



# Inside Knowledge



Incorporating *Enterprise Information* magazine



## KM gurus: The path to enlightenment?

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## KM gurus

# The path to enlightenment?

Knowledge management is changing, but what about the so-called KM gurus?

By Graeme Burton

**T**he guru – or ‘wise man’ – has held a special fascination for different cultures throughout history. Thought leaders, rather than leaders of men. Stories and legends picture seekers of knowledge fording wild rivers, crossing untamed wilderness and ascending perilous mountains in a bid to find the one elusive person who can provide the life-changing wisdom they seek.

How times change. Today, those same seekers of knowledge might attend a conference, read a blog or even drop their favoured guru an e-mail in their desire to find answers to their most troublesome questions. At most, an audience with them will merely require the crossing of palms with silver (on an expense account, of course) – no dangerous journeys across the unknown for the modern knowledge seeker.

And if the answers are not to the listener’s taste – and the gurus of legend were just as likely to disappoint – then there are plenty more to choose from, just as easily.

But what makes a guru? And, in the discipline of knowledge management (KM), where are the up-and-coming gurus, the providers of tomorrow’s most-wanted knowledge?

Surprisingly for a discipline supposedly driven by cast-iron rational thought, underwritten by the black and white success or failure of the bottom line, business management has more than its fair share of gurus. KM is no different, with the same names connected with the same innovations, time and again.

For example, Steve Denning will forever be associated with storytelling, Debra Amidon with ‘knowledge-innovation zones’, David Snowden with ‘sense making’ and Karl-Erik Sveiby and Leif Edvinsson with the concept of intellectual capital and intellectual-capital measurement respectively, among many others that could be named – the list is long.

Although there are a number of notable female KM gurus – such as Amidon, but also Patti Anklam and Verna Allee – they are in a minority,



believes Patrick Lambe of Singapore-based Straits Knowledge. “Most gurus are men partly, I think, because to be a guru you have to be into ‘display’ which is a male thing,” says Lambe.

What the majority of gurus also have in common is that they have also long been in the KM spotlight, too. Does that mean the discipline is becoming stale, that new and fresh ideas are either failing to percolate to the fore, or are they being stifled by the intellectual strength of the ‘old guard’ and their supporters?

Leif Edvinsson – who was named as guru by a number of interviewees – believes not. However, the ‘leading edge’ thinkers are becoming more specialised in terms of their chosen areas of research and many of those areas of specialisation are becoming increasingly far removed from the everyday cares of practitioners working at the corporate coalface.

“I think there are a number of new directions. You can see it in the evolution [of KM] of the process flow of knowledge, you can see it related




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to culture, design, ergonomics and neuroscience," says Edvinsson. That is to say, KM theory is being developed in all sorts of areas that it has hitherto not been applied.

At the same time, some of the core concepts have arguably gone mainstream. "There's a growing acceptance of intellectual-capital measurement – IC reporting – not in the sense that it's new, but in the sense that it's being accepted as a normal business tool," says Dr Oliver Schwabe, managing director of Eurofocus International Consultants. Likewise, he says, 'network thinking' as a tool for business development and operational improvement.

The rush to deploy blogs and wikis, too, has not just come from KM, but IT, as organisations seize on the twin ideas as cheap and easy ways to encourage knowledge sharing.

These developments have left a smaller stage – or a series of more specialist stages – for the development of KM.

Edvinsson, for example, is striking out in the direction of culture. "Asia

is much more tuned in to this than Western Europe and America," says Edvinsson. "The Asian perspective is much more holistic than the fragmented Western thinking." It is, he adds, embedded in many aspects of Chinese Confucianism and Buddhism but true, more or less, across Asia from the Ural Mountains to Japan.

Indeed, in Japan the discipline of examining the importance of knowledge – and other intangible factors – to the national economy has long been labelled 'softnomics' – soft economics – and the cause adopted by the Japanese government's Ministry of Economy, Trade and Industry, successor to the once highly revered MITI, Ministry of International Trade and Industry. It even organises week-long events devoted to the subject, says Edvinsson.

#### **Users, the real gurus**

While interesting, such research is far removed from the KM that is practised in organisations around the world by knowledge managers who simply want to meet the demands of their bosses on the one hand, and equally demanding customers (internal or external) on the other. "I know this sounds a bit naff, but the people I listen to or 'read' most are users," says Sam Dimond, global knowledge systems manager at law firm Clifford Chance.

