Owning & Appraising Knowledge (Knowledge Management, Conclusion)

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Please note: This transcript has been edited for clarity.

In this series on knowledge management and knowledge engineering. I presented several mental models that I've relied on to make sense of what appears to be incomplete and semi-organized repositories of information, both what has been archived and what is known among organizational members. But no discussion of this is complete without addressing a couple of critical points that drive what information is retained and what is withheld, Who owns the information and who determines its value? And do our methods of establishing ownership and appraising knowledge make sense?

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

This is the concluding episode in this series, and I wanted to do kind of a retrospective look. I went through an old repository, 15 years of information, and then proceeded to come up with some thought processes about how one could organize the information to make it somewhat generally useful [and] to understand where gaps are. And I broke it out into meta-narratives. Certain models could be used to describe or categorize the information that we have. Some of it some models can be applied then to explain it, to interpret the information models, to generate alternatives and make decisions. And then finally, how to act out a plan [or] develop a plan. So all of these meta-narratives help with taking the repository of information as it is, or extracting information from what is available in the minds of the knowledgeable ones within an organization.

But there's still some hurdles to overcome that cause people to withhold information. And I recorded this episode very shortly after we did the Zuboff episode in the Talking about Organizations Podcast. This was the episode on Shoshana Zuboff's In the Age of the Smart Machine. It basically summarized some of her ethnographic work from the 1980s that showed how transparency through the use of automation, how automating business practices made information that heretofore had been opaque or unavailable to frontline workers about how the entirety of the business or the enterprise was run, their ability to see that became threatening to managers because then managers no longer had dominion over a set strategic perspective. The broad view of what the organization was doing, and managers would then subsequently find ways to circumvent the transparency or impose rules or use the system as more of a means of control then of openness. She came to the conclusion that there were certain things that had to be done in order to make automation fulfill its promise of better organizations. But in the intervening years, we ended up going the opposite [way].

So now here I am, thinking back to the repository, and I was in an organization where sharing is just a natural part of what the organization does, and yet the repository really wasn't terribly complete. Part of this was because of how the capturing is done. There's a reliance on a specific function, in this case, an administrative function to do the archiving or to do the capturing and retaining and organizing rather than the organizational members themselves.

The organizational members may generate information, but ultimately what winds up in the archive is what made it through the administrative process. There are so many reasons why, just from the natural ability to put energy and time and effort into the administrative function, why some of these repositories might be incomplete. But I want to offer some other ideas that really get a little bit more to the heart of who really owns the information. There are times in which information is not upheld because of organizational inefficiency, but because of concerns over the accessibility of that information. I'm going to recount in a previous episode the story I told of the time in which I was in an organization where the leader of the organization swapped out and the assistants were directed to erase all of the information, [which was done] basically to protect the information to ensure that it couldn't be misused in some way because this was in a somewhat sensitive position.

So sensitivity is one thing, intellectual property rights is another. There's certainly instances in which the creation of the information creates conditions by which who owns it can be unclear. Is it the individual or is it the organization? On the basis of that, the individual is working within the organizational context, but there's also kind of a negative aspect, which I think I see a little bit more in the public sector, and that's actually that there is a undercurrent of individuals who I would consider to be otherwise wholly professional, forward thinking, whatever, who simply feel it's inappropriate or risky to put their name on things.

[I'll] give one example that in my team we were very strongly encouraged to publish in professional journals because that was considered to be one of the important things that we did. I was in kind of a think tank organization that was attached to a larger headquarters type organization, but some of the staff officers were very, very smart, conscientious, forward thinking individuals who did some wonderful things for the organization. But they really were afraid to put their name on, say, a professional article, a note or a commentary because of a belief that they would be stepping outside of the organization's norms. And there's also sort of the fear that it was self-serving.

