

narrative learning

To make meaning from what its people know strengthens a business's collaboration for learning, growth and transformation

What does your business have to gain from collaborating to learn?

The pressure is mounting to find better defences against change, as we don't believe any business leader will want to find their company in the bottom diagram on this page.

From a simple organisational hygiene perspective, investors will recognise that in the knowledge age, the quality of its knowledge assets and processes can make or break a business.

So, into which of these learning groups depicted below does your business belong, and which group does your leadership team think will drive its industry's future?

Orchestrate someone else's disruption

Never has there been more need, nor greater opportunity, to strengthen, develop and draw on the capacity of what an organisation knows and can learn.

Fortunately, in the internet's collaborative workplace social technologies, we have the best tools ever invented to speed advances in a business's creative thinking by harnessing their capacities for collective learning.

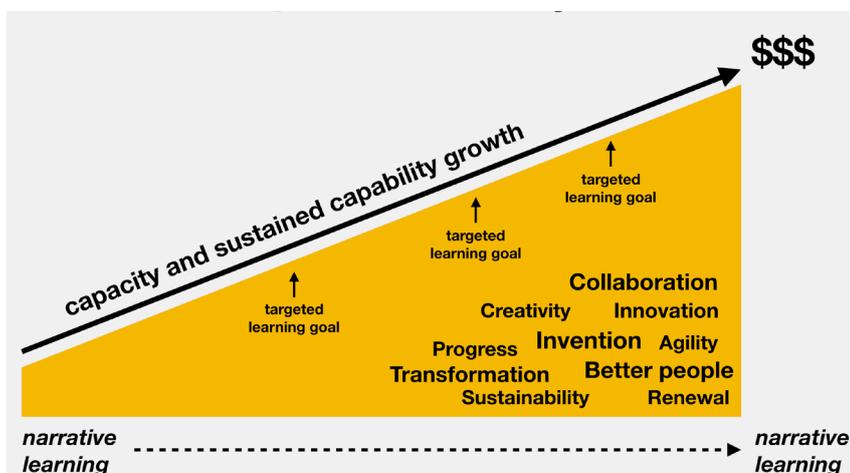
The main problem is that against this promising backdrop, without a common organising principle, most employees may still not yet know exactly *why* or *how* they're meant to use these tools.

And, likewise, managers can't afford to be hands-off in assuming that simply by introducing them into the workplace, the effort and knowledge of a business will come together to form itself into a meaningful, coherent, usable whole.

In this, the workplace needs both a motive and guidance, because most business organisations have no deliberate knowledge management strategy.

If they never ask what their people know, care about or can contribute to the learning of the organisation, the chances of finding out by accident are vanishingly slim.

Now, however, as social workplace technology-driven collaboration grows in uptake and management-media attention – here, at McKinsey (<http://bit.ly/2uHx482>), and here, at the Harvard Business Review (<http://bit.ly/2gLrZII>), for example – the need and opportunity to exercise it as a well



executed workplace discipline grows, if it is to evolve business processes within competitive practices for constant digital adaptation.

And those who demonstrate clear method to organise, motivate and steer the generation of new ideas and new revenues through productive collaboration that everyone understands, and in which each workplace member can participate fully, will certainly find themselves a long way ahead of rivals that haven't yet figured this out.

By focusing learning and attention well, they can counter, if not become, their industry's next disruptors.

A critical communication for the future

Narrative learning offers a natural evolutionary force to overcome the challenge of constant change.

It is fast and cheap to implement, because the minds it draws on represent a workplace resource a business is already paying for. And it requires no prior preparation of special course materials, being guided by its workplace's unique and dynamic learning needs.

Its economies include technologies the business likely either already has, or can procure quickly as a service in the cloud.

Furthermore, through the contributions it manages, it can even guide workplace leaders to understand better the nature of the future talent their business most needs to attract.

However it is implemented, narrative learning represents an essential internal communication discipline of the future for organisations keen to learn to stay in business by anticipating and addressing the turbulence of change.

Figure 1:
The upward trajectory of those businesses making deliberate effort to discover and organise their knowledge to learn



Figure 2:

The competitive prospects for those businesses making no effort to uncover, organise and learn from what they know are less than promising

Enduring capability development demands pervasive and persistent organisation-wide learning

Management academic Peter Drucker wrote that innovation is a change that creates a new dimension of performance.

