Sharing The Wealth

By Kathleen Watt

Comedian Jerry Seinfeld’s TV neighbor and nemesis, Newman, said it as well as anyone: “When you control the mail, you control *information!*” Newman regularly hissed his famous tag line through clenched teeth and sinister sneer, referring to the snail mail he carried in his “postal vehicle,” savoring the power it gave him, however fleetingly.

Although today’s real-world wheeling and dealing is transacted predominantly by email, Newman’s megalomaniacal snarl is truer than ever. Information leads to knowledge. Knowledge is power. And power is what separates winners from losers.

The buzzy, new-ish field of Knowledge Management proposes to make sense of the glut of raw information within any large organization. In diverse business environments from international commercial law to nonprofit music administration, KM is developing technologies for making large databases accessible and navigable (thus rendering them truly useful), and strategizing to persuade employees from top to bottom to talk to each other about their successes and failures (KM-ers call this “tacit” knowledge, and consider it the pure gold in the lode). In practice, KM functions in corporations of the 21st century in somewhat the same way that Organizational Behavior functioned during the sensitive New Age □’80’s and ’90’s. Now it’s KM that sets itself astride the gaping maw between the realities of doing business, and the way things ought to be. KM proposes to shepherd power players to a better bottom line by leveling out the chaos in the corporate coliseum, deploying state-of-the-art technology, and by establishing a sophisticated dissemination paradigm which knowledge managers call…well…“sharing.”

It should surprise no one that knowledge management, with its sharing incentives, has made inroads into British and Canadian companies more easily than it has into the pugnacious American business culture—where KM would likely get better play if the word “gladiator” could somehow be worked into it. In fact, it remains to be seen whether or not the fundamentally psychological (some say "feminized") KM objectives will ultimately be achievable, in vigorous—not to say vicious—market economies.

But this is primal territory that we are forever rediscovering. My thoughts were piqued recently by the unlikely intersection over my desk of two fascinating, timely and otherwise unrelated essays. One was an illuminating discussion of biochemical atrocities in the wars of Antiquity and earlier ("From Hydra to Venom to Anthrax Myth," NYT, October 7, 2003). Pulitzer prize-winning science writer John Noble Wilford begins to unravel the stubborn myth of a prehistoric peaceable kingdom, or any golden age, when the human drive toward dominion was ever any different than it is in our wicked modern world. Current military scholarship, writes Wilford, dates the beginning of combat by organized groups from about the same time that foraging cultures first settled into agrarian villages, some ten thousand years ago. Other research suggests that among peer groups of simple foragers—even chimpanzees—guerilla warfare can be particularly vicious, wiping out as much as 25% of a population.

Thus reminded of the barbarous basic nature of *homo sapiens*, I turned ruefully to an essay by Patrick Lambe, principle consultant of Straits Knowledge (a Singapore-based organizational and knowledge management firm). Lambe dares to dump a cold water bath on the KM reverie of a better way to do business. If knowledge management implies knowledge parity, writes Lambe, then the whole endeavor is doomed merely to reinforce the status quo, because KM will not succeed. Under typical present business models, information is hoarded against both theft and depletion. So all employees' knowledge and technical knowledge retrieval systems are conscripted in the service of the "corporate plot." But perfect information transparency, leading to knowledge parity, warns Lambe, is not the appropriate response. Perfect parity produces stasis. That is, no losers—and no winners.

This is anathema to the marketplace, and, as it turns out, to human nature, and to say otherwise is "simply naïve—or deliberately deceitful." Everywhere in nature, momentum gathers toward winning, finding and exploiting physical or informational inequalities in order to win—Lambe's word is "triumph"—over an adversary, a competitor, or bad luck. In matters of knowledge, as in all else, that's what makes a horse race. But don't bet on it—until you know the odds.

In reality, declares Lambe, somewhat seditiously, information exists everywhere in *asymmetry*. Therefore the simple volume of data in the warehouse, and the dogged race to acquire more, is far outbalanced by *the effectual use of knowledge at hand*. This is where KM focus and training must be. Without concomitant training, maturity, and/or environment to understand and implement the information that is now technologically accessible, no KM expenditure can be counted effective.

Law firm knowledge manager, Joy London, who also authors the highly respected KM weblog, "excited utterances: more than just an exception to the hearsay rule" (http://www.excitedutterances.blogspot.com), suggests that KM is primarily an intramural enterprise, not subject to the fierce upward pressure of marketplace competition. But London is making a crucial distinction between knowledge and legally protected intellectual property. Lawyers, for just one example, will testify that the intramural competition for clients, promotions and bonuses never stops. And London does not disagree.

Lambe further refracts KM's laser focus by reminding us that human nature begins closer to home. Not only are companies triumph-driven, but so too are individuals. Sooner or later the foot soldiers who make up a company workforce or corporate infrastructure are going to find the drive to personal triumph at odds, jointly or severally, with the corporate triumph, turning job loyalty into a Hobson's choice that penalizes both the individual and the corporate body, and undermines the best intentions of KM's "sharing" initiatives.

Lambe posits the case of a senior executive in a large company, who finds himself the sole survivor of senior management, after a corporate takeover, in which every one of his colleagues is "systematically moved, marginalised or dismissed." As the last repository of the accumulated knowledge of the old regime, this executive wants to know why he should share the wealth. He feels, reasonably, that his own job is safe only as long as he remains a walking database. Still, says one former director of diversity initiatives at a major international financial institution, such a situation can and should be "managed" with "mutually assured upward pressure." That is, to the extent that any embedded executive's tacit knowledge can be leveraged for the company, the company continues to thrive and the executive's retirement package continues to grow, benefitting himself, even when, inevitably, the executive is loosed from his corporate mooring. A high tide raises all boats.

But this is delicate business even for the savviest student of human nature—hard to explain, and harder to sell. The real challenge of KM will be, first, to find the middle ground between Lambe's "personal triumph" and the antithetical "corporate plot." Perhaps something like "community triumph," where what's good for the individual is also good for the corporation or partnership. And then, to sell it—like tofu to a carnivore.

In this Information Age where anyone and everyone can have a piece of the Web, and even arcane databases are only a couple of clicks away—nearly as vulnerable as they are accessible—knowledge itself is coin of the realm. As knowledge managers install leading technologies and develop new strategies of suasion, they do well to remember that knowledge *asymmetry* is the natural condition and people pursue it naturally. Effective knowledge management depends upon knowing—and training knowledge *users* to know—*when* to save it, *where* to spend it, and *how to spread it around.* After all, Knowledge Management is one of those new ideas that has been around awhile. One thinks of the "enlightened self interest" of Ayn Rand's twentieth century hero businessmen. Better yet, as Benjamin Franklin wrote in 1735, in *Poor Richard's Almanack*, "The use of money [read 'knowledge'] is all the good there is in having money [read 'knowledge']."