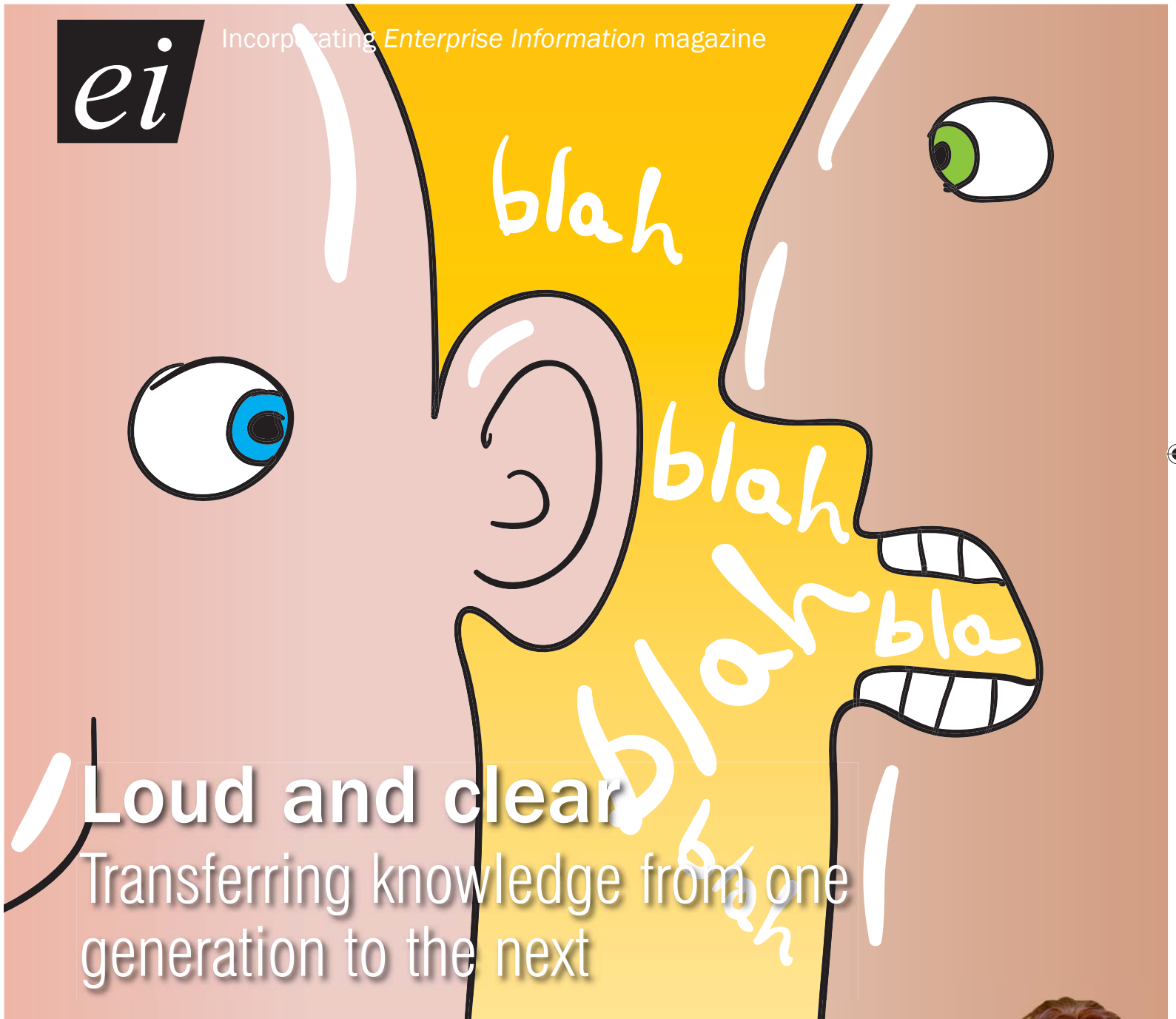


Inside Knowledge



Incorporating *Enterprise Information* magazine



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THE KNOWLEDGE

How Debra Amidon went from Digital to KM guru.



The knowledge | Debra Amidon

Debra Amidon is arguably one of the most original and prolific writers and thinkers studying knowledge innovation zones – and much, much more.

By Graeme Burton

For most people, the fabled work-life balance, the divide between working life and the time that individuals can devote to core pursuits and interests, never seems to be quite right – there is always something that increases the amount of time that needs to be devoted to work at the expense of family, hobbies and personal interests.

But one individual who seems to have got the balance just right is Debra Amidon, no doubt helped by the fact that one of her principal pursuits or interests – how people interact, share knowledge and innovate (and how they can do all that better) – is also her work.

On the one hand, Amidon has consulted with many major organisations well-known for their knowledge leadership, including Skandia, BP, American Express and Siemens, with strategies to link staff across the world, drawing on her own experience across government, academia and business.