But, where it will appear is also unpredictable, and we should not expect the world to conform to our tidy, linear expectations.

This makes the need to address the digital transformations of possibly unseen rivals not a simple, one-off, set-and-forget event. Instead, defensibility is now a perpetual cyclical challenge to the continued well-being of any business.

What is disruption?

In this world, what makes “disruptive” innovation so threatening is not necessarily that it produces technologies that are better, but that it often initiates a shift in business models, which makes it hard for incumbents to compete without killing their cash cows.

Neither Uber nor AirBnB invented new technologies to solve a problem, but each found an opportunity to disrupt their target industries through smarter thinking and better use of technology.

With the massive advances coming in computing power, even many really smart, conventionally well-managed companies may be underestimating the scale, scope, and speed of today’s impending disruptions.

And, when it comes to the changes wrought by artificial intelligence (AI) and machine learning, we are all moving into a world we can’t clearly imagine.

The road to successful digital transformation in any company is now most likely built upon the effectiveness with which its technologists and information officers can capture, develop and put to work its diverse, native collective intelligence and ability to create new knowledge.

The need to experiment with knowledge creation is persistent

The bulk of the value delivered by innovation may, however, be generated less by disruptions than by steady incremental improvements.

Those who can reproduce success over many years may not look for new ideas per se, but for problems to solve.

This is why great, enduring companies may less often be forced to adapt to the march of others. Instead, they prepare for the future and focus on solving deeper

problems that have the potential to change what’s possible and to raise their own performance to a higher level

Perhaps contrary to expectation, the world’s richest man, Amazon CEO Jeff Bezos, said recently he looks to exploit things that *won’t* change – such as customers’ wishes for low prices and expectations of better service – rather than things that will.

A good problem leads to a sense of purpose, so it may be better not to look for a great idea, but to find a good problem, as that’s where good ideas really come from.

But if a business will not even venture out to experiment into even the fairly tame unknown of discovering what its own people know and can contribute, it is, unsurprisingly, unlikely ever to find anything new, or to learn much.

It’s a straightforward equation. If you don’t explore, you won’t discover. If you don’t discover you won’t invent. And if you don’t invent and improve, you will be disrupted.

People, not just technology, will define the future of work.

Most businesses agree that the future of work will be rooted in technology, from cloud-based software to AI. But technology on its own isn’t enough.

It is people, not just technology, who will define the future of work, and their world is more open, connected and faster moving than we’ve ever known.

Moreover, through the ubiquity of always-connected mobile devices that make learning potentially available everywhere and to everyone at any time, that is exactly what its individuals are doing.

Any employee can now take a course on nearly any subject online by browsing through content from Coursera, Udemy, Udacity, or a dozen other providers, and get access quickly to a lecture, a course, or a workshop on a needed skill.

This greatly enriches the quality of the personal learning they can contribute to that of their workplace.

This new world of consumer-centric learning potentially puts employees, and less human resources or learning and development departments, in charge.

Why is the ultimate learning machine being used so little for business learning?

For over 20 years, we've had business access to the internet, the greatest knowledge machine ever invented for the pooling and sharing of human experience to create insight, learning, new knowledge and wisdom.

But, while we also have the best tools ever developed for capturing and disseminating learning across an organisation, in most, they aren't being used widely enough.

Most businesses don't yet appear to have developed either an appetite or a recipe for engaging them in meaningful collaboration.

When it comes to learning, most businesses are startups

The ability to conjure and make meaning from what its people know is the first essential capacity in strengthening a business's ability to collaborate to learn, grow and transform itself from within.

But, it is reported that knowledge capture in big organisations is sporadic and its results rarely easily accessible to those who need it.

The problem in many businesses is that knowledge may typically routinely be disaggregated, captured and shared ineffectively, and unfit for reuse.

When workplace knowledge is undervalued, the cost of information loss and degradation grows, unnecessarily reducing productivity and potential.

Yet, in most businesses, there is more raw and adaptable intellectual capacity than ever gets applied to designing their future.

