

## Stories stimulate KM activity in your organisation

Arthur Shelley

An extract containing case studies by Arthur Shelley. To acknowledge or reference, please cite:

**Shelley, AW (2012) *Stories stimulate KM activity in your organisation*. pp. 135-141.**

**In Hawley T, *Making knowledge management work in your organisation*. ARK Group, London UK.**

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### Executive Summary

This case study describes how the former Cadbury Schweppes developed a strategy around community behaviour and stories to stimulate participation in knowledge based activities to “Make KM work in their organisation”. This strategy was deliberately designed to generate some short-term wins to increase awareness and provide foundational stories to engage significant stakeholders. Relationships were created between people in similar roles from different parts of the world (many of whom previously did not know each other) to build a sense of identity and belonging amongst them and develop trusted relationships. Support and opportunities for these people to “connect, collaborate and capitalise” on each other experiences and expertise were provided through a small central knowledge management team who (half) jokingly referred to themselves as the “corporate dating service”. The deliberate gathering and reuse of success stories was leveraged through a range of internal and external communications including newsletters and senior management conferences. Some examples of these stories and the process of how they were collected, collated and communicated is shared here to assist others to emulate this path.

However, just one word of advice before embarking on such a path. It is rare to be able to simply take an approach and “make it happen” elsewhere. Although the author is confident an adapted version of this approach could be successful in many other situations, the finer points need to be adapted to suit other situations and cultures.

### Introduction

In many ways one cannot “Make KM Work”, as KM is fundamentally about the exchange of new and old knowledge, concepts and ideas between people to leverage what is known and create new knowledge (and value). Most intelligent leaders are aware that it is not possible to force people to share what they know. Stimulation of knowledge sharing requires the building motivation for active participation and creation what David Snowden describes as a “safe fail” environment. That is, an environment in which people feel a sense of belonging and trust in which they are confident that what they say will be treated with respect and in an ethical and professional manner.

The role of the knowledge team is to inform and support the communities to have the right conversations in the right situations about the most relevant priorities. An example of how the KM resources can stimulate interactions that create value is to simply ask challenging questions about

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what the “big issues and opportunities are”. This simple trigger has produced some of the richest dialogues with insightful reflections for those involved. Another is to get people actively considering the role of social exchanges and their impacts on sharing and the professional environment. An example of such a communication from 2004 is included below (extracted from an email from the Knowledge Director to the facilitators of the communities):

*Social complexity (of which building a community is an example) is an unpredictable situation. It is full of potential, but also fraught with potential dangers. To progress positively, we need to experiment rather than predetermine everything. Try something and observe the outcomes, then determine if "progress" has made a step in the right direction or down a less productive path. After trying and observing you have learnt and your community now has a new vantage point (with reflective hindsight) from which to plan the next experiment. Over time you should chart a course in the positive direction increasing activities that add value and discouraging activities that are undesirable. It is like a sailing boat tacking in the wind, progress is never in a straight line to the destination, but the participants are learning along the path. Constant reassessment and realignment is required to maintain the right general direction as you progress. You could not have charted the exact journey at the beginning, because you did not have a complete knowledge of the rocks, sandbars, wind directions, quality of your crew, and a range of other "unpredictable" things before you started.*

*With communities, some knowledge and planning is a good thing (E.G. having agreed purpose, direction, planned activities, anticipated problems, opportunities to be addressed, diversity of people to involved). However, don't make the mistake of planning forever and never acting. The better you can inform your "crew" (members) the general direction and to prepare for flexibility the more you can smooth the journey. Often great (unpredictable) opportunities come from trying something that would not have happened if you never "experiment". You cannot predict how people will interact and what value they place on your vision for the community. Open honest interactions and challenges within the community is where the real value comes from. Give them the freedom to stray a little and don't (obviously) monitor too closely. As the leader, work on building trust and ensuring everyone is actively engaged, the subject matter and interactions will look after itself (after all these are communities of experts, they know what is important).*

With a constant flow of supporting thoughts and reading materials the central knowledge team then also made contact to gather the success stories as well as the “learning stories” from across the communities. The central support team participate as a facilitator on early conference calls and later simply be another person on the call once the community was up and running. By listening in they would hear potential stories that needed to be told in a wider arena and get in contact with the teller to flesh out more details via telephone and email. A one page “success story template” was provided make it simple for contributors to gather the basics of the story which were fine tuned in conversations with the central KM support team. The outcome was crafted into punchy (but remaining factual) narratives and shared through “Join Up NEWS” the global knowledge newsletter. The name Join Up NEWS was a direct link back to the global strategy slogan endorsed by the CEO of the time of Scale Up, Speed Up, Join Up. As new slogans and straplines were introduced to support new business activities and directions, the KM team quickly adopted them into their communications to show how “knowledge work” was directly aligned with global business strategy. A significant point highlighting the value of this initiative was that it survived multiple restructures and also the acquisition of the organisation as a whole. This represents a point of difference with several other international organisations where similar knowledge initiatives were cut in restructures and highlights the value the senior decision-makers place on it and the wider knowledge initiatives.