Edvinsson may well contend that Dimond's practical approach reflects an Anglo-Saxon 'object' view of

knowledge, a view that regards it as a utility or almost-tangible commodity that can be identified, labelled, patented and 'monetised', as opposed to a 'process' view, which emphasises the importance of the system in which knowledge generation can flourish.

But as a law-firm KM specialist Dimond is surrounded by fee earners, people who can directly demonstrate their monetary value to the organisation. Dimond must likewise prove his worth to them – practice is more important than theory. "I don't read the work of gurus that often. I do read about KM quite a lot, but I prefer to read things that have more practical application and understanding of our business," he says.

"Because I practice in a law firm, the ones I tend to read in more detail are the ones that write about KM for professional service firms – people such as Richard Susskind and David Jabbari. I wouldn't necessarily agree with them all the time, but they certainly get me thinking."

In a sign of the times, it is not just from books and conference appearances that he forms his judgements, but also relevant blogs: "Joy London writes a blog called Excited Utterances about KM in law firms. It's highly practical and enjoyable, and it shows that she is working at the coal face."

Dimond's fondness for London's online work also reflects how the





traditional KM gurus are at risk of disintermediation by the rapid rise of the internet since the advent of reliable broadband. Not all traditional gurus are bloggers – most are too busy – but an increasing number are, as well as people who might be regarded as challengers.

The down-to-Earth attitudes of Dimond at Clifford Chance are partly reflected by Richard Hare, knowledge manager at fast-moving consumer-goods maker British American Tobacco (BAT). The KM gurus that spring to his mind are overwhelmingly involved in subjects of direct professional interest to him – not the theorists. At the moment, that means communities of practice and storytelling, particularly Steve Denning, Richard McDermott and Etienne Wenger.

“We have created a community builder to get people in different parts of the world working together on problems where they face the same issues, putting a relationship in place that wasn’t there before,” says Hare. The work of Denning, McDermott and Wenger have therefore helped to frame BAT’s strategy.

However, Hare’s interest in their work is underlined by the extensive research that they have put into building their theories and advice with practitioners in organisations just like his. “It helps build depth,” he says. Such practical references lend credibility and therefore weight. Another key to his regard for this trio is that they were among the first to explore their respective areas.

### Theory and practice

The increasing gulf between the focus of gurus’ research and what practitioners have to do in their everyday work reflects the increased specialisation of gurus’ work.

Instead of working on subjects of strict corporate interest many, such as Leif Edvinsson, Debra Amidon and Oliver Schwabe, are looking at how knowledge is generated in non-corporate systems, such as so-called

## The *Inside Knowledge* guide to becoming a guru

### *Practice first in a big company*

Many of the big-name gurus, notes Patrick Lambe, cut their teeth at big-name organisations before striking out on their own. For example, David Snowden at IBM – and you don’t get much bigger than IBM – and Steve Denning at the World Bank. The *caché* of practicing KM at such major organisations, of course, almost immediately opens doors to the conference circuit...

### *Conferencing*

Practice, practice, practice Microsoft PowerPoint above all else, because competency on the conference circuit is a prerequisite and slides that pitch to the audience at just the right level are a must. Then, practice communication. A presentation should not just be a recitation of the contents of the PowerPoint slide – that’s boring – but must inspire the audience.

### *Communication*

The art of communication, often, is about simplifying – especially in many means of mass communication, such as publishing, the internet/blogs and conference presentation. But avoid the danger of over-simplification because nobody wants to be thought of as simple.

### *Develop your own language*

As noted above, communication cannot be *too* clear and simple. That will undermine the lucrative consulting gigs that ought to make up the bread and butter of a guru’s new life. Gurus need to develop their own jargon – not too much or potential followers may be alienated, but just enough to make the audience feel special when they understand it.

### *Establish a blog*

In truth, most of the big gurus don’t have blogs. Maybe they are just far too busy or far too important. Aspiring gurus, however, need to be more accessible and communicative – but don’t give too much away or they won’t buy your books.

### *Write two books*

It’s no longer enough to simply write a book – an aspiring guru must prove his or her staying power by writing at least two books. A key trick is to write a highly technical first book and follow it up with something similar, but much simpler, for the masses. Two birds/one stone.

### *Original ideas*

Almost forgot: do you really have anything new or original to say? Hopefully, but if not, a lack of originality is not a barrier to some lesser aspiring gurus – those that David Snowden feels should be digitally tarred and feathered – who simply repackage other people’s ideas and present them as their own.