And, there has never been more need, nor greater opportunity, to cultivate this resource wisely to promote what an organisation knows and can learn.

The reality is that when it comes to driving their own learning, most businesses are still startups, and a startup is by nature a crash-course in building expertise.

Startup learning is a great teacher, if for no other reason than it demands the planning and accumulation of knowledge quickly, even when optimising for the long term.

But, at least we now have the tools. In social workplace knowledge-sharing applications such as wikis, we have the best technologies ever made available for articulating, sharing and targeting learning and knowledge-creation across a business.

In organisations that adapt well to their uses, this advantage will be a source of much future profit, repeated innovation and productive disruption – in that imposed on rivals.

Narrative learning answers the need for a low-cost, structured, adaptable learning methodology geared to individual business need

Your business is unique, and narrative learning offers a way of transforming its exclusive knowledge to drive powerful collaboration to achieve the results above in Figure 1.

Narrative learning is open learning, and works because it operates in the ways in which humans think, as storytellers and listeners.

It organises collaboration by telling participants the story of where the organisation is going, what it is learning, and what its collaboration does, and why.

It aims to drive change in capability by directing, organising and articulating back to the business itself the growing knowledge of its workplace.

It works in much the same way as media does, exploring, picking up, transforming, polishing and presenting workplace knowledge in a consistent, comprehensible cycle of assumption-checking "double-loop" learning. (Double-loop learning entails the modification of goals or decision-making rules in the light of experience.)

What does narrative learning comprise?

In his 2004 book, *The Wisdom of Crowds*, *New Yorker* magazine business columnist James Surowiecki elucidated the simple idea that larger groups of people pooling their knowledge are often smarter than an elite few, no matter how brilliant, at solving problems, fostering innovation, coming to wise decisions, and even predicting the future.

Narrative learning places this expectation at its core, but is also informed by traditions of storytelling and more recent thinking on workplace knowledge management.

To the search for sources of organisational improvement and innovation, it applies the spirit of collaborative invention and renewal more commonly found in open source software development.

The aim of narrative learning is to aid in turning innovative ideas quickly into the learning capable of delivering rapid product advances, improved workplace capabilities and practices, and great new technologies.

It makes explicit to those who need both to know, and to contribute to it, the knowledge journey on which a company's future will be built.

And, because its curriculum is dynamic, responsive and self-generating, it allows companies to pace their learning according to their own distinctive, individualised needs.

Build a better coordinated collaborative organising principle

To be captured, shared and grown, knowledge must typically, at a minimum, be written down.

But, while their intelligence, their ideas and suggestions may be good, not everyone has the same gift, comfort with or care for writing. Many people write poorly, don't like doing it, or record information in ways that may be imprecise and unsuited to use by others.

Narrative learning overcomes this shortcoming by using practices born in professional publishing to enforce clarity and aid comprehension.

And it is informed by my personal experience, in equal measure as a student of innovation management and the holder of an MBA (Technology) from UNSW, from my first-hand learning in the use of workplace social technologies through documenting a major software development at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, and as a former professional editor at Fairfax Media's *Australian Financial Review* newspaper group.

Narrative learning focuses digitised knowledge development

In digital business transformation, no individual executive is likely to be able to think through all potential developments, outcomes and scenarios, or be able to create and test any solution single-handedly.

In the same spirit, LinkedIn founder Reid Hoffman wrote, "No matter how brilliant your mind or strategy, if you're playing a solo game, you'll always lose out to a team."

The path of transformation demands constant iteration and consideration of multiple individual hypotheses and perspectives.

It must be managed because, in the knowledge age, increasingly, knowledge assets in the form of people, processes and technologies can make or break any business and present a significant boost or drag on its productivity and potential.

To make them a spur, through thoughtful coordination, the learning narrative must deliver coherence and consistency, as better knowledge capture and sharing can assist in transforming processes for building new intelligence and applications across an organisation.

And its learning delivery processes assimilate naturally with the innate human need for storytelling about the world we each create in our heads.

How storytelling lies at the core of our being

In narrative psychology, an individual's life story is not a chart of its facts and events, but how they integrate them internally, picking apart and weaving them back together to make meaning.

Stories present links to ancient traditions, and, through symbols, to a larger self and universal truths.

