

Management Education and Knowledge Ecology

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Ecosystems of knowledge generate social and economic value for businesses.

by George Pór

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Be Introduced to “Knowledge Ecology”

The emerging theory and practices of knowledge ecology are making 20th-century ideas of management and business obsolete. Today, the measure of an organization’s mettle is no longer the money in its coffers, but the knowledge and intelligence of its members, and their capacity to effectively collaborate in learning partnerships of all sizes and kinds, within and outside the formal organization.

For example, think of an organization as an ecosystem, a living organism. When all of its constituents perform in concert, sharing and coordinating their efforts to enhance the possibilities for all members and the organization as whole, the ecosystem thrives.

“Knowledge ecology” is about studying and enhancing the ways in which the parts and wholes of knowledge-generating systems relate to one another. It provides a framework for organizations who want to maximize their benefits from emerging technologies to facilitate effective collaboration among their members.

Most managers today understand that Web-enabled communications have made, in large part, their function of “information gate-keeping” obsolete. They even realize that people are their most important assets. Some of them also understand that *what the members and their communities know* is what makes or breaks their organizations. The next step is to recognize and act on the recognition that knowledge is not a “thing” that can be “managed” like physical assets, but a human and organizational capacity produced by collaborative relationships that can be nurtured and inspired.

That’s why the core practice of knowledge ecology is the art knowledge gardening: the seeding and feeding of healthy knowledge ecosystems. This article is an introduction and invitation to reflect on and explore why nurturing knowledge ecosystem is both a key leadership competence and a strategic imperative for today’s organizations.

The First Step and Its Rationale

The first step is that we abandon many old concepts of “management” as we have to come to know it. As French novelist Andre Gide once said (as quoted in Bela Banathy’s *Guided Evolution of Society: A Systems View*), “One does not discover new land without consenting to lose sight of the old shore.”

What must take the place of our “old shores” is a practice more akin to *shared learning*, in which managers—who themselves become master learners, coordinators, and coaches—lead by example, and inspire and acknowledge contributions of knowledge from all members.

Managers who are still guided by the old habits and processes of command and control, rather than ways to unleash the full potential of the membership—previously known as “employees”—hold their company back from

developing the resilience and flexibility it needs to respond to rapidly changing technologies and markets. And *that* will be the difference between a business that succeeds and one that struggles, or dies.

What a company knows, and how it shares and uses what it knows, is a strategic asset, or liability if it's not attended both by its leadership and members. We're living in a time when knowledge, intelligence and wisdom became the most powerful engines of generating great social and economic value. Therefore, the vibrancy of a corporation's knowledge ecosystem is a more reliable indicator of its future performance than its financial might. *Money* indicates only its past performance on the market. The vitality of its *knowledge* ecosystem tells about its potential to meet rapidly moving, strategic challenges and opportunities. To meet them, organizations must rely on the shared knowledge and intelligence of their members. A company can have billions of dollars in the bank, but if that company is not in tune with the requirements of knowledge-based economy, it's very likely that it will not survive.

Management Meets Education

There was a time when an MBA degree meant a partial, if not total, shift from learning to doing—from student to employee. That model also is quickly becoming obsolete. In a knowledge economy, no managers can afford to rely on what they have known in the past to see them through their careers indefinitely.

They must continue to learn, and managers and educators alike must create environments in which learning is ongoing and “stealthy”—that is, invisible and effortless. “Stealth learning” happens simply by doing our work in virtual and real-world environments optimized for developing new capabilities and their surprising combinations.

As a result, management development is no longer limited to organizations such as business schools or corporate universities. Organizational professionals develop new skills and better maps of the knowledge landscapes in which they are traveling, more and more through “peer learning” or “collaborative learning.” Also called “c-learning,” this term was coined by the Gartner Group. C-learning occurs everywhere people interact in environments optimized to support their collaboration. If their environments, and their potential, are not optimized, it starves the organization's knowledge ecosystem.