*Compiled with the help of David Snowden, Leif Edvinsson, Oliver Schwabe, David Gurteen and Patrick Lambe.*





knowledge cities or innovation zones. "Where I see KM right now is where the 'branches' are going," says social-networking guru Patti Anklam.

Indeed, Anklam has moved on from social-network analysis, the sector of KM with which she is best known, to organisational-network analysis (ONA), which is more concerned with uncovering the inner intangible workings of organisational groups. This will be the subject of her new book – an important prerequisite of 'guru-dom' – which will be published in April.

In other words, the KM that many gurus are researching today is becoming increasingly specialised and much of the research is perhaps of greater interest to governments, local and central, rather than companies and other organisations.

The concerns of many gurus today, therefore, have become far removed from the corporate landscape examined in detail by, for example, Ikujiro Nonaka and Hiro Takeuchi in their ground-breaking mid-1990s analysis of the way in which knowledge is generated, shared and utilised at car-maker Toyota.

### The key is in the keynote

But what, exactly, is it that makes one person a guru and another a false guru or snake-oil merchant?

David Snowden – who was regarded as a guru by a number of interviewees – takes a liberal view. "If you get consistent keynote invitations and are invited back then you are probably in the category. It means that you are saying something that is original enough to be listened to," says Snowden.

Another qualification is a publishing deal, with at least one book – preferably two or more – under their belt. Snowden, however, has yet to complete his first, although it will be very soon, he promises.

"I think the main criteria is thinking originally about the subject. If you look at the people who are

acknowledged and who do get the invitations frequently, they are people who have either invented or thought differently about some aspect of the subject," he says.

There is a class of so-called guru, however, that Snowden feels quite violently against – they come late to a field when it is popular, cherry pick from the work of others without acknowledging their contribution and seek to profit directly, often from less experienced people who might be new to the field. "They are the ones that I want to see digitally tarred and feathered," says Snowden.

Many of the pioneers, he notes, suffered personally as a result. "If you look at all the early KM people, in general they are now working for themselves. [Gurus] have got to have a willingness to pioneer, to stand out, to say things that other people aren't saying."

The snake-oil salesman, says Snowden, move into a field that's already become established – but claim to have been involved from the start – they recycle material, much of it drawn from other fields (such as quality management), they drop in jargon and simplify other people's thinking in their presentations.

However, they rarely reach keynote-speaker status. "They come late, they pick up some of the concepts, they're good at marketing themselves and they tend to ride the wave behind something. Interestingly, a lot of the KM gurus are now moving on to other spaces," says Snowden.

Another genre of potential gurus are those who have implemented a KM programme which has subsequently been curtailed by senior management. Often, that does not stop them from doing the rounds of the conference circuit (presumably they have much more time on their hands) and authoring books, says David Gurteen, founder of the Gurteen Knowledge Community.

### Leif Edvinsson's five names to watch

Ahmed Bounfour – France;  
Dr Kay Alwert – Germany;  
Thomas Rudolf – Poland;  
Dr Manfred Bornemann – Austria;  
Markus Will – Germany.

If the speakers are upfront about their failures, there is much to be learnt from them, says Gurteen, perhaps more than from speakers claiming outstanding success. "I would say that between 60 per cent and 70 per cent of KM initiatives have failed. Maybe not totally, but they've fallen way short of their hopes and expectations."

Learning from their mistakes may almost be as important as learning from the top gurus, he says.

### Young blood

Of course, the success or failure of any movement is dependent upon young blood percolating up through the system, displacing the establishment with fresh ideas – yet there seems little clear evidence of this happening in KM. All the biggest names are well-established.

Will KM suffer its own 'knowledge drain' when they retire, one without a concomitant knowledge transfer when they do, as good KM practice would dictate?

Maybe. But while most of the figures interviewed struggled to name anyone in KM who could be labelled 'up and coming', Edvinsson was able to reel off a number of names who he regards as particularly promising, such as Ahmed Bounfour in Paris and Dr Kay Alwert in Germany.

However, if they are to become the gurus of tomorrow, they will need increase their activity on the conference circuit and write some books (see box, 'The *Inside Knowledge* guide to guru-dom'). Or perhaps the road to 'guru-dom' will change beyond recognition in the era of blogs, wikis and Web 2.0. ■