This particular instance that I'm talking about is more like 20 years ago now, I think. Yeah, about 20 years ago. So, I mean, things have changed a bit. [But yet] I found that kind of pervasive. There were a number of folks who really were reticent [to publish] because they felt that it wasn't proper. It wasn't something that people in those positions did. A similar circumstance I encountered maybe about ten years later where it was somebody who really was personally opposed to publication. And this was an individual who was doing some incredibly important things that should be shared and that this individual, who was a very senior person, was sharing sort of in a verbal or an oral sense by visiting other organizations, sort of giving consultation work or teaching or educating or whatever, but didn't want to put anything on paper because it potentially would channel their reputation that they would become the person who wrote this.

And then instead of being able to work across a breadth of things, they would be almost forced to focus on the one thing that they published both cases ten years apart. I can understand some of the reticence because writing a professional piece was something that was really outside or would be on top of what was already some rather heavy duties. Not a lot of people in the organization that I been in had much room to be able to write or reflect or whatever. There was no real benefit to going ahead and doing so. Similar attitudes, I think, pervaded when it came to capturing information and putting it into an organizational repository. The feeling that it wasn't worth it because nobody would be able to figure out how to find the stuff anyway. The information was created by an individual. They had their own file structure, they had their own thought process of how they organize things, and there was no way that anybody was going to be able to go through and even bother sifting through this.

It just would be overwhelming no matter what. It just seems like you almost can't avoid some sort of a filtering mechanism. There's sort of the blanket idea that maybe sometime in the future and a AI application is going to help us do things better. But in the time being, there's just too many reasons, too many understandable reasons why we just haven't built a good sense of being able to just naturally archive things for re-use in units that I've been in. We used to have a very vigilant unit history program where organizational historians and that was this was their role was to go through the organization, to interview the leadership, all the directors, all of the branch chiefs, and develop a fairly lengthy and detailed archive of what was done in the organization over the course of a year for posterity. But man, that was an expensive undertaking. The good news is, is that doing so relieved a lot of the stress off the organization because now it wasn't. Yeah, staff officers were having to spend time at these interviews. They had to provide information. They had to sometimes help with writing some of the chapters, but it was really useful. And it was great because when I joined an organization that I'd never been in before, that was one of the resources that I was able to go back and say, Hey, I can go back and see what some decision that's being faced now.

When was it done? Before I could go to the unit histories and I can find some potential clues, even if it wasn't quite the same thing. The other thing is the value of information, which is sort of aligned with what I'm talking about here with the with the history. But there are some other things about how we value information that just don't seem to make sense or can be somewhat perverse. I'm going to start by highlighting another talking about Organizations episode, and this was episode 57 that we did with Steven Kerr. So Steven Kerr did the article "on the folly of rewarding A while hoping for B." This was an article that was written in 1975. It reads more like a commentary. It was not written in traditional, rigorous academic prose per se. At least that was our assessment of it. But it was a very enlightening commentary about the use of perverse incentives or an inability to for organizational leaders to say what they really, really wanted. And they were pursuing something, laying out certain incentives and hoping that something, some other good would come of it. If you were to do an Internet search on coeur on the folly of you would find numerous entries. If you flip over to the images, you would see all sorts of PowerPoint slides or graphics that people have used that provide examples or highlight this quote from this article as being something very important. A central part of a brief. The number of citations is massive. 3000 was the last time I checked. It was over 3000 citations. And this was even before it was reprinted in 1995, which only added to the articles mistake.

Now, in the realm of the academic conversation we like to talk about, one article should spur another article. Best way to critique a theory is to prepare another theory. For example, what I found very fascinating is that there have been critiques and commentaries in response to the Kerr article, one of which by two authors Becker was one. I forget the second one, but it was in 1994, and they wrote "on the wisdom of rewarding A while hoping for B"—a direct response. This article was much more of a traditional academic work and used far greater numbers of citations to try to explore why it would be that organizations may be wise or maybe smart to go ahead and use misdirected incentives for various reasons, among them being that there may be reasons why the actual goal cannot be disclosed. So if we were valuing information correctly, I would argue this response article should be as valuable, at least as valuable, because it does provide a valued critique. It provides a more rigorous argument to justify it, and it should then further be extended for say, all right, who's going to write the tiebreaker article? Well, guess what? That article, even though it was in a prominent journal, probably, I think the last time I checked, it only had 12 citations. If you were to do the same Google search, of course you wouldn't find any reference to it. It's certainly not in the images. Nobody is making a slide based on their arguments or whatever.

