there something that's actually very, very important? It should be imparted upon students, for example, that I'm not catching, just leafing through the archives themselves, the information that was left behind. So the next episode, I'm going to talk about how I try to construct that meaning, how I try to construct that meaning. And it's going to take several episodes to do it because it's, there's, there's different facets, different perspectives. And thinking about how do you

figure out what is what connects together in a certain way? And when I do that, I'm going to start with my experience. I'm going to start with a military experience that's getting close to 25 years old, which was kind of the first time I had ever undertaken a project of this kind of sort of nature. And the lessons still ring true. So, I'll see you next month.

... 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