To promote a healthy knowledge ecology, managers have a new responsibility before them. To inspire the members' best contributions, they must:

- Be master learners and model better practices of individual and c-learning.
- Elicit the leadership qualities in all who work with them.
- Become future-responsive, anticipate and articulate future possibilities.
- Model all of the above for others so they can learn to do the same.

If managers are not master learners, they will not be able to absorb and apply the new practices they need to master, if they are to win in the marketplace. If they cannot inspire leadership in all their members, they cannot mobilize the full potential of the organization to deal with a broad range of situations.

If the primary business of all business is to generate value for their surrounding market ecosystems, we can say the same for education. The difference is that most business organizations deliver that value through their goods and services as their primary market offer, while educational organizations tend to do that through staging, eliciting, and guiding learning experiences for their customers. However, even that differentiator may disappear or become more nebulous, as more and more businesses realize that selling memorable and fully enjoyable experiences is what brings customers back again and again. The subtitle of “The Experience Economy,” a popular management book by two Harvard professors, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, tells it all: “Work Is Theater and Every Business Is a Stage.”

Work and Learning in Cyberspace

Mastering the right combinations of social and electronic technologies for collaboration, learning, and coordination of action, is an essential ingredient of business, educational, and organizational effectiveness. Recognizing that, more and more organizations use online tools and environments to connect their members to each other across the office, the campus, or the world.

Cyberspace, however, will neither replace nor diminish the value of face-to-face communication. It will, in fact, oblige us to become smarter about how and why we use the latter. When someone convenes a meeting that brings together in the same room 20 managers from around the world, both the convener and the participants are aware of the combined value of their time and attention, given the cost of projects not attended at the same time. As face-to-face meetings become a more and more expensive exercise, there will be more care going into designing, preparing, and facilitating them for effectiveness, efficiency, *and* the enjoyment by all participants.

As the volume of work done in cyberspace increases, so, too, will the value of well-designed, face-to-face events. Where cyberspace will shine most is in its propensity for enabling the emergence of free energy and group genius, through synergizing those synchronous and asynchronous modes of working and learning together. To be viable in the knowledge economy, an organization must develop competence in designing and nurturing various kinds of c-learning communities.

Some of those c-learning communities are also known as “communities of practice,” groups of colleagues facing the same types of challenges, who learn together to become better practitioners. Their primary context does not lie in a specific project that requires specific results, but in their shared and collaboratively negotiated learning agenda. As such “enterprise ontologies,” “intelligent agents” and other technologies that enable c-learning continue to improve, communities of practice—the stewards of organizational competences—will become more and more strategic and valuable to the organization.

“Competition Is Dead!”

Author James Moore, who has championed the idea of a market ecosystem in which all organisms function in concert, wrote, “Competition is dead.” It makes sense, considering that if value is created through sharing—not hoarding—knowledge, then an organization’s most valuable strategic advantage is its capacity of collaborative knowledge development inside and across organizations. When an ecosystem functions well, players can easily find their unique niche and contribute to the whole with what they do best. For example, if in a given niche I cannot provide as high value as somebody else does, I’d better discover and redefine my true niche.

Here’s a story to illustrate that point on a personal level. Recently, I attended an invitational conference of an international group of computer scientists, biologists, artificial intelligence experts, sociologists and other researchers of the “global brain.” I had prepared a presentation that was scheduled for the last day. However, in taking part in the conversations of the first two days, I found it necessary to revise the presentation a couple of times. What was the point to waste everybody’s time and attention, I thought, by elaborating on issues covered better by somebody else?