### The power of stories

Join Up NEWS articles were widely read and influential at all levels of the organisation. Stories included in the newsletter were as personalised to engage “people to people” communications by collecting direct quotes and creating a friendly feel and chatty exchange. Often, sometime later follow up stories were included to highlight progress continued to be made over time and also “Spotlight” stories featured on the intranet.

Readership was monitored (globally) as the headline and first paragraph were included in the newsletter and there was a link to the bulk of the story on the portal. Hits on the community portal sites containing the rest of the story were automatically graphed to show the level of interest in the stories and this information fed back to senior managers through the global KM steering team. This also provided a good way to entice other members to the community sites and to become involved in community activities. As the stories were on the portal on not just in the newsletter, each community built up a history of stories that could be retold and developed into urban legends that people wanted to be associated with. These formed part of the kudos of being an active contributor in the visibility of the senior management rather than “just a community member quietly doing their things behind the scenes.” Another strong support for the story support was that each month a senior manager would be interviewed in the newsletter providing insights into them and their personal interests. Several of the senior managers were sponsors of a community and at times participated in the calls. They would also proudly share these stories at senior management conferences in explaining how “their community” had generated benefits (supported of course by a few pictorial slides and story links provided by the omnipresent, but behind the scenes central KM support team).

There is a risk with a story strategy in that it can be seen as preaching and biased. Informal stories from friends and colleagues are trusted and have a deep impact on the typically small number of people who get to hear them. “Official stories” (those released through corporate channels such as webpages, newsletters and memos) can be treated with a degree of scepticism and in some cases should be! Such stories may be perceived to be “manufactured messages” to influence the target audiences to think and behave in the specific way determined by the leaders. Although a shared vision is a good thing and this does require clear communication, it is better achieved through interactive dialogue than what some may consider propaganda. Intelligent people like to feel involved and well informed, but react negatively to being inappropriately manipulated or misguided. A story does not have to be untruthful to be unethical. Stories can be presented in incomplete ways or information taken out of context to bias or misrepresent the reality to inappropriately influence the perspectives they create. This should never be done and will only cause issues in the longer term. Always seek permission to use others stories and content and treat other people’s information as you would your own ensuring you deal with it with utmost respect.

### Story structure and components

In collecting the content of the story, there are some key elements that are key for impact. The central KM team created a basic one page template to make it easy for the story owners to gather these critical components of the story and connect them with why it is important to share:

<i>Headline</i>	Attention seeking title that gets attention.
<i>Context</i>	The basic situation and a brief statement of the benefits to engage the audience.

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<i>Story details</i>	The flow of what happened so people can understand the next level of details of the actual inputs and outputs of the activity that occurred and what impact it had on people, process and tools and the wider organisation. Attempts were made here to link outputs to business benefits or positive experiences of those involved.
<i>Outcomes</i>	To some extent, the punch line. A focus on the intangible outcomes and how the benefits were created for which parties (immediate and other stakeholders).
<i>Acknowledgements</i>	Who should be specifically mentioned as a significant contributor in the activities so they get some kudos for making a contribution to the initiative. Quotes from stakeholders can also be collected here.

### **Example stories with tangible and intangible benefits**

#### ***Case 1: The engineers and the difficult product***

A significant product range was selling in excess of USD 100 Million per year and all factories capable of making it were running to full capacity. The business knew it could sell more if it could produce more. There was a multi-million dollar proposal to build a new factory to increase capacity, but it would take a couple of years to complete and by then there was no guarantee that the demand would still be there in such an impulse driven market.

Due to time pressures, none of the engineers in each of the factories making this product wanted to “share what they knew” with others as they needed to keep their heads down and focus on ensuring their specific line was as fully operational as possible. The KM team tried to get each of the engineers to share their knowledge through either a portal project site or engage in a teleconference, but it seemed impossible to get a mutually agreeable time. After considerable debate a few of the engineers agreed to participate in a thirty minute teleconference call hosted by the KM team to focus on what they thought was the one biggest issue or opportunity for them. Once they were on the call with something of specific interest to them and found a number of others with the same issues and opportunities there was no stopping the conversations. They went well overtime and were asking for support from the team for more ways to interact. A team site was set up and each engineer asked to add just one file they thought would be useful. Soon, solutions for issues solved by one engineer were being shared with others as useful ways to adapt to resolve similar problems. Teleconferences were run regularly and after a few months of generating improvements in several factories, they agreed to run some trials in a factory in Turkey. Several of the engineers participated in the trials and within a week their collaborative interactions increased production capacity by twenty per cent! This immediately enabled a staggering extra USD 20 Million in saleable product per year and removed the need for the additional factory.