We are wired to understand life through stories. They are our primary sense-making mechanisms.

They are how we explain how things work, how we make decisions, how we understand our place in the world, and how we create our identities.

In the human brain, our narratives are consistently being updated, and so powerful is our impulse to detect story patterns that we see them even when they're not there.

Imagined experiences are processed in the same way as real experiences, and managers can make powerful use of storytelling in the sense-making needed to direct an organisation's learning and capability development.

A brief history of knowledge management

Master craftsmen have always taught apprentices, and workers traded know-how, but it wasn't until the 1990s, through the spread of networked computers and the shift in the foundations of industrialised economies from natural resources to intellectual assets, that senior executives started talking about the need to manage knowledge.

Among other things, knowledge management became viewed as:

- A means of storing and structuring information to make it available to those needing it.
- A way to distribute information to encourage its spread to others.
- A way of generating ideas that could make or save money for a company.

Narrative learning uses the spirit of open source software development to script the future for the organisation

Perhaps the best example of open source software is the operating system Linux, developed by the voluntary, collaborative, self-organised and shared efforts of large numbers of software developers around the world, on which around 70 per cent of the World Wide Web runs.

In open source software development, success is driven by computer code being exposed to many sets of eyes, typically resulting in software that has been more extensively tested and is of greater reliability and quality than that produced by smaller proprietary teams.

In open source, once conceived, inventions are coded, documented, put to the test and made more robust by constant collective peer review, meaning only the strongest survive.

In this work, it has been observed that, "given enough eyeballs, all bugs are shallow."

Narrative learning likewise seeks out a plan for growing an organisation's future knowledge as routinely and deliberately as a business would the computer code on which its knowledge assets are increasingly built.

In the workplace, the same development principle can also be applied through narrative learning to improve non-software processes and practices, and to stimulate more productive new workplace thinking.

Why what we don't know we know now matters

Importantly, growing value is increasingly found in the "tacit" knowledge that exists in our heads that may be hard to articulate even to ourselves, much less to others.

Tacit knowledge adds to explicit knowledge (facts, data, and so on) the unconscious knowledge generated by our actions, our intentions and experience and the emotions we produce from it.

Tacit knowledge is "emergent" and created as we confront new situations, and its value lies in reflecting and teaching us from the changes occurring around us in our unique, first-hand contact with the world.

Most people don't know what they know, but tacit knowledge gives us insight, and, as the best defence against change, its development needs to be encouraged in any workplace.

Effective management of tacit knowledge won't happen by accident, however, but any company can benefit when it can build recognition of its importance deliberately into its human resource planning and knowledge management strategy.

Narrative learning's professional publishing disciplines define the effectiveness of its knowledge capture and communication

Narrative learning is defined by its relentless pursuit of better ideas and targeted shared learning.

It adds a layer of professional reporting and sense-making to explain, source comment and keep comprehensible and on track a business's internal communication of what is being learnt, improved and invented, how and why.

Through journalism and professional publishing's search for truth and clarity, and for what must be learnt next, writers ask questions, document and expose the answers for shared reflection and comment.

From what is learnt, they create new questions to which they direct people's attention, and build learning by repeating the cycle of review and enquiry. (See diagram beneath.)

This method underpins the ways in which over generations we have all learnt pretty much everything we know.

Narrative learning likewise draws purposefully on brains across a business to report on the knowledge that has been assembled and that which must be captured to drive organisational progress.

It exposes the expertise and knowledge an organisation values most and must attract and develop.

Furthermore, because it reveals the gifts the organisation already contains – in which of its members collaborates well and which don't – narrative learning will also guide leaders to understand better the nature of the future talent their business most needs to attract.

And by making explicit the learning they need, businesses can increase the rate at which they acquire that knowledge to grow, identify opportunity and progress.

And they can create a satisfying, knowledge-rich, knowledge-creating, talent-competitive workplace of repute, attractive to those who go to work wishing to learn.

Employees at all levels also now recognise that the "learning curve is the earning

curve," and demand access to dynamic learning opportunities that fit their individual needs.

A narrative learning editor's role is to probe for and promote understanding

It is not an editor's job to know the answers, but to focus a team's attention, helping it understand by directing the knowledge enquiry, preparing and reporting the story of what is going on and what is being found.