Thinking of the workshop as a miniature ecosystem, and each participant as a species occupying a certain knowledge niche, I’ve noticed how the unfolding patterns of our shared knowledge got modified and shifted by each new presentation. Given the new and continually changing shape of the workshop’s implicit “issues map,” I kept asking myself, “What elements of my original presentation will add unique knowledge value to our evolving mini-ecosystem, and what are the parts to abandon, which were covered by other participants with more coherence and clarity? Doing so allowed me to re-focus my presentation on those dimensions of the field to which I had a more unique contribution to make. (The paper’s title is “Designing for the Emergence of a Global-scale

Collective Intelligence: Invitation to a Research Collaboration,” and can be found here: <http://www.co-il.com/coil/knowledge-garden/kd/designing> .)

Organizations can thrive on continuously shifting market and technical conditions only if they learn to grow, harvest and leverage the unique mix of knowledge and capabilities of all of their members.

Distributed Intelligence, Collective Wisdom

Knowledge ecology is about recognizing and honoring people—their knowledge, their expertise, and intelligence—as the main source of value creation. “Honoring” should include providing them with the best available tools, methods, and expert facilitation of knowledge development in a well-nourished knowledge ecosystem of productive conversations. In such an ecosystem, relevant information, successful practices, and mutual inspirations feed one another.

The vibrant health of a knowledge ecosystem requires that business leaders, HR managers and executives, and other management educators provide a sustained attention to the right cultural and technical conditions in which people and relevant knowledge can blossom.

What knowledge is relevant? That’s not an as trivial question as it may sound. Spectacular failures happened, in many cases, to organizations that have been successfully climbing a peak in their knowledge landscape but have chosen the wrong peak to climb. Where will the shared intelligence and collective wisdom come from, which will be needed to successfully navigate in fast-shifting social, market, and knowledge landscapes?

The distributed intelligence of any collective entity is increasing as it provides all members with more access to its meaning-making activities. It can do that by optimizing its knowledge ecosystem for member-to-member interactions and member-generated content.

A knowledge ecosystem designed for unleashing the potential of its members’ creativity and collaboration, will be capable to equip the organization with a collective wisdom demonstrated by, first, a better understanding of the interrelatedness of the parts and whole in complex, adaptive systems; and second, a better intuition about the future.

Verna Allee wrote in *Knowledge Evolution: Building Organizational Intelligence*, “Wisdom is...a highly creative and connective way of processing knowledge that distills out essential principles and truths. Wisdom tells us what to pay attention to. Wisdom is the truth seeker and pattern finder that penetrates to the core of what really matters.”

Why did “wisdom” become an organizational distinction in the last five years? Because the emergence of the Web and related technologies enabled the emergence of larger, intricate, and interrelated patterns that connect our market/social ecosystems, knowledge ecosystems, and the forces which play there decisive roles.

In these conditions, an organization can't afford to be only “*knowledgeable*.” To understand and respond in a timely manner to the kaleidoscopic patterns of new opportunities and dangers for its strategic intent, the organization needs to mobilize its distributed *intelligence* and collective *wisdom*.

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<head>**Related documents by George Pór**

- The Quest for Collective Intelligence
<http://www.vision-nest.com/cbw/Quest.html>

- Nurturing Systemic Wisdom through Knowledge Ecology
<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/kd/KE.pdf>
- Frequently Asked Questions about Knowledge Ecology
<http://www.KnowledgeEcology.com/faq/>
- Knowledge -> Intelligence -> Wisdom: the Essential Value Chain of the New Economy
<http://www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/kd/kiwkeynotes.shtml>

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<head> Knowledge Ecology: The Next Steps

What are the next steps for organizations and communities that aspire to go beyond knowledge management, to develop shared intelligence and collective wisdom?

1. **Mandate** that a self-selected team of explorers engage in a learning expedition, that explores ways to dramatically improve the vitality of in the core of your knowledge ecosystem. It will use, among other tools, a Web-enabled network of focused conversations to facilitate breakthrough results.
2. **Empower** the team to acquire the resources they need to carry out their mission.
3. **Choose** or ask the team to choose **a focus** for a strategic conversation for action.
4. **Engage** and use the power of your knowledge ecosystem to make that conversation highly effective, efficient and enjoyable.

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