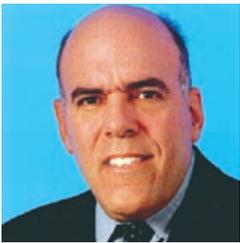


The Knowledge Notebook

Don't Neglect Social Knowledge

BY LAURENCE PRUSAK



During the last decade or so, journalists and executives of many organizations have talked a lot about a set of related words that includes knowledge, expertise, talent, human capital, know-how, capabilities and capacities, skills, and intelligence. I'm sure readers of this column have heard some of that talk. This focus on terms associated with knowledge is not particularly surprising. In the past few years, organizations in the United States spent as much on knowledge and knowledge-supporting tools and activities as they do on capital goods. This is a first for an advanced industrial (or what used to be an industrial) nation. Although the event wasn't much noted in the popular press, it is a significant milestone on the road to a twenty-first century knowledge-based economy.

So those words are undoubtedly important, but there is no real consensus about what we mean by them and, even more disturbing, I don't think leaders of organizations have a precise idea of why they spend so much time and money hunting for employees with the elusive qualities those words represent.

Well, one answer is obvious. You just can't do some tasks, and especially complex project-like tasks, without people who have the expertise needed to do them—and by “expertise” I mean know-how based on experience, not just technical information available in books and manuals. This kind of know-how accounts for much of the efficiency in project work, since it relies on “rules of thumb” (or, to use a fancier word, heuristics) developed over time that make it possible to make good decisions and choices quickly and avoid pitfalls that experience teaches people to expect and recognize. The undeniable importance of this kind of expertise is one reason organizations spend

so much on what, for lack of a better word, we can call “knowledge.”

And yet, all this scurrying about after knowledge and intelligence misses something important. Is an organization's value and effectiveness merely a function of its brainpower and its expertise at particular tasks, even in an economy that works more and more with ideas and less and less with things? Would you want to invest all your savings in a company that was a pure meritocracy of skill? I suspect many of you would answer no, possibly without being especially clear on why you feel that way. But you'd be right. Winning the war for talent is no guarantee at all that an organization will thrive, if talent is defined too narrowly as technical skill and knowledge. In fact, you might want to bet against it.

What these equations of individual expertise with effectiveness leave out is the simple fact that knowledge, however we define it, is profoundly social, both in its origins and in its use. It is not a stand-alone entity—a Spock-like brain ready to give brilliant answers to any question or implant all its knowledge in someone else by way of a Vulcan mind meld. Terms like “human capital” suggest that the value of knowledge resides in individual brains but, in real life, knowledge needs just as much coordination as logistics or manufacturing. How does this coordination happen? Not necessarily through leadership (though that isn't a bad thing) but thanks to the social skills of people who help generate, develop, translate, encourage, transfer, and distribute knowledge throughout an organization. Being smart is important, but so are different mental skills like empathy, articulateness, imagination, cooperativeness, and patience. I'm

not saying that people with those qualities aren't very bright; often they are. But those social skills are different from what we usually think of as knowledge. Without them, though, knowledge is unlikely to thrive or be put to productive use in complex organizations or in teams working on challenging projects. I have heard people at NASA say that they know within the first week or two whether their project will succeed. Almost always, that judgment has to do with whether the team has the right mix of social skills, not whether it has the requisite technical knowledge.

Many of the articles in *ASK* illustrate the importance of social knowledge to project work—in fact, to any situation where two or more people work together toward a common goal. Social knowledge tells people how to earn and build trust, encourage cooperation, inspire commitment, communicate openly and clearly, and deal creatively with conflict and disappointment. It creates the conditions that make it possible for groups to pool their technical knowledge to solve problems together.

I know of organizations that refused to hire very skilled individuals, people renowned in their fields of expertise, because they were solo acts, operating in isolation. While they might accomplish some demanding tasks, employing them would be sending a destructive message to other employees: “We don't care about social values or cooperation—only individual talent.” In the long run (and probably sooner rather than later), this would be a disaster for collaboration and overall success.

The sort of employees that knowledge-intensive organizations should hire need to balance expert knowledge and high social skills that support knowledge coordination. In fact, it's possible that knowledge *about* knowledge and about how people share and use knowledge will prove to be the resource organizations will need most in our ever more complex world. ●

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