#### ***Commentary***

Although such significant stories are rare, without the initial investment in some time and knowledge sharing, people do not know what can be achieved. This community went on to collaborate on additional engineering projects that generated nearly triple this sales increase in ingredient efficiencies. This would never have happened if it was not for the relationships being created as part of their initial opportunity and the sense of pride in what they had achieved together. The trust and camaraderie built up together and the use of open constructive conversations in seeking better ways forward enabled this small group of people to create some magic for themselves and others whilst creating solid tangible benefits for the organisation. Although the tangible benefits get the attention of decision-makers, these do not get generated

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without these intangibles being in place, especially openness, trust, collaboration, sharing and the sense of identity and pride they will always tell. I am sure this will be a story they will all be sharing with not only their professional colleagues, but also proudly retold to their grandchildren. Our stories are part of who we are, who we want to be and play a key role in forming who we become.

### ***Case 2: The executive secretaries and the smooth conference***

During the late 1990's to the early 2000's Cadbury Schweppes expanded rapidly through acquisition of confectionary and beverage companies across the world. This provided volume and strength for a new range of brands, but it was almost impossible to get an up to date understanding of the company structure and list of businesses and products in this ever changing landscape. There did not seem to be anyone that has a definitive structure, list of all products by country, names of the key people in the hierarchy or who to contact about a particular issue or opportunity in a specific geographical region. Significant time was wasted on finding the right people and the alternative-reinventing the wheel was worse, especially when you were confident that the information must exist. Another issue as obtaining information and acting on it (such as a mailing list or organisation chart) only to find it was only one of the many versions and it was probably not the latest or most complete, but no one could verify it.

Somehow, someone had to take control of this situation. A sensible beginning seemed to be one master version of the organisation chart for each region that was guaranteed to be up to date, stored in an accessible position for all. The additional feature added from a conversation the executive Secretaries was "and a corresponding mailing list by level of the organisation hierarchy".

The sceptics were out in force... you will never get this, but the time it is up to date, things will have changed, why bother! The short version of this story is that within a few weeks this was achieved through the effort of the central KM team facilitating a focused activity engaging a new community of executive secretaries around the world. The executive secretaries were privy to a range of announcements about mergers, acquisitions, promotions and restructures and were in the ideal position to collate these and update the organisation charts and the mailing lists. Each individual was given ownership of the official hierarchy document for their leader's part of the business and edit access to the mailing lists. Mailing list were restructured such higher level lists were automatically build from the lower level lists right up to the global list. This meant that adding or removing an individual in one team in one region would automatically adjust the regional list for that region and also the global list.

The efficiencies were immediately clear. You could now confidently find the appropriate person in any part of the business, by referring to the master copy of the hierarchy on the regional home page and you could just select the level of the business to send any communication to only the appropriate people and be confident this would not miss people and that it would be up to date.

The interesting aspect of this story is that once the executive secretaries started to collaborate and participate in community teleconferences, they started to find other things they could share. One example was that most of them were after required to organise conferences for the leaders in each of the regions. They quickly developed an event management spreadsheet that could be shared (since the list of leaders was the same, they just met in different parts of the world) and helped them to smoothly budget, track and manage the events and reuse important pieces of information rather than regather them each time. Subsequently the community further improved the spreadsheet and also adapted it for other types of global and regional events. This document was especially helpful in the case of a role change enabling the new person to become efficient quickly and also engaging the assistance of others in the community for clarity.

### **Commentary**

This story was shared to highlight that significant benefits can be achieved in all parts of the organisation and that benefits can flow to many other people that the generators of a knowledge object may not even know or ever interact with. There are many simple ways in the lower parts of the hierarchy in which shared knowledge can drive greater awareness and save a tole to time as well as build robustness into your knowledge assets. The interesting about this story was that the community of executive assistants started to share a variety of documents, templates and forms that made them more productive and continued to build stronger relationships between them. It also highlighted the networking capabilities of these individuals and helped them to leverage their networks. One of the executive secretaries later moved into a management role and a significant member of the core KM team, something that perhaps would not have happened if she was not so proactive with the executive secretary community. Given the opportunity to demonstrate leadership and communication capabilities, she was noticed much more widely leading to the promotion.