Now, with this suggests to me is that unfortunately, the value we placed on these types of articles is based on the emotional response that they generate and occur. [Kerr's] article was definitely written to be provocative. I mean, it was to provoke a reaction. I think that's kind of stilts things a little bit.

I'm going to give another even more egregious example. On my smartphone, I have a couple of social media accounts. Social media platforms tend to run ads. And there's this one ad that unfortunately, for reasons I do not know why, but it comes up on my smartphone probably because I have a sociology background of some kind. But there's this ad that comes in for an article, a traditional academic journal article, and it happens to be by a researcher who is focused on the life of the rich and famous, if you will. And this particular study that was done engaged with those who were involved in these rather lavish parties in which some particular famous person would go on splurges and there'd be a whole network of people that are associated in order to provide the alcohol.

There would be women, there would be a lot of energy, all essentially to run up massive bar tabs. But this on my smartphone in this ad is one of those previews that you get like in in a social media where you have the article with a link and an image and the image is literally just nothing but a bunch of scantily clad women. The whole marketing aspect. You think about academia as trying to value knowledge, and then you have these sorts of techniques basically exercising clickbait. Now I'm starting to wonder about, well, how are we valuing the information? I mean, my concern is commodification is a threat to professions in general. That's been documented before. And this is a case where commodification is a concern because in. Intrinsic value of the knowledge is what we should be measuring our research and our publications or whatever against. How useful are they, how accurate are they, how much they add to our knowledge and whatnot, and not through extrinsic sources that basically attach value based on what generates more buzz or generates more emotional reaction? This was kind of an extreme example. I think some more ordinary examples in terms of how we value information comes to factors such as who's the contributor, power position or influence, where some people's inputs may carry more weight than others, whether or not the view is a popular one, and whether because we're filtering, because we're vetting information that goes into the repository, whether unpopular different views get cut out rather than captured [].

So controversial views [don't typically see] both sides of the controversy [captured]. You might not see that in a repository. The preference would be to come up with what is the "organizational solution." And that's what's recorded and that's what's promulgated. We have to find new ways to resist that temptation, even though perhaps there is a concern that the presence of different points of view may create controversy, may create confusion, may cause people to make mistakes or bad judgments or whatever, I think those concerns are overstated.

In my experience, I haven't really seen where it's been such a bad thing that you've had different views that were captured in writing or captured in videos or whatever that were centrally available. It can help with getting an organization out of a jam because if the school solution that works today proves no longer to work, perhaps those dissenting views may have a key to alternatives that that could be captured and explored. So the repository has to be more objective. We can't allow emotional contexts to pollute the repository in such a way that people consume it, not on the information's merits, but on what is appealing or whatever. That's not to say that the repository doesn't need to take into account what is accessible and readable.

I mean, it's got to be captured in such a way that people can use it, but not captured in such a way that it's that its usage or its presentation is unduly influenced by factors that detract from the utility of the knowledge. I mean, everything that I said is in line with the domains of managerial activity that Zuboff put in about managing and information organization. And those four domains are intellect of skill development, technology, development, strategy formulation and social system development. That's [on] page 397.

A lot of what I've been talking about today is about the social system development, altering or modifying the way in which repositories are viewed and how they're consumed of changing them from being something that's extraneous to organizational duties to something that is central and moving from something that values information based on extrinsic factors to something that's a bit more intrinsic. The repositories, if they're organized according to thought process of a kind of a knowledge engineering strategy of which mime data narratives are offered as an example. Then there I think there's a greater chance that repositories can be shaped and formed in such a way that they can be more useful to an organization down the line as they grow, as they as they expand because of the continued way in which we add new experiences, new organizational learning to the repository. That concludes my series on knowledge management. Thank you for listening.

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