On the other, she has also selflessly given her time and attention to governments and non-profit organisations, partly to offer her insights, but also so that she can further her own personal curiosity in key subjects such as knowledge innovation – her registered trademark – and how innovation can turn knowledge into prosperity.

The result is difficult to sum up in a few mere paragraphs, but demonstrates the benefit of getting that work-life balance (what she calls ‘simultaneity’) right: Amidon has authored a prolific library of writing and research, which is perused by people all over the world – friends and ‘competitors’ alike – and has created a loose, but always-growing network of knowledge management’s most influential writers, thinkers and researchers; the Entovation E100.

“Once you have a critical mass of people who are enjoying successes and enduring failures, sharing, interacting and exchanging aspirations, then you can begin to see how extraordinary things can happen by working with one another,” says Amidon. “That was part of the reason for establishing the network – so that I could feature and link some of the people, frankly, that I most admired, and do so in a global ‘virtual’ company.”

It is not a formal business partnership or club. Rather, it is one of the largest ‘groupings’ of KM professionals in the world, each of whom may call on the other for help, advice or support – which Amidon frequently does, as and when she feels that members’ particular skills would be more appropriate.

“I was on retainer for the pharmaceuticals company Novo Nordisk, converting its stakeholder innovation approach from one of ‘customer satisfaction’ to one of ‘customer success’. With my methodologies, insights and strategy formulation, I reached the point where there would be a certain set of things that needed to be done, which were outside the realm of my personal expertise. So I said, ‘On this particular item, if this is what you want to do (which was on intellectual-capital measurement), you should be talking to Leif Edvinsson’. On another topic, of business intelligence, I said, ‘You should be talking to Bryan Davis – the Entovation Fellow for what we call ‘innovation intelligence’,” says Amidon, “tracking where competitors are headed rather than where they have been.”

“The third area was on leadership. They were talking about global leadership and I said, ‘You really should be talking to Doug Macnamara, who’s the Entovation Fellow for leadership and governance, who operates out of The Banff Centre in Calgary, Canada’. So, all three of those people were subcontracted,” says Amidon. Novo Nordisk, of course, is not only a KM pioneer, but its work is regularly recognised in the Most Admired Knowledge Enterprises (MAKE) Awards.

Knowledge innovation zones

Novo Nordisk was just one of many well-known companies that Amidon has worked with, helping to pay the rent and enabling Amidon to pursue her interest in more esoteric research in such areas as knowledge innovation zones (now a registered trademark of Amidon’s). Central to Amidon’s interest in innovation zones is the question of how knowledge is generated in a societal (rather than exclusively corporate) context, how that knowledge is innovated upon and how it is turned into viable products and services that generate lasting wealth and prosperity for society.

While maybe less lucrative, getting the work-life balance right has also helped take Amidon to some exciting places – at exciting times – that one would not normally associate with the cutting-edge of KM, but which have provided experiences that have helped shape her KM outlook. “When I went to Beijing [ten years ago] they only paid my lodging and expenses, but I got ten days of exposure to China that I never would have had otherwise and an opportunity to influence their strategies. There’s not a price you can put on that,” says Amidon.

It was not just the opportunity simply to learn more about attitudes and strategies to the development of knowledge and

innovation in the world's fastest growing economy, but also to further her research into knowledge innovation zones or knowledge cities. At the same time, Amidon has influenced government policies to knowledge sharing, management and innovation, sometimes bringing KM concepts to some unlikely places – for example, Desert Knowledge Australia, Colombia, Latvia and Estonia in the Baltics, Bahrain and many more.

“It was a Saudi company, Integrated Vision Group, which funded the research that Bryan Davis and I did to study worldwide examples of knowledge innovation zones from an enterprise perspective, as well as the country perspective,” says Amidon.

Saudi Arabia – perhaps looking forwards to the day that the oil runs out or ceases to be central to the global economy – is investing in a big way in the innovation zone concept. “They announced the development of six knowledge innovation zones. The first is connecting the economic region of Medina and Mecca. They are building the knowledge economic city. King Abdullah announced the development of this city with a \$26.6bn investment,” says Amidon.

The Saudi investment is just one of many around the world that are being made to promote the so-called ‘knowledge economy’. Developing countries in particular have zeroed in on Amidon's ideas in a bid to understand what they need to do to create the conditions in which such a knowledge economy can flourish. Their hope is that they can kick-start economic growth and maybe even leapfrog the developed world with new knowledge cities, generating the knowledge and services of the future.

“When my book, *Innovation Strategy for the Knowledge Economy*, was translated into Chinese, the National Academy of Sciences established the knowledge-innovation programme for the country – a cornerstone of its economic-development strategy. Now, India has done the same and established knowledge innovation as their research focus. Japan just launched its new strategy, calling it *The Innovation Superhighway*,” says Amidon, referencing the title of another one of her books with much justifiable pride.

