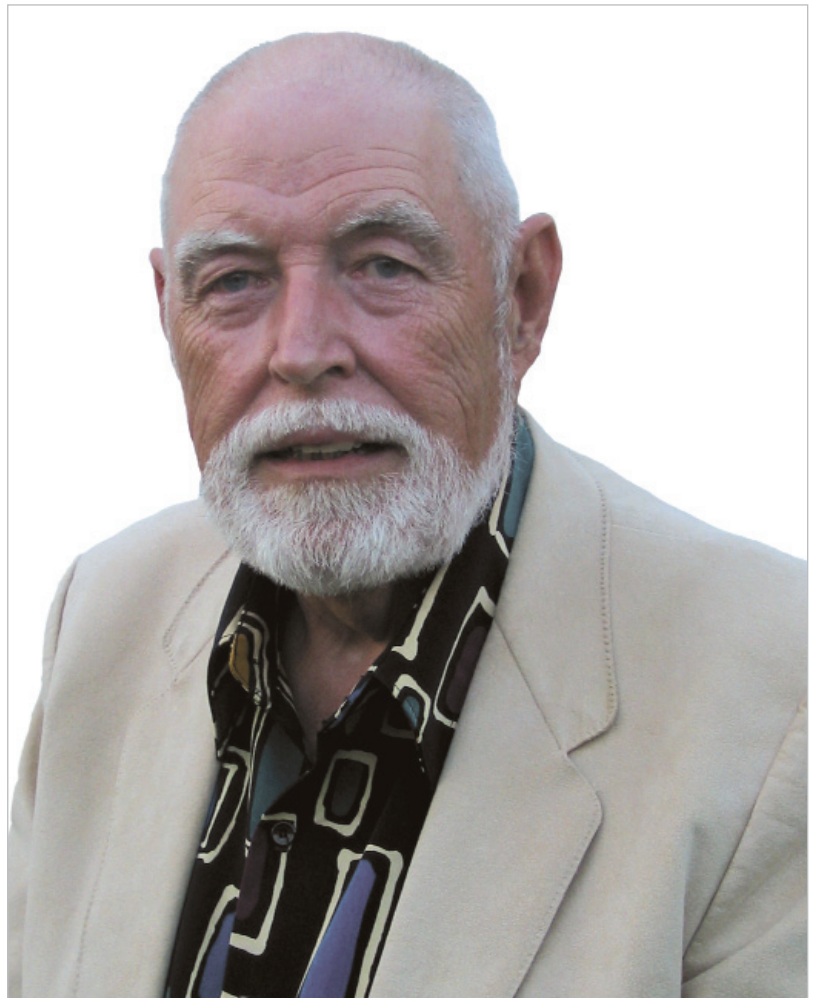


The Association of Knowledgework, incorporating the esteemed Star Series Dialogues, is the brainchild of one man. On the verge of an exciting partnership with Ark Group, Jerry Ash considers the highlights of his career and talks to [Rebecca Cavalôt](#) about his baptism into KM and a future 'new order', where individual intellectual activity and technology will unite.



Jerry Ash

Given the upsurge of interest among KM professionals in narrative and storytelling, it seems a perfect time for a discussion with Jerry Ash. With a complex career spanning numerous disciplines, Ash has an inexhaustible supply of stories from which to draw. He began in journalism, as both an editor and a university professor, but maintained a strong link with the business world. His enterprise awareness was tested when he became state legislator and chaired a small business committee. After a spell as chief executive of two state healthcare associations, Ash became executive director of the largest human-organ-donation programme in Texas, which is where his KM career began.

Ash describes his background as "broad and diverse", but communication is the tool with which he has chosen to hammer out his career credentials. "Advocacy has been the central theme in all my work," says Ash. "KM can only succeed where initiative is encouraged."

