

Open Comment – The Lost Art of Storytelling

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Children's nursery rhymes. Medieval morality plays. Allegorical art. What have they all got in common? They have all been used as means of passing on information before the advent of more technical approaches, such as cheap printing that enables broad literacy.

Storytelling is a means of passing on information that can still be found around the world. Here, the generations pass on information through learning by rote a means of codifying this information. The general forms of this are as follows:

- Through elders, or "religious" leaders within the community
- Through specific "keepers of the truth", such as named story tellers
- Through the use of song or rhyme
- Through the use of plays
- Through play itself
- Through art
- Through writings

Taking a couple of the above, we can see how the Mystery and Morality Plays of the mediaeval ages were a form of storytelling. Before the age of general literacy, a means of getting information through to people was required, and travelling players ensured that morality and religious messages were promulgated.

Nursery rhymes and folk songs ensured that basic information – for example, political (as in "Mary, Mary, Quite Contrary") or basic education (as in "One, Two, Buckle my Shoe") – would be passed down from one generation to another. Many folk songs are based around sex education (e.g. The Nutting Girl), couched in terms that kept them innocuous to those who should not understand them. In many tribal cultures, the equivalent of a shaman will have the responsibility for collating and passing on information through storytelling, covering the

history of the tribe, the knowledge of herbal medicines and so on.

As well as the general informational systems such as those mentioned above, Quocirca has found several relatively "lost" pieces of information while carrying out research into advanced sustainability approaches. For example, a 14th century Abbot's kitchen at Glastonbury Abbey in the UK has a distinctive shape that drew cold air at the bottom of the building, venting it (along with the smoke from the cooking) through a specially shaped cupola in the roof.

Likewise, the old-style sash windows, where two windows in the same frame can be slid up from the bottom and down from the top were not designed that way just because hinges were difficult to put in place in frames that were hand-made. The idea of the sash window is that the top pane is pulled down some way, and the bottom pane pulled up a little way. Warm air escapes through the top gap, pulling in cool, clear air through the bottom. Natural convection is therefore set up. Seeing modern people only sliding up the bottom window and wondering why a room does not cool down shows how information is no longer being passed down properly between the generations. Such information was generally passed on through mentoring, in the form of apprenticeships, where little nuggets of best practice are learnt through hands-on experience being passed from mentor to novice.

These and many other areas show how we have, over a relatively short period of time, lost the habit of passing on information in a meaningful manner. Instead, we rely on information that comes from sources that we should apply a little more due diligence to – is it really true that an 18 year old posting information through a blog should be the ultimate arbitrator of the truth, for example?

New seems to be best, and things that were done yesterday are old hat and should be forgotten as soon as possible.

Finally, within the "new civilisation" of the corporate world, we have the opportunity to get back to such approaches. The use of wikis gives the capability for information to be garnered from those within an organisation with the experience to be able to say that such an approach works, while enabling younger heads to see if the approach can be improved through the application of new technologies the original person may not be aware of.

However, many of the implementation of wikis that Quocirca has seen around the world fail to do this, and often for fairly simple reasons. Many do not try to gain the seed information from those who are the existing gurus, instead just hoping for good ideas to come from anywhere. There is nothing inherently wrong with this, but ideas management is a different subject, and different wikis should be set up for this. Once an idea has been through a few iterations, it may well become a seed for a best practice wiki.

Also, many wikis are not moderated sufficiently. Entries rapidly get changed with incorrect information, go off topic or become a content fight between a couple of people. Corporate wikis are not a free for all – they have to be controlled and inappropriate behaviour nipped in the bud and content culled as applicable.

Finally, the old adage *knowledge is power* can be the death of such a wiki. The main idea here is to share the base knowledge, in the same way that story telling always has done. The reader has to be able to pick up the bare bones of the idea and its implementation rapidly – but also must be able to add their own thoughts back into the system to iteratively improve the story.

As with the majority of collaborative approaches, the key is in the initial ground rules, and then with the application of policy. Make sure that everyone is aware of the usage principals and what will happen if they do not adhere to them (i.e. their input will be deleted). Make sure that the principals are enforced – even though you may have to revisit them on a regular basis to adapt to changing requirements. Draw out the best from the wiki, and give credit where credit is due, so encouraging correct usage.

For many organisations, the knowledge held within the organisation is key. Lewis Platt, ex-head of HP, summed up the problem for HP in the following statement: "If we only knew what we know at HP, we would be three times more profitable". Using wikis as a means of storytelling enables organisations to gain a better handle on what they do know – and could have such an impact on the bottom line.

About Quocirca

Quocirca is a primary research and analysis company specialising in the business impact of information technology and communications (ITC). With world-wide, native language reach, Quocirca provides in-depth insights into the views of buyers and influencers in large, mid-sized and small organisations. Its analyst team is made up of real-world practitioners with first hand experience of ITC delivery who continuously research and track the industry and its real usage in the markets.

Through researching perceptions, Quocirca uncovers the real hurdles to technology adoption – the personal and political aspects of an organisation's environment and the pressures of the need for demonstrable business value in any implementation. This capability to uncover and report back on the end-user perceptions in the market enables Quocirca to advise on the realities of technology adoption, not the promises.

Quocirca research is always pragmatic, business orientated and conducted in the context of the bigger picture. ITC has the ability to transform businesses and the processes that drive them, but often fails to do so. Quocirca's mission is to help organisations improve their success rate in process enablement through better levels of understanding and the adoption of the correct technologies at the correct time.

Quocirca has a pro-active primary research programme, regularly surveying users, purchasers and resellers of ITC products and services on emerging, evolving and maturing technologies. Over time, Quocirca has built a picture of long term investment trends, providing invaluable information for the whole of the ITC community.

Quocirca works with global and local providers of ITC products and services to help them deliver on the promise that ITC holds for business. Quocirca's clients include Oracle, Microsoft, IBM, Dell, T-Mobile, Vodafone, EMC, Symantec and Cisco, along with other large and medium sized vendors, service providers and more specialist firms.

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