TRY ASKING THE PERSON AT THE NEXT DESK

Don't overlook the importance of vicarious learning for sharing critical knowledge at work

By Christopher G. Myers

People today have access to more information than at any point in human history. A 2014 report estimated the size of the internet at 1 billion unique websites, and by the end of 2016, global internet traffic is expected to reach 1.1 zettabytes. That is 1.1 trillion gigabytes of information moving around online – enough, by my rough estimate, to fill 8.59 billion iPhones (the 128GB maxed-out iPhone 6S, to be specific). It's no surprise, then, that one of the most common ways we seek out and learn new things is online, embodying the 21st-century learning mantra "I don't know. ... I'll Google it."

However, because of this volume of readily available information and knowledge, we risk forgetting one of the most important ways people learn, particularly at work – namely, by learning from the experiences of others, or what's known as *vicarious learning*. Though we have long recognized the benefits of not repeating others' mistakes or not "reinventing the wheel," the emphasis of many modern organizations on self-directed learning and more autonomous, independent work means that employees are often turning to Google for answers, rather than learning vicariously from a colleague's knowledge and experience. This is a costly trend. In 2004, *HR Magazine* estimated that this failure to share knowledge internally (resulting in wasted time searching for known answers and reinventing wheels) cost the companies in the *Fortune 500* a total of at least $31.5 billion per year.

Failing to learn from others' experiences at work is a challenge for several reasons.
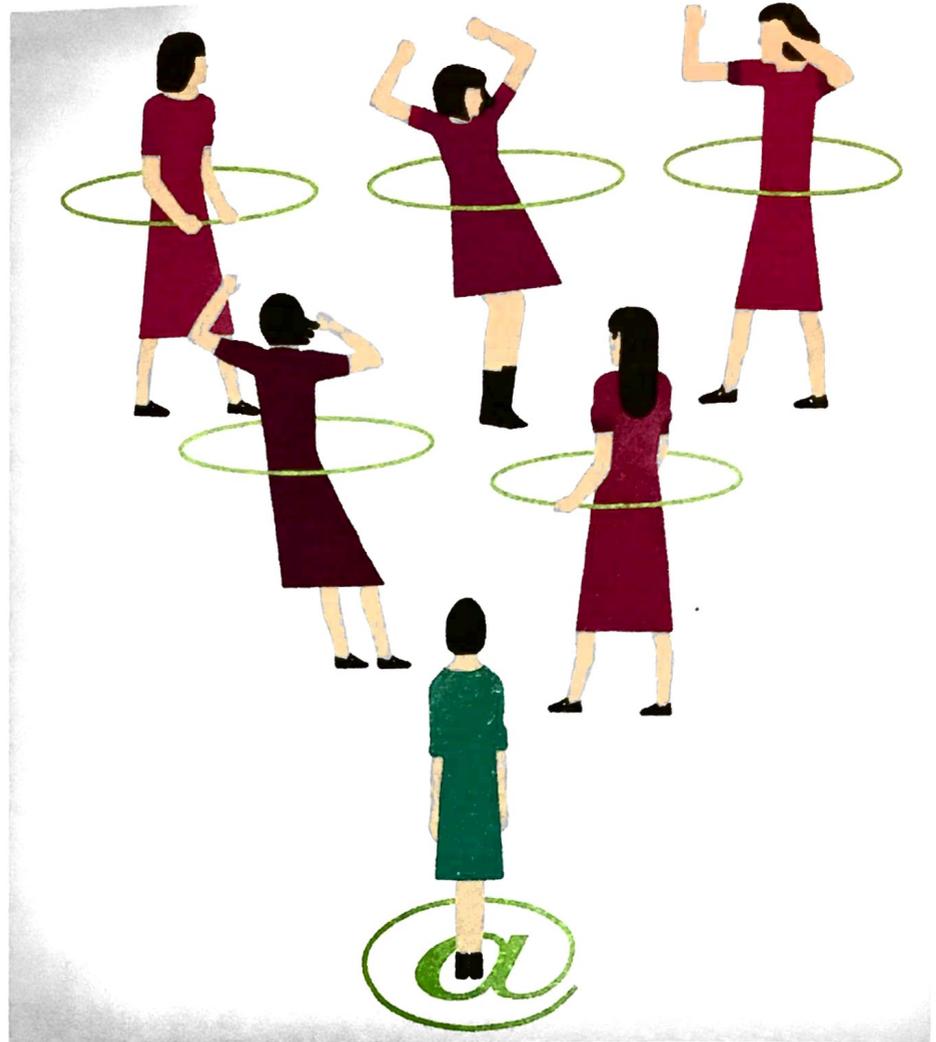
...WHAT IS OFTEN CRITICAL FOR SUCCESS IS MASTERY OF THE *TACIT* KNOWLEDGE OF THE ORGANIZATION – THE COMPLEX, OFTEN SUBTLE INTERPRETIVE KNOWLEDGE THAT IS DIFFICULT TO CAPTURE OR WRITE DOWN.

Despite the plethora of hits returned on any given Google search, not all information is available online. The knowledge needed to succeed in many organizations relies on unique or sometimes proprietary information (such as patented designs or procedures). In addition, differences in the ways knowledge is captured and retained can make it difficult to find certain pieces of information through online searches, even within an organization's own digital archives. For instance, differences in terminology or document "tagging" practices can impede individuals' efforts to search their companies' online knowledge databases, leaving them unable to find important information simply because they searched the wrong keyword.

Most importantly, though, much of the knowledge needed for employees to learn and thrive at work is not the kind of formal, codified information that is typically documented in online repositories or knowledge-management systems. Instead, what is often critical for success is mastery of the *tacit* knowledge of the organization – the complex, often subtle interpretive knowledge that is difficult to capture or write down.

For example, in some of my research with air medical transport teams – teams that travel via helicopter or airplane to pick up patients from small hospitals or accident scenes and transport them to large tertiary-care centers – I examined how flight nurses learned what they needed to succeed in this dynamic, knowledge-intensive environment. I found that the nurses engaged in a great deal of informal conversation and storytelling to learn from each other's differing experiences, with a specific emphasis on the nonclinical aspects of medical transportation, such as the interpersonal intricacies of taking over patient care from staff at another hospital. Clinical knowledge (i.e., codifiable knowledge of how to treat particular injuries or illnesses) was certainly important, but without an understanding of these more tacit elements of the work, team members would be unable to put their clinical knowledge to use most effectively during a transport.

This need to learn vicariously from others' tacit knowledge and experience pervades most organizations, particularly as the world of work continues to become more adaptive, complex, and knowledge based. We will have to continue to ask ourselves how we can harness the power of technology to support, rather than replace, these key interpersonal learning interactions. How can we use technology, for instance, to enable greater vicarious learning between members of geographically dispersed teams? How might the availability of information online be used to provide a "foundation" of codified knowledge that can be expanded by learning from stories of others' experiences? And what role could social media play in facilitating the sharing of more tacit knowledge across teams, organizations, or even industries?

Hang on, I'll try Googling it. [C]

Christopher G. Myers is an assistant professor on the faculty of the Carey Business School and the Armstrong Institute for Patient Safety and Quality. His research and teaching focus on individual learning, development, and innovation in knowledge-intensive organizations.

WHAT WE LEARN FROM 'THE WIRE'

TV series set in Baltimore provides context for course taught by Carey faculty member

By Toby Gordon

The typical response to the question many of us in Baltimore hear from outsiders – "Is Baltimore just like *The Wire?*" – basically amounts to a defensive lecture on the merits of the city and the damage *The Wire* has done to our reputation. And yet I would argue that the television series has been more helpful than harmful, something I learned from teaching a Carey Business School class based on the show.

The Wire first aired on HBO almost 15 years ago and went off the air in 2008. It has enjoyed an afterlife and fan base far greater than during its original air time. This was indicated in part by an event this year at Columbia University in New York, where I joined a group of academics, actors, musicians, journalists, and other professionals at a conference on how *The Wire* has made an impact on our respective fields, on public policy, and on the national discourse about social justice.

At the show's start in 2002, David Simon and his gifted writers, actors, and producers could not have imagined that more than 30 colleges in the United States would someday offer courses on *The Wire* in fields such as sociology, literature, law, criminal justice, public health, and business.

My calling to teach *The Wire* came naturally. I was born in Baltimore and educated in the city's public schools. I raised my family here, studied public health, and worked at the Johns Hopkins Hospital. As a Carey faculty member, I have wanted my students to understand that they could make a difference in the life and future of the city by being better informed about it, using the skills and tools learned in business school, and then finding a way to contribute that would be meaningful and in partnership with folks in the city.

In my class, we use *The Wire* as a case study of the "social determinants of health" so common in our city – environmental hazards, stressful living conditions, unemployment, addiction, poor schooling. Urban life as depicted in the show makes the point better than any text – that old orange sofa in The Pit, a seeming repository of urban pollutants, a vector for causes of the high rates of asthma in our city; the significant morbidity and mortality from trauma and gun violence; the drug trade and drug use that correlate with the surge in heroin deaths and the high rates of "the bug," HIV.

My students design innovative yet feasible solutions to these urban ills, addressing food deserts through new modes of delivery of fresh produce, tackling addiction issues by expanding distribution of naloxone for opioid overdoses, designing safe injection sites for addicts so as to prevent infection and overdosing, and offering novel job training programs and after-school initiatives that include sports and college-prep activities.

We may not like the way Baltimore is depicted in the news or on fictional albeit realistic TV shows, but we should rejoice in the tremendous energy and assets in our community, especially in response to last year's unrest. We are beginning to see how we can each play a part in shaping a new future for the city; it is not as hopeless as David Simon may have portrayed it.

My own contribution is in the classroom, where students largely from somewhere other than Charm City ache and weep over the issues and inequities found here and then aspire to make the city better, thanks to *The Wire's* humanizing of the drug users, the drug dealers, the children in failing schools, and the adults in failing institutions. With humanity in mind, we are able to see that the way forward is to move past the manifestations of the social determinants of health and attack the root causes. [C]

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