
Keith De La Rue: Interview

reference
by Ana Neves
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Ana Neves interviews the author of "The Ivory Tower: a Knowledge Management Fable" to understand more about his work at Telstra and what he thinks about knowledge management in organisations.

Read the story [The Ivory Tower: a Knowledge Management Fable](#).

Visit [Keith's site](#) to get to know more about his work.

May you please describe your role at Telstra?

Telstra is a full-service telecommunications company, 50% owned by the Australian Government. I have worked for four years in a group known originally as "KnowHow". The role of this group is to actively gather knowledge from a number of Product experts and transfer that knowledge to the Business and Government sales force.

This role includes aspects of communication, content management and training. It is centred on a web-based document library and weekly web-based newsletter, but has at various times also included a range of e-learning tools, audio CDs, streaming audio and video and face-to-face training.

What do you like most in your role?

This role gives me an opportunity to bring together experience I have gained in a number of previous jobs. Immediately before joining KnowHow, I worked as a telecommunications consultant in the business sales force – our current target audience. This required a broad understanding of the whole gamut of IT and Telecommunications products. It also gave me an understanding of the needs of the sales force. At other times, I have worked part-time in communication and adult education.

I get very passionate about helping people to not "reinvent the wheel" – to avoid duplication of effort. The more we leverage the work that we have done, the simpler and more effective it is for the sales force to access the information they need to do their job, and the more efficient it is for the company.

I have also found great enjoyment in taking a career path that has led from technical work to a much more people-oriented role.

What led you to write "The Ivory Tower - a Knowledge Management Fable"?

I was given the opportunity to contribute to a Knowledge Management training manual for CPA Australia – a professional association for Accountants. I co-authored a chapter on practical tools and techniques for KM with a former KnowHow colleague. As we were preparing this chapter, it occurred to me that we needed some way to tie the different steps of our approach into a coherent picture –

something that explained why all these tools were needed, without locking it in to any particular company or even industry.

The KnowHow approach to KM in the Telstra sales force started inside a small group of technical specialists in late 1999, particularly focussed in the Internet and data product area. There was a great need to get them to share their specialist knowledge with a sales force more focussed on traditional Telco voice products. Thus, the concept of breaking down the walls of the “ivory tower” has always been in the back of my mind. The idea of a medieval setting seemed to fit this image, and provides a rich source of characters and scenarios. It is a setting that most people have some familiarity with – who hasn’t read some form of historical fiction, or seen movies in this genre? Even in fantasy, such as the Lord of the Rings series.

Once the basic premise was in place, each section of the chapter threw up a scenario that could be met within the general framework.

Keith's related, favourite books and how he describes them in no more than five words:

[Gödel, Escher, Bach: An Eternal Golden Braid](#), Douglas Hofstadter. A multi-faceted explanation of mind.

[The Day the Universe Changed](#), James Burke. How discovery changes reality.

[Dirk Gently's Holistic Detective Agency](#), Douglas Adams. The fundamental interconnectedness of everything.

Who are the wizards, the kings and the knowms in our organisations?

So, we already have the technical specialists as the wizards. Every company has its wizards. They may be a formal Research department. In our case, as we moved on and KnowHow’s scope expanded, we were dealing with our full team of Product Managers.

In my experience, the real wizards can often be in informal positions. They are the people that everyone turns to for help. Some wizards are happy to give this help – other see the withholding of their knowledge as power. Thus, there is an element of culture change required to promote knowledge sharing. But even the most willing wizards can resent the repeated questions from the uninitiated – they need techniques for making the knowledge more available.

The kings are any of various levels of management. This is a little simpler in the story, and my king is a very wise and perceptive manager! In reality, there are benefits in knowledge sharing starting small – even under the king’s radar – but if it is not endorsed by at least an important prince or two, there is no certainty of lasting success.

The knowms are perhaps a more rare subject in the kingdom. The secret of the success of the KnowHow group is that some of us came in from the telecommunications consultant role. This gives us the ability to understand both the wizards and the serfs. We understand the technologists’ jargon, and we understand the impatience and frustration of the sales staff. Also very importantly, the team included a rich mix of skills in adult education, media, marketing and publicity from the beginning.

Most importantly, the teamwork has always been strong. There was virtually no recruitment ever necessary – people with the passion for this work just kept hammering on the door wanting to get in! The challenge is that the knowm role does not easily fit into traditional structures or job descriptions.

How do you find the knowms? My (totally unscientific) rule of thumb would be to look around for people that have switched careers a few times, that possibly have high IQs and that have skills at understanding both the big picture and the details of their work.

From your experience, what does influence people's attitude towards knowledge sharing?

Just explaining the big picture is where we started. The more people can be made to understand the reasons for sharing knowledge, the more cooperative they can become. The more specific technique we started with was reward-based. We allocated a point system to a range of our knowledge-sharing activities. Writing or reviewing a document for our on-line library was one point; delivering a two-hour face-to-face training session was five points. At the end of each quarter, the total number of points earned went towards twenty per cent of each wizard's remuneration.

Just monetary reward doesn't necessarily suit everyone. We also at various times gave people other recognition – from gift vouchers to wristwatches and even a surfboard branded with the team logo. Winners and success stories were also publicised in a team newsletter.

Making a range of standard templates available for the various documents and media also makes the job easier for the wizard – it puts a visible limit on the amount of work required. Once the system became established as a recognised part of the process of taking a product to market, the knowledge sharing then became part of the day-to-day job.

What are the biggest obstacles to the knowledge processes in our organisations?

As may be obvious from the tense of some of my earlier answers, things have changed within the KnowHow group. We merged a range of functions and disciplines that do not traditionally sit together. We also were sitting in the middle ground somewhere between product development and sales. Succeeding reorganisations of the company have led to the KnowHow function being moved between Sales and Marketing departments. With each move, the focus has been shifted, and some of the functions moved to other groups.

On the one hand, much of what we have created has been built into standard business processes – a great endorsement of our work – but on the other hand the difficulty of fitting this role into a traditional hierarchy can limit effectiveness.

A great strength of focus and economies of scale can be achieved by putting all the KnowHow skills and functions into a single team. Coordination of effort is critical in making it easy for the target audience to get the knowledge they need to do their job.

You clearly see knowledge management as a crossroad of many disciplines. What are those disciplines? What do they bring to the mix?

In some ways, the KnowHow definition of KM is fairly narrow. We have focussed particularly on getting the wizards to share their knowledge with the serfs. In practice, many of the serfs also have much to share, which we have also supported. It is most important for the knowms is to be able to understand and communicate in both of these worlds. Thus, whatever disciplines the wizards and serfs are operating within are key. Again, the knowms don't need to be experts in these, but they do need enough experience or knowledge to gain the respect of both the wizards and the serfs.

To do the actual work, the knowms need to then embrace the three disciplines I mentioned back in question one - communication, content management and training. Another part of our approach was not to view these as three separate functions, but to blur the lines between them.

Communication skill may be in journalism, marketing or technical writing – knowing how to condense down the message into a form that attracts the attention of the audience. Content management requires some level of librarianship skill, and a level of understanding of taxonomies – not that we have ever used the term. The need is to understand how a sales person would look for information, and build indexes and search tools to suit. The main skill in developing face-to-face training is again around understanding the needs of a time-poor audience that just need to know enough to recognise a sales opportunity for a product, and know who to call to help them sell it.

Our motto has always been: "The right information to the right people at the right time."