It was this science of encouragement and ingenuity that inspired Ash's first leap into KM. As director of a human-organ-procurement organisation, he observed an informal knowledge-sharing network spanning over 150 Texan hospitals. Ash realised that organ procurement co-ordinators, medical and transplant physicians, nurses, social workers, hospital administrators and staff were swapping stories and sharing experience. He decided to harness this largely untapped source of knowledge and support its growth. Through the implementation of a structured network, blending technology with the human elements already in place, Ash allowed the passionate goal of these workers to become a reality. "They were able to learn from each other and work with each other in order to increase organ donation and save lives," he says. Inspired by Ash, a valuable community of practice was created.

Despite his success, Ash is quick to point out that this was before the concept of a community of practice was

widely understood and stresses that this natural community didn't need the sponsorship of the Texan organisation to exist. "All we did was enable the passion and energy of the people beyond their solitary capabilities, by recognising and supporting the community," he says. But this experience gave Ash a taste for developing and implementing knowledge-based strategies.

Eight years ago, and coinciding with the completion of his work in Texas, Ash took his own solitary step into the world of independent consulting. His complex background had shaped his view of knowledge management as an interdisciplinary activity and he made a move to focus on helping organisations to manage their knowledge resources more effectively. Ash joined forces with Forbes Group, an organisation with a reputation for providing counselling to professional and trade associations in the US. Ash also began studying the impact of the digital economy on the traditional services of not-for-profit organisations. Emerging in both theory and practice, Ash saw a trend that brought new focus to his work. "The 'digital age' was quickly becoming the 'knowledge age'," he explains. It became clear to Ash that associations needed to shift their focus from digital procurement to recognising their knowledge resources.

His own KM journey began to gather pace following his first professional meeting, where he was introduced to some of the luminaries in the KM space. Ash remembers this as his first face-to-face contact with a group of people who actually referred to themselves as a KM community. Among them were Debra Amidon, founder of Entovation International, and Bob Buckman of Buckman Laboratories. Ash had found his niche. Always the networker, he forged links with like-minded thinkers such as Tom Stewart and Leif Edvinsson, who shared his view, as he puts it, that "intellectual capital resides primarily between the ears and not in the computer or the company safe". He cites Hubert Saint-Onge and Carl Frappaolo of the Delphi Group as further influences on his view of knowledge work that began to take shape.

Ash's adept networking had sown the seeds that led to the growth of the Association of Knowledgeework (AOK). The more his own vision was sharpened through learning about KM, the more Ash wanted to share his finding and experiences. When asked about the beginnings of the now well respected AOK, Ash is modest about his personal role in its formation. "It began humbly enough in January 2000 as an informal e-mail discussion group for executives and staff of professional and trade associations in the US," he explains. However, the concept struck a chord and professionals in other disciplines, both in the US and globally, were quickly clamouring to join the group. Ash had stumbled upon a world of knowledge professionals who had found a platform to share ideas and experiences with like-minded pioneers in his 'humble' discussion group. Thought leaders, researchers, academics, CKOs, knowledge managers and knowledge workers all contributed, and Ash realised that he had all the elements of a truly global knowledge-sharing community at his fingertips. By August 2000, the Association of Knowledgeework was born.

One of the original AOK discussions that lingers in Ash's mind was initiated by Michel Pommier of the World Bank. In 2000, Pommier was collaborating with two colleagues, Lesley Shneur and Steve Denning, on a paper exploring whether KM had matured to a point where the 'rules of knowledge

management' were beginning to form. To Ash, this topic represented a source of real excitement. He felt that his peers at the World Bank were pushing the KM boundaries and, at Pommier's suggestion, Ash invited Steve Denning to engage in an e-mail discussion with AOK members focusing on emerging patterns within KM.

