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Jerry Ash and
David Snowden debate

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MASTERCLASS

Stan Garfield reveals the secret of the 'ten commitments'.

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The big debate

Jerry Ash and David Snowden debate the future of knowledge management.



Paul Louis Iske
Chief knowledge officer, ABN Amro Corporate Finance



Karl-Erik Sveiby
Principal, Sveiby Knowledge Associates

Thought leader

By Oliver Schwabe

The guru is dead, long live the network

THROUGHOUT HISTORY, humanity has looked to leaders and 'gurus' to provide ideas and direction. Even today, for example, elections revolve around the supposed qualities of the respective candidate's personalities – looks, even – rather than around the more complex business of the policies they might be proposing.

In the field of business – one that ought to be rigorously intellectual-driven – this can be seen as much as anywhere. New business ideas and the gurus that champion them emerge, their ideas are adapted with varying degrees of enthusiasm and, in many cases quietly discarded when they fail to live up to over-inflated expectations.

But are things slowly changing?

Take Wikipedia as an easy example. While it is often criticised for pandering to the 'wisdom of the crowds' – that is to say, whatever the majority and those with too much time on their hands believe is true tends to become 'wiki fact', more considered opinions are edited out by the 'crowd' – just look at the immense resource it has become.

The great libraries of antiquity, lovingly put together over decades, have nothing on Wikipedia, a project that has harnessed the knowledge of the global community, not just a handful of 'wise men', and which is available to everyone, everywhere for no charge.

In such an environment, do we really need gurus or intellectual thought leaders anymore? In the 'business model' of the open source operating system Linux, there is no guru. It's distributed intelligence.

Maybe we are already making the move from the lighthouses – isolated beacons of knowledge – to genuine networks such as the Entovation Group (www.entovation.com) or Value Networks Consortium (www.vncluster.com), what John Maloney, founder and chief strategist of KM Cluster, calls 'collective intelligence'.

It's become distributed – is 'guru-dom' no longer bound to a person? It's being found in networks. There are networks out there that are extremely influential, that do not have a single thought leader behind them. Due to this they are, indeed, largely unknown – but perhaps one could consider the leading consortia in European Union projects to be an example, or the London Knowledge Network.

If you take the network idea, those lighthouse beacons change all the time, depending on what sort of projects are happening. All of a sudden, you have somebody doing something, for example, with BP, rising out of this network as an implementer, as a 'do-er', and subsiding again. That is normal. Then, someone else arises with something new.

So you have this tension between networks and the individuals that implement because the network does not implement *per se* – it is changing constellations within them that are able to impact organisational dynamics at certain points in time.

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