In a narrative's creation, editors work with managers to make explicit what a business needs to know, and how it is going to get it.

The editor's job is questions and answers all the way down, and armed with the workplace responses to their probes for knowledge, they work with decision-makers to decide how reports and questions should be presented for easiest consumption by their target audiences and knowledge creators.

As everybody's original writing contains errors they can't see, the editor's job is to enforce sense in communications, often rewriting and using simple, precise language to bring focus, remove verbosity, unhelpful jargon and ambiguity.

The narrative learning process

Ask the narrative learning question (see 1 on diagram)

A manager "commissions" a question to be asked of the workplace by an editor, whose job is to distribute it and help them get its answer.

The editor uses vocabulary the learners can understand to support their ability to contribute successfully towards the desired outcome.

Clear learning outcome statements not only direct the workforce, but are also meant to help individual learners.

The editor guides responses by describing why the question is being asked, precisely what needs to be known, and the deadline by which submissions are required.

Get the question out (2)

Once framed, the question is posted to the wiki, web page or channel into which those answering it are to deliver their responses.

To circumvent non-response, it will most likely also be circulated by email with a link to the destination in which responses are to be captured.

Manage responses (3)

As contributions come in, where posts are contributed on the same wiki page by two or

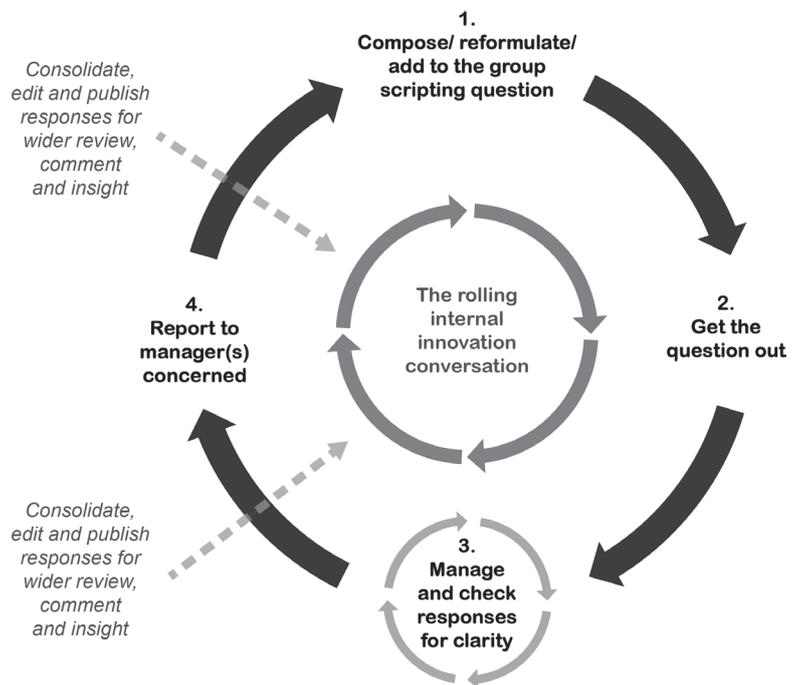


Figure 3:
The narrative learning process

more contributors, comments on preceding responses may be made by those submitting later to take advantage of the social, shared learning nature of the medium.

This is beneficial, as interplay between contributors exposes to its audience who knows what and who knows whom, growing the knowledge of where expertise lies in the business.

The editor sorts and compiles responses, and may aggregate individual submissions to make sense of what is contributed.

As I wrote in *Some rules for effective workplace wiki publishing* (<http://bit.ly/1T7A54P>), we can, however, predict that without proper review, guidance, or checking, not all contributors will be as diligent in the consistency with which they tag, reference and index their own contributions.

Yet, effective codification, indexing and search are critically important to the modern learning experience. They remove unnecessary distraction for readers to improve continuity of thought and deepen attention and understanding.

Sense has to be made if users are to be kept engaged.

At 4, editors summarise the responses and review them with the commissioning manager to ensure their satisfaction that their question has been answered.

They then post their summaries for scrutiny by the audience, inviting comment and soliciting, where appropriate, answers to other questions arising.

The wrap-up