An interview with Don Cohen

Interview by Alistair Craven

Don Cohen is a writer, researcher, and consultant on organizational knowledge and social capital whose articles on those subjects have appeared in *Harvard Business Review, California Management Review, Knowledge Management*, and *Knowledge and Process Management*.

Don created and edited *Groundwork*, the newsletter of the Ernst & Young Center for Business Innovation knowledge management programme, and *Knowledge Directions*, the journal of the IBM Institute for Knowledge Management. With Laurence Prusak he is co-author of *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work*. With Robert Putnam and Lewis Feldstein, he researched and wrote *Better Together: Restoring the American Community*, published by Simon & Schuster.

Don Cohen has worked with colleagues Laurence Prusak and Alvin Jacobson on a project (sponsored by CAF, the Andean development bank) to apply organizational knowledge and social capital principles to economic development in several Latin American countries. He is currently a research associate with Babson College's Working Knowledge programme and Managing Editor of NASA's *ASK* magazine.

What first prompted your interest in the field of knowledge management?

Don Cohen:

In part, my involvement was the result of being in the right place at the right time. At the end of 1995, Larry Prusak, whom I had known socially for many years, invited me to help write a book about knowledge management that he and Tom Davenport were working on. I spent a good part of the following year on what became *Working Knowledge*. That experience of working with Larry and Tom was the best possible introduction to what was then the new field of knowledge management. But knowledge management appealed to me for reasons that go back much further than 1995. I was a literature major in college and graduate school and taught literature for a while. I've had a lifelong interest in communication and especially in questions of how people hear and understand one another – or fail to hear and understand. It's a core human issue that defines the essential aim of knowledge management: to improve people's ability to hear and understand what others know that can help them accomplish their work.

What would you cite as the most important issues facing knowledge managers today?

Don Cohen:

An essential one is finding ways to align knowledge management efforts with specific important business aims and be clear about the results KM efforts are expected to produce. As possibly we can talk about later on, I think this kind of alignment (which I see happening in many organizations) is essential to making sure and being able to demonstrate that knowledge management earns its keep. I also think KM professionals need to work harder to engage knowledge workers in the process of designing the practices and technologies that will help them share knowledge. Co-creation of those practices and technologies is important because only the knowledge workers themselves know precisely what they need. Another issue that's been with us from the beginning is how to work in a coordinated way on the broad range of factors that make successful knowledge management possible. We need to look at practices, technologies, workspaces, and organizational structures and behaviours in relation to one another, not as separate subjects.

To what degree has the internet influenced the development of knowledge management?

Don Cohen:

The short answer is, less than many people probably imagine. To those who think of knowledge management as system-based, the internet and corporate intranets loom large as sources of information from the outside world and a means of knowledge-transfer within the

organization. But knowledge management is much more than communications technology. It has to do with communities, storytelling, mentoring, and meeting in person. So I see the internet as an important supporting technology rather than the heart of knowledge management. In addition to that supporting role, I think the internet influences knowledge management in a couple of interesting ways. First, the vast quantities of good, bad, and terrible information on the Web put a premium on judgment, on the skills that good librarians and editors have, which I think of as knowledge management skills. Second, the easy availability of information makes information per se less valuable to organizations – there's no competitive advantage in having what everyone else has – and makes knowledge – knowing what information matters and what to do with it – much more valuable.

Can you tell us about the background to your book *In Good Company: How Social Capital Makes Organizations Work?*

Don Cohen:

That book, which I co-wrote with Larry Prusak, grew out of a central knowledge management question: Why is it so hard to transfer knowledge from one part of an organization to another? Part of the answer has to do with problems of documenting or codifying knowledge. A lot of the subtlest, most valuable knowledge can't be captured in documents. Also, documents describing practices or learnings seldom have the power to inspire action. More important than the codification issue, though, is the fact that knowledge travels best among people who have relationships characterized by trust and mutual understanding. In other words, social capital (which consists of networks of those relationships) is an essential part of successful knowledge management. Work done by John Seely Brown and Etienne Wenger and others on community helped establish this principle. In *In Good Company*, Larry and I argued that high social capital supports collaboration and knowledge management, as well as commitment and longevity that help keep valuable knowledge in the organization.

In his interview with us, KM pioneer Dr. Yogesh Malhotra described KM focused on IT solutions pitched as silver bullets by self-interested vendors and analysts – particularly in the USA – as "deplorable." How would you respond to this?

Don Cohen:

I agree one hundred percent. I recently interviewed two dozen experienced KM practitioners to try to understand what we've learned about knowledge management from more than a decade of practice. Without exception, they identified a reliance on IT "solutions" as the number one source of failed knowledge management efforts. One said, "The rocks are strewn with the wrecks of projects based on thinking IT tools will change the world."

That comment gets to the heart of the problem: IT can support the sharing of ideas in organizations but can't make it happen. The successful knowledge management systems I've seen work because they exist in a context of behaviours and practices that support knowledge sharing in organizations that value and reward trust and cooperation and encourage face-to-face meeting and community.

Despite the fact that IT solutions invariably fail, many organizations continue to fall into the technology trap. Why? Many managers are more comfortable buying something tangible – a system – than investing in practices that are harder to quantify and explain. And the vendors Malhotra mentions are always claiming that the next technological advance will solve all the problems that caused the last one to fail. They appeal to a hunger, probably stronger in the US than in many other countries, for a simple solution to complex problems. It's the same hunger that drives some people to buy self-help books that promise readers they will become slim, wealthy, and popular if they follow a few simple rules.