Ash sees this dialogue as the first milestone in the association's history. Denning's involvement represented, as Ash puts it, "a big hit and a catalyst for a long parade of luminaries to follow". He perceives the development of the guru-led discussions as a "natural phenomenon". Ash has always believed in practising what you preach and has found that knowledge-sharing icons are, by default, eager to share their own experiences. The Star Series Dialogues are now firmly established among KM professionals and Ash attributes their popularity to their accessibility. Well paid and respected knowledge workers have contributed generously,

“ People not only thrive on the responsibility of thinking and learning and decision making at home, they go to work ready to do the same there. ”

although Ash is not surprised by this. "Never mind that they sell their knowledge at work or at the podium," he says. "Give them the opportunity and they will demonstrate by example the wisdom and the power of open knowledge."

Pay a visit to the dialogue archives and you will find that the list of discussion moderators and contributors reads like a who's who of the KM scene. The STAR Series Dialogues have welcomed Karl-Erik Sveiby, Leif Edvinsson, Verna Allee and Victor Newman, to name a few. Some of the AOK's most prolific moderators, such as Dave Snowden and Steve Denning, have gone on to become regular contributors to the dialogues. They are among the many active AOK members who always find time to inform their peers of new thinking and initiatives. It seems that, despite diaries crammed with presentations, masterclasses, consulting and writing appointments, a true KM pioneer can never turn down an opportunity to share what he knows.

Over the past four years, the AOK STAR Series has become a body of knowledge that Ash describes as "pure gold". Indeed, he has decided to catalogue the AOK treasures by using his finest archive riches for the basis of his new book, provisionally titled *Stars of the New Order: What They're Telling Business Leaders*. A sneak preview is available at www.kwork.org/book/book.html.

It's a wonder that Ash finds the time to commit to so many outside pursuits when his dedication to the advancement of the AOK is so fervent. The Star Series Dialogues have taken place over the last two full weeks in every month since August 2000 and, to date, have featured more than 30 KM luminaries. The association has attracted some 2,500 members from over 60 countries. Although AOK is US-based, it is a world-wide phenomenon, with over 40 per cent of its membership residing and working outside the US. The AOK has a huge and dedicated following in Canada, Australia, the Pacific Rim and the UK, and now boasts the title of oldest member-based professional association for knowledge practitioners in the world.

Ash feels that AOK's success is due to the fact that it has been true to its original vision statement. The association was formed on the premise that people from every speciality can cross professional, geographical, cultural, economic and hierarchical

barriers in order to learn together. Ash firmly believes that it is this inclusive environment that has nurtured the growth and development of the AOK community, which encompasses diverse levels of interest and experience. He is adamant that the association should not be grouped with other KM internet resources, claiming the AOK is not just another website to be added to the knowledge worker's list; rather Ash defines his creation as "a virtual home for those who work with this stuff called knowledge". Fundamentally, Ash sees the association as a community of practice that is constantly changing and adapting to embrace seasoned pros and newcomers alike.

The AOK has evolved over a relatively short space of time and the evolution of knowledge management as a whole fascinates Ash. He is eager to talk about what he sees as the defining moments in KM's history. He cites Peter Drucker's heralding of the knowledge worker over 50 years ago as first on his shortlist. He then leaps forward to the 1990s and the dawning of an era in which enterprises realised that success or failure was tied to knowledge work. Essentially, he maintains that KM has been around since business began, but has only recently been labelled. Ash ventures that successful managers have always advocated knowledge strategies; unlike modern workers, they just did not have the terms available to define how they were running their organisations. Ash's third and final definitive moment in KM history is right now. "I fully identify with the recent awareness that the best way to manage knowledge is to enable it," he says.

The term 'knowledge management' has become a contentious issue and many of the KM leaders profiled in 'The knowledge' have voiced their wariness of the expression itself. Yet Ash strongly believes that knowledge management is not just the latest invention of management gurus. Rather, he says, it reflects the demand growing out of the explosion of the internet and other forms of personal communication. He sees the business world as one where human intellectual activity and technology have combined, creating what he terms a "new order". Ash urges us to look at our own everyday lives for analogies. "People who were once content to be led are now less likely to blindly follow," he says. Patients often research their own symptoms before they go to a doctor; consumers shop online to learn, not just to buy; and most of us would rather select a product based on personal review as opposed to a sales pitch. Ash points out that, as a society, we are better informed because of a much freer flow of information and ideas. He concludes that we make decisions based on the sum total of what we know. As far as he is concerned, the knowledge effect is ubiquitous. "People not only thrive on the responsibility of thinking and learning and decision making at home, they go to work ready to do the same there." Ash hopes that the new-order system will promote innovation and agility within companies.

And yet it is a model that will not be easily integrated into business. Management support for the attitudes and ways of working it encompasses is critical. Like Larry Prusak, a guru recently profiled in *Knowledge Management*, Ash believes that it is crucial to facilitate a counselling-leadership style of management. He sees the command-and-control style as an outmoded concept, but Ash is aware that social, cognitive and economic models do not change overnight and is realistic about a transition period. "Although Drucker talked of knowledge workers and the impact they would have on the way we do business, it took us another half century to fully accept the fact that the knowledge resource would require a different style of management," he acknowledges. Ash shares Prusak's hopes that firms will embrace sharing and learning, seeing this as the only way businesses can survive.

Ash does not apportion all the blame to closed-minded managers or outmoded entrepreneurial values. He feels that knowledge advocates have lost credibility by railing against the evils of hierarchy, and he does not absolve himself from blame. "We've scared the pants off stockholders and senior executives," he admits, blaming the "somewhat reckless talk about bottom-up control and decision-making". According to Ash, financial ownership and ultimate responsibility will remain at the top and KM advisers who take this line are fighting a losing battle. Instead, he says, it is essential to focus on returns in the form of professional accomplishment, advancement and satisfaction when it comes to implementing a strategy.

For Ash, the highest hurdle left to clear is the current 'them and us' mentality of both management and workers. He feels that companies need to be open to the theory that hierarchical and individual or group enterprise cannot only co-exist but can actually support one another. "The issue is not where knowledge management will happen but how it will happen," says Ash. Hierarchy will provide a sense of order, but a softer style of human enablement and leadership can set the standards for how knowledge is managed. Ash advocates organisational harmony: people need the resources of an organisation, which include structure, discipline, capital, networks, stature and mission. Equally, the organisation needs the human and emotional involvement of people in order to capitalise on their natural assets. Ash's thinking has been further cemented by the ethical breakdowns that have rocked major US corporations. To facilitate his management model, he urges organisations and workers to "earn trust from one another" to avoid any Enron-style repeats. "Both will be betting their futures on each other in the knowledge age," he warns.

As to the future of KM, Ash is wary about painting too rosy a picture of things to come. His main worry is that knowledge management is being hijacked by other disciplines, just as people are starting to realise that IT is not the driver of knowledge management but simply an enabler. On the other hand, Ash feels that if these disciplines are penetrated by knowledge management, rather than commandeering it, then the outlook is more positive. He disagrees with some purists who see the popularity of social-network analysis as an example of another discipline that is usurping KM. Ash feels that social networking can work hand in hand with broader knowledge initiatives and can "re-establish the importance of research before action". Ash would like to see KM puritans collaborate with advocates of other disciplines to accomplish the goals and objectives of knowledge management. He is adamant that knowledge management will continue to matter as long as knowledge matters.

We will be hearing much more from Jerry Ash in future issues of *Knowledge Management* as he takes time out from his busy schedule to work as US correspondent and consulting editor for the magazine. We look forward to his insights and comment in September, when Ash will write his first column. At the same time, he has committed to continue as organiser and host of the Star Series Dialogues, so his already busy days are about to get even busier – it's lucky that Ash is an early riser. He is confident that this marriage will be beneficial to all involved. "*Knowledge Management* will add a world-class interactive community for its subscribers. AOK members will get beyond virtual online discussion with access to face-to-face events and world-class publications. Working together, we will be a complete package," he concludes. A keen tennis player, Ash is often seen serving up a storm, both on the court and in the KM arena. We believe that *Knowledge Management* and Jerry Ash will prove to be a perfect match. ■