### **Case3: The product developers, working better together to achieve Fewer, Faster, Bigger, Better**

The objective of the *Fewer, Faster, Bigger, Better* initiative was to leverage the development of successful new local products into wider (ideally global) markets more quickly. Typically a product from concept to launch was taking most business around 6-9 months. However, with this initiative many products were able to be launched in as little as three months by simply copying a product in one market and relaunching into others. This was done effectively by putting the product developers into direct touch with each other through monthly teleconferences and also through a “new products and projects” page on the portal for each region to support sharing of idea across geographic boundaries and time zones.

Product developers were encouraged to highlight their new products on their regional product development community home page and create links back to the project in which details of the product development and specifications were found. During the development stages, access was controlled only allowing named individuals to view the documentation. However, after launch the project areas were opened up to all staff as a “self-serve” information mart to support “stealing with pride” (and of course acknowledgement of the source of the information that helped them get faster launches in their part of the business).

There were many examples where a product developed in one region was quickly launched into another. A new chocolate range developed in India was very quickly launched in the United Kingdom cutting time to launch to half their normal development. A new flavour for a candy product extension in Asia Pacific leveraged market research performed by the beverage team in United States of America, saving significant costs and time. Testing of potential alternative ingredients (such as sugar replacers and low calorie sweeteners could be done in one place rather than many in parallel). At that time Cadbury Schweppes had expanded rapidly through acquisition and had replication of development teams in many countries, most of whom had no knowledge of the capabilities and product range of the new parts of the business, so the communities was the most direct route to understanding range and an ideal way to find out who else there was doing similar things to them in the wider business.

### **Commentary**

This program facilitated the sharing of ideas through the product developers to leverage successes and to be more aware of potential dangers in the development of new products. It reduced the time taken to get to market as well as provided expertise to those developers who were adopting someone else’s product for the own market. The financial value is being able to get a product out so quickly and respond to market demands much more quickly. Three months of additional sales is very significant for any product and can also lead to first launch of a new concept in a market which

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helps with leadership position. The launches in other markets help to provide a basis for market research in similar markets and also with understanding of potential cannibalisation of similar own products as well as of competitors products which leads to better forecasting and more efficient logistics. These in turn assist with minimising issues and frustration as many of the potential unpredictable aspects of a new product launch are much clearer from the earlier experiences. Such intangible benefits and the fact that the product developers are interacting with each other in creative ways to accelerate the business performance are invaluable. Although it may not be easy to quantify this in a direct cause and effect relationship, it is clear to those involved this made a significant difference to their work performance.

### **Conclusions**

Stories are a powerful way to create awareness of the benefits of knowledge sharing and collaboration. They positively engage people, create a sense of identity and belonging. They positively reinforce knowledge initiatives by showing they are worth talking about and create a greater level of awareness of what we achieve as individuals and together. The creation of a structured story which is short and sharp and yet also highlights the benefits through tangible outputs and intangible outcomes is a powerful mechanism to communicate and influence right across the organisation. Well structured (without over manipulation or inappropriate biasing) they inform, build trust and relationships, encourage the right behaviours and publicly reward those involved for investing in something greater than themselves. We will always be proud of our greatest stories and influenced by those who passionately share stories that impress us.

If you want to be credited with “making knowledge management work in your organisation”, tell some well-structured stories how you have been doing this well, highlight the outputs, outcomes, benefits and beneficiaries.

### **About the author: Arthur Shelley**

Arthur Shelley is a capability development and knowledge strategy consultant with 26 years professional experience. He has held a variety of professional roles including managing international projects in Australia, Europe, Asia and USA. He teaches Knowledge Management and Applied Research Practice in RMIT University’s MBA program and KM through Open Universities Australia. Arthur is the author two books: *Being a Successful Knowledge Leader* and *The Organizational Zoo, A Survival Guide to Workplace Behaviour* and has written chapters for edited books, articles for academic and professional journals and has a regular blog providing insights from his research about metaphor and behaviour.

Arthur is regularly invited to international conferences to speak or facilitate workshops on his books and articles or to share experiences as the former Global Knowledge Director for Cadbury Schweppes. He is founder of The Organizational Zoo Ambassadors Network (a professional peer mentoring group), leader of the RMIT MBA mentoring program, co-facilitator of the Melbourne KM Leadership Forum.

For a more comprehensive biography:

[http://www.organizationalzoo.com/files/ArthurSHELLEY\\_Profile2010\\_2p.pdf](http://www.organizationalzoo.com/files/ArthurSHELLEY_Profile2010_2p.pdf)