In other words, today every country in the world – industrialised, developing and transitional economies – wants a knowledge economy and all are competing to create the right conditions to enable it to happen and flourish.

Amidon's interest in the process by which an idea moves through its various stages from conception into innovation and ‘productisation’ originated in the 1980s when she was the vital interface between external research and bench engineers at computer company Digital Equipment Corporation (DEC) – then the second biggest computer company in the world.

Her role at DEC was to provide funding for valuable research being conducted in academia and to ensure that the company did not miss out on the fruits of such work.

At that time, many Japanese companies were able to profitably sell manufactured products at prices lower than their American competitors could produce them. Japanese factory workers were not working for nothing; their companies were simply much better at taking the latest technology and turning it into desirable products than anyone else in the world – at the lowest cost and the best quality, too.

Amidon's intellectual curiosity was piqued. “They were productising research I was funding faster than I could get it 20 miles down the road. There was something in that transfer process,” she says. “In 1987, I held a conference in the US on managing the knowledge assets into the 21st century. That was 20 years ago when I first wrote about something then called ‘intellectual capital’,” says Amidon. “And look at the progress we have made...”

She went further in 1989, when she was selected by DEC to take its biennial place in a prestigious Sloan Fellowship at the Massachusetts Institute of



Technology (MIT). The title of her published thesis? *Global Innovation Strategy*, naturally.

“It was about the whole rubric of innovation and contrasting what happens in the US, Europe and Japan. It was about understanding the process and the model of how an idea becomes a product and becomes commercialised – the full innovation process from idea conception to utilisation and value creation,” says Amidon.

Her conclusions were threefold. First, knowledge – or intellectual capital – is a corporate (and social) asset that needs to be actively managed. Second, innovation is the process by which knowledge is put to work because on its own knowledge is next to useless – innovation is the value created

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when knowledge ‘moves’. “It’s not as valuable if it sits inside one individual’s head or within one unit of a company, or one department of a government ministry. When it moves and starts to connect with other kinds of things, that’s when value and wealth is created,” says Amidon. The third, following on naturally enough from the second, was that “collaboration had become the name of the game. Collaboration provides the optimum utilisation of resources”.

DECed out

Unfortunately, such lessons were not necessarily learnt quickly enough or thoroughly enough at DEC. Although it was a company that greatly valued knowledge and the expertise of its staff, and commanded great loyalty from its staff in return, it still proved to be insufficiently adaptable in the face of changing times – and changing technology – not to mention stiff competition.

Throughout the 1980s, ‘open systems’ – computers built on the principles of interoperability, portability and, above all, open-software standards – were slowly gaining traction. But DEC founder and CEO Ken Olsen, while supporting such developments, did not believe that they could ever be as good as DEC’s own products. However, open systems did enable standard PCs to be networked quickly, simply and cheaply.

In 1989, the open systems revolution finally took off – and DEC was not a part of it. By 1993, the company had caught up technically, but was nevertheless in financial

turmoil and Amidon was just one of tens of thousands to part company with it. She spent her final day consoling Olsen, who was also soon to depart and perplexed about the state of his company, his life’s work since the 1950s, leaving her only enough time to grab her Rolodex from the desk at the end of the day before the cleaners moved in.

“When I walked out of the office that evening I had 400 cards from people in 20 countries,” says Amidon. “The managerial enigma that Digital was at its zenith has become the standard for networked knowledge-based firms today.” Her first port of call was David Skyrme, who had run various market intelligence and strategic-analysis initiatives for DEC in the UK, and who had set-up a knowledge centre before also leaving DEC in 1993.

“David Skyrme and I realised that there was a new form of management emerging and we knew it was based on knowledge exchange and knowledge management. Ultimately, we defined it as knowledge-innovation strategies that were systems oriented. And that there was a whole new way of thinking about enterprises, interacting and performance,” says Amidon.

He helped build the first Entovation internet site in 1993 and has been a close associate ever since – the first member of the E100 network, which now boasts 160 members in 60 nations

across the globe. E100 network members have roundtables across the world, in New York, Helsinki, Monterey in Mexico, Barcelona and, most recently, in Muscat in Oman.

So how has her thinking changed since those days at DEC in the late 1980s when she was just starting to make sense of knowledge creation and innovation? “I’m more affirmed,” she says, “about our exploration into new management technology and the potential for breaking down counter-productive barriers between functions, industries and nations. Together, we have an unprecedented opportunity to bootstrap the innovation capability worldwide and minimise problems that plague our society – one person at a time.”

And for Amidon, the future is bright, too. She sees a critical mass of understanding how knowledge is developed and innovated upon around the world, which will spur on further change, hopefully helping the world to overcome many pressing challenges. However, a world of flux and perpetual change may not be to everyone’s taste, even if it may benefit them and their children in the long run. “People are just going to have to become comfortable with complexity, ambiguity and kaleidoscopic change,” she says.

The best way to ride that wave is to understand it. And few people understand it better than Amidon. ■

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