You stated recently that people working at organizations devoted to missions other than making money share knowledge more readily than employees working for companies that emphasize the bottom line. Why is this so?

Don Cohen:

First let me qualify that statement a little. Some organizations with worthwhile missions – some charitable organizations, say – are poisonous. Jealousy, competitiveness, and distrust make knowledge sharing (and effective work) impossible in those places. But by and large, yes, mission-based organizations do have an advantage when it comes to sharing knowledge because shared belief in a valuable goal draws people together and encourages them do what needs to be done to succeed, including asking for knowledge and offering what they know. Participants in NASA's ten-year *Stardust* project talk about how the goal of bringing samples of comet-matter back to earth – a scientifically valuable feat that had never been achieved before – helped them overcome disagreements and break through the territorial protectiveness that inhibits knowledge sharing.

The military has had some remarkable success in knowledge sharing both because they generally believe in their mission and because learning about battle conditions from the real-life experience of other soldiers (what the US Army calls "ground truth") is literally a matter of life or death. A shared sense of mission is an important strengthener of social capital. For most people, saving money for their organizations or bland goals like "making us more competitive" are not missions that inspire the extra effort required to share knowledge or build the trust knowledge that sharing depends on.

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If people who are proud of their work are more likely to "offer what they know", in what ways can companies encourage buy-in on the scale needed to make a difference?

Don Cohen:

I suggest two things. Even for-profit companies can validly emphasize goals other than "make more money for shareholders and executives." Pharmaceutical companies certainly are out to make money, but I think researchers are motivated to do good work and share knowledge by the hope of discovering disease-curing drugs. United Parcel Service pays a great deal of attention to profitability, but its employees are proud of reliably providing a necessary service and their cooperativeness is partly based on that sense of mission. Many organizations can stress their socially useful products and services or even the value of work well done. Second, companies need to make clear about how adopting knowledge management practices and technologies will directly help individuals and groups do their work more effectively. That is a much more powerful motivator than vague talk about benefits to the organization as a whole.

An interesting topic which recently appeared on your Babson blog concerns practices organizations have devised to encourage the application of existing knowledge to new purposes. A recent article in Emerald's *Journal of Knowledge Management* argues that in the scientific and engineering communities in particular, knowledge reuse is not always perceived by the individual to be "good" – innovation or creation is "better". What are your initial thoughts on this?

Don Cohen:

Engineers especially like to figure things out for themselves and believe there is always a better solution to a problem than the one someone else devised. And they're right, of course – there's always room for improvement – but organizations need to find the appropriate balance between quality on the one hand and speed and cost on the other. It's often the job of project managers to enforce the necessary compromises; part of doing that is sometimes insisting that an existing solution is good enough. I think organizations can also address this issue by working to strengthen the communities and networks of scientists and engineers because those people don't work alone – whether innovating or adapting someone else's solution, they're always learning and borrowing from one another. In fact, of course, re-use and innovation aren't opposites. All the innovation I know of comes about by combining previously separate existing knowledge or by using an old idea in a new way.

What do you think blogs have to offer in terms of managing both personal and business knowledge?

Don Cohen:

I have mixed feelings about KM blogs. As someone who writes them, I enjoy the chance to articulate an interesting idea quickly, without having to stretch it into an article or embed it in a book. The immediacy of blogs is their great strength. At their best, I think they can spark interesting conversations about current issues and ideas. But to say that the quality of blogs varies is a major understatement. There are a lot of terrible blogs out there and I worry that the good ones may get lost in the general mediocrity. I'm also concerned that many of the people who spend a lot of time reading and responding to KM blogs may not be the people we want to reach – that is, the ones who are too busy doing knowledge management to spend much time in the blogosphere.

A frequent criticism of knowledge management is that it is extremely difficult to prove links to bottom line performance, which in turn makes board level buy-in hard to achieve. Can you offer any solutions to this dilemma?

Don Cohen:

We've been talking about this problem for a long time, and I don't have the solution. But a couple of things I learned from my recent practitioner interviews may be helpful. One is that the most successful knowledge management programmes are backed by senior managers who don't demand a strict accounting of return on investment. They believe in the value of knowledge management, they understand that it's rarely possible to put a dollar value on new or shared knowledge, and they recognize that some of the most valuable KM investments may not pay off for years. Knowledge managers in those companies don't have to waste time coming up with falsely precise numbers every six months or distort their programmes to generate such numbers. Instead, they tend to use surveys and anecdotes to demonstrate the value of knowledge management to the organization.

It's true, though, that "faith" in KM may not be enough to protect it when times are tough and organizations cut expenses. The other trend I've seen, which I think will help give knowledge management the firm footing it needs, is an increasing insistence on being very clear about the specific business aims of knowledge management projects and programmes. Nancy Dixon talks about doing KM "from the question in" – that is, defining the problem you want to solve first. Years ago, knowledge managers tended to think that their job was to collect and distribute as much knowledge as possible. Now they are looking at critical current and future knowledge needs and focusing their efforts on providing just that essential knowledge when and where it is needed. This focus on business value strengthens the case for the value of KM and defining the results you're trying to achieve should make it much easier to measure value.

Finally, do you see us still sitting round and discussing the value of knowledge management in say 15 years' time?

Don Cohen:

I hope not. I hope the value will be clear long before then. And I doubt we'll be using the term "knowledge management." Will people still be discussing questions of how to develop and use organizational knowledge effectively? In other words, will we be talking about learning, talent development, collaboration, and innovation? Absolutely. □