

### **Among time thieves and knowledge puzzlers**

The other day I took my students on a field trip to a company which outsources consulting services on the grand scale. Our host showed us a project that was in full swing, but all the time kept venting his annoyance over what they called “time thieves”. We asked what he meant. “Time thieves,” we learned, was the ironic term for consultants who sold time instead of value-adding knowhow – clean contrary to their consulting firms’ promises of placing their accumulated knowledge at the firm’s disposal. And anyway, what is “accumulated knowledge”? Something potted?

Knowledge is always borne by individuals. How can a company be a bearer of knowledge? And what exactly do companies do in order to gather and disseminate experience, so that the individual associate will be genuinely able to offer the company’s accumulated knowledge? The knowledge amounting to the sum total of knowledge possessed, in the bigger companies, by several thousand well-trained, experience associates.

Reading slogans about accumulated knowledge, I was put in mind of *Murke’s Collected Silences*, the famous short story by Heinrich Böll, published in 1955. Dr Murke had an unusual hobby. He worked at a radio station, where his job was to cut recorded tapes. His hobby was collecting the discarded silent bits. If silences can be potted, then perhaps knowledge can too.

Up until 2000, the solution seemed plain and simple: knowledge was collected in the computer pot. Through the compilation of reports on assignments completed, experience would be stored in databases from which associates would then be able to retrieve answers to the questions facing them in their new assignments. But events proved that, whereas reporting trivialities was an easy matter, communicating subtleties was that much more difficult. A large part of professional knowhow proved to be implied and contextual. The reports were long and numerous, and the answers to specific questions hard to recover. And how should the data which the database offered be interpreted – who had they been keyed in by? Were they dependable? Pure IT did not offer the ultimate solution for an intended industrialisation of knowledge enterprises’ production of services. “Knowledge management”, regrettably, became a buzzword.

In order to pool their knowledge, professionals must have the opportunity of meeting, socialising and getting to know one another across the organisational boundaries within the enterprise. Associates can successively augment their knowledge and competence through joint in-service education and systematic evaluation. And, once they have got to know each other, they will be better able to assess and benefit from the data which a colleague has fed into a database. A successful knowledge-based enterprise has a cat’s cradle of threads between its associates. Successful leadership in a knowledge-based enterprise is also knowledge-oriented, in the sense of possessing meta-knowledge as to who knows what and of being good at selecting and combining competencies in the clients’ best interests. A smart knowledge organisation facilitates knowledge puzzling.

But the selfsame company boss marketing the firm’s collected knowledge as its great competitive advantage also parades the excision from his organisation of everything “superfluous” – no staffs, no editorial committees, no development projects, no thought leader. Associates wishing to sustain their market value must manage their own professional development. With this way of seeing things, all service industry workers are active on assignments only: none of them is working across the assignments for the further development of competence or in search of new ways of augmenting benefit to clients. This way, when an assignment is concluded the experience gained is dissipated:

instead of being transmitted from the individual assignment to the enterprises, it goes up in smoke. The enterprise is not systematically building up an intellectual structural capital.

Knowledge sharing today is a more burning issue than ever before. It cannot be dismissed as a buzzword. What do we want the consulting enterprise of the future to look like? A value-creating knowledge puzzler or a common time thief?