

## Software is no substitute for collected wisdom

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They still stand in the Arctic, where Inuit law forbids their destruction. Made of several stones balanced on each other, they serve as silent guides in uncharted terrain.

Most of us call them inukshuk (even though the plural form is inuksuit) -- some are designed to show directions, others to warn of impending dangers or to mark a place of respect. They've been adopted as the brand image of Vancouver's 2010 Olympic Games.

For Dr. John Girard, they have become a totem of a different kind: A way of showing how to practice "knowledge management," or sharing and retaining the ideas that make a business successful.

Dr. Girard, who served for years in the Canadian Armed Forces before taking up an academic position at Minot State University in North Dakota, lectures on knowledge management using a picture of an inukshuk in which every stone body part is labelled. The left leg is "technology" and the right is "culture." The waist is "leadership," while the stones making up the torso include socialization/externalization, tacit knowledge and explicit knowledge. The top stone -- the inukshuk's head -- is labelled "measurement," which is usually the hardest part of any knowledge management initiative.

The inukshuk became Dr. Girard's teaching tool when he realized he needed a way to help Canadian executives understand that knowledge management is really about people. While technology can support it, and there have been many attempts to produce products that do so, you can't collaborate and capture best practices without some willing volunteers.

"There was that old saying: 'Loose lips sink ships,' " Dr. Girard says, referring to a poster about the military during Second World War. "The army didn't want soldiers going down to the pub and sharing strategies with a woman they met there. We're still in that mindset of protecting the confidentiality of information that could really benefit other people."

Canada's military was just as resistant to knowledge management when Dr. Girard was a part of it. Although there was an acceptance and even an embrace of information-sharing tools in the lower ranks, senior officers had a different culture, he says. "Information was given on a need-to-know basis. There wasn't a lot of trust."

We all know what a lack of knowledge management looks like in a company. There's duplication of effort as one department has to figure out all the shortcuts to performing a task that another department learned months or years ago. The lack of communication means that projects fail, or aren't done by the deadline. Worst of all, turnover of any kind means that when someone talented

in a company leaves for another job, they take a lot of knowledge with them that would assist their successors.

In the same way that inuksuit were intended to be messages permanently left in time and space, Dr. Girard hopes his inukshuk model will remind organizations of the qualities they need to make knowledge management work.

The good news is small businesses are in the best position to get knowledge management right.

"The real success stories are in the organizations with 500 people or less," Dr. Girard says. "That's because you're still at a size where you know the people you're dealing with, so you're better able to work towards a common goal."

IT vendors tended to link knowledge management with document management in the 1990s. The idea was that, since key information is often put in documents, an electronic way to organize documents would lead to greater knowledge. That's why you saw so many firms offer products to set up sophisticated employee intranets or other repositories to pool ideas.

Outside of the public sector and the research community, however, the term "knowledge management" is rarely heard among industry players today.

"The IT vendors have moved on," says Nick Bontis, chief knowledge officer with Knexa Corp. in Vancouver. After technology budgets were slashed a few years ago, it became harder for many companies to measure the impact of knowledge management products, he says, so they didn't buy them. "There wasn't much revenue to be made."

Dr. Bontis teaches knowledge management courses at McMaster University in Hamilton, where he says small and medium-sized enterprise executives talk about struggles with productivity that are really knowledge management challenges.

"In smaller organizations, people just do more stuff," he says. "There isn't always a full-time finance person or a full-time HR person, so they handle all of that. The issue is, how do you become an efficient knowledge worker to compartmentalize the tasks you need to do in the average day?"

Instead of prescribing expensive document management or content management software, Dr. Bontis suggests his students make better use of the tools they already have, even if the vendors don't highlight their knowledge management capabilities. An example is the "rules wizard" in Microsoft Outlook, which can be used to more efficiently sort an e-mail inbox. If a group within a company is working on something called Project Alpha, he says, all e-mail messages related to the project should have Alpha in the subject line. That way, they can be routed to a folder for immediate attention. Teams should also come up with policies so that a message flagged as a high priority, for instance, would receive a response within 24 hours. This could be just as effective as a more advanced system, Dr. Bontis says.

"There was a thought that if you build the repository, that people would come and download their brain on it, and of course that's not true," he says.

This isn't to suggest no one's going to come up with better knowledge management technology. It's just that the products have to be complemented by human resources policies and procedures that motivate employees to participate. Dr. Bontis cites one firm that rewards teams that have collaborated only by phone and e-mail by giving them a free trip to meet each other at the end of a project.

Can this combination of high tech and soft skills create an environment where information is shared freely, in a spirit of true partnership among equals? If the inuksuit know, they're not telling.

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