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ISKO Singapore
Zombie Knowledge with Patrick Lambe, 17 March 2023

Edited chat notes

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Stuart: I am interested in both adaptation and exaptation of capability knowledge, Patrick. [Exaptation is adaptation using the tools and resources and capabilities to hand]

Bill: One value of an organisation is to not 'turn on a dime' but to stop and assess what is the 'better way'.

Edgar: Zombie knowledge sucks resources from other useful knowledge, gets in people's way, yet you can't get rid of it

Susan: Encyclopaedia Britannica shouldn't have turned down Microsoft!

Arshad: Could best practices be reasonable, as long as it's understood that it should be a best practice at that moment in time and can therefore be improved/progressed?

Edgar: So in Encyclopaedia Britannica's case, the zombie knowledge is the knowledge the sales people thought they knew, i.e. people wouldn't want to read the EB in a   digital format?

Patrick: I don't think the sales people thought about what people wanted, they were being driven by their livelihood needs. At the capability level it was the organization that didn't manage the transition from a high-end publishing and credit management business, to a commodity-based digital publishing model.

Bill: Bespoke is building an airport. Standard is building a factory.

Mark: Companies have difficulty "disrupting" themselves and their existing revenue streams and processes. The Innovator's Dilemma is knowing what to keep and what to get rid of. How can we recognize when "living" becomes "zombie"?

Edgar: Capabilities become zombie when they get outdated.

Stuart: Our Lessons Management Team uses longitudinal analysis to determine when new knowledge might be required and where current practice is starting to fail. One key indicator of that is when people stop environment scanning because "they think they already know whats going on".

Mark: Complacency can kill in your industry, Stu....
Stuart: Absolutely.

Heather: Also, does the organization have a culture/ecosystem that is flexible, moving from capability to capability as the environment demands. The military example shows a culture "ready" to change per mission. How many non-military organizations are as flexible? Is this a facet of management style?

Meena: Definitely management styles play a big role. I notice a shake up of 'how business is conducted' works best whenever a new CEO shows up.

Patrick: But new CEOs with grand visions can also do harm if they don;t really understand what makes up their company's capabilities - e.g. Boeing and the 737 MAX

Edgar: Closer to home, the SMRT CEO who removed the engineering layer and replaced it with marketing

Meena: True Patrick, whether the new boss is right or wrong though, that often is when people are willing to move. Because the new boss allowed it (less rigidity I suppose)

Stuart: Creating new capabilities is a capability in itself. Country Fire Authority has always had a 12-18 month battle rhythm, and COVID sent us for a six because the change required was WAY faster than we had the capability to adapt to in a controlled way.

Edgar: It's hard to give up something you have invested so much on
Mark: Perception of sunk cost guides decision making...but costs of changing can be high.

Janine: Love the concept of repurposing. Fascinated by what is going on in the gas pipeline industry and how they are applying current and new knowledge to transition the pipelines to transport hydrogen. Any speck of zombie knowledge that is not relevant could lead to serious risk

Bill: The guy from Coca-Cola (John Scully) who tried to save Apple almost destroyed it. The people were much happier than under Steve Jobs but knew it was never going to work … A lot left when Steve Jobs returned because he was 'difficult'

Mark: Same story was Terry Semel at Yahoo...

Edgar: Challenging to divest zombie knowledge if its champion is a powerful or influential personality

Meena: Was thinking about that. It's their 'baby' right?

Stuart: Another example of adaptation from emergency response is the use of drones. Up until recently, the appearance of a drone on a fireground required all aircraft to land immediately without exception. Now they are developing micro air-traffic-control standards and technologies to allow drones and aircraft to operate in the same airspace.

Bill: 1990s - in Hong Kong, Kodak, had a massive HQ, shops all over town, delivery vehicles, specialised services like microforms, etc. Fuji was the cheaper film. Disposal cameras. The company was not so visible.

Bill: The role of culture. Not what people call organisation culture but anthropological culture. Kodak is from the USA. Fuji is from Japan. Americans are rather sloppy. Japanese are rather meticulous. Americans are marketing geniuses. Japanese are excellent makers.

Mark: Picking up the need for change: understanding how the "customer" perceives value and trend sensing for how that might change?

Stuart: May I suggest that another role of KM in an organisation is to archive the old knowledge as it is being decommissioned? I write this blog post about loss of zombie knowledge that suddenly needed to be used again after a technology change and the cost has been in the millions. https://www.deltaknowledge.net/2018/04/danger-of-IM-versus-KM.html

Patrick: Divesting/ archive old knowledge has to be done carefully. The famous example of how NASA "forgot" how to build the Saturn V rocket - they had archived the knowledge but they lost a generation of people who knew how to work it, now NASA's KM is on keeping critical knowledge in constant circulation. "Lost Knowledge": book by DeLong

Bill: Retrieving knowledge from archives is problematic.

Stuart: Another way would be to use the "spore" model from the world of mushrooms. Simulations and scenarios as a means of documenting knowledge in context e.g. PAXSIMs games - US Army ops

Bill: Organisations will 'reorganise' and then return to the previous structure after a time. There are examples over the last 40 years of organisations which thought they were going to become more effective, more efficient, be able to reach into a new market by using technology. The technology failed. People will do enough to look like they are using the new way but continue to do it the old way so they can get the job done.

Stuart: Patrick you have just reminded me that an amazing novel on this whole process is called "The Truth" by Sir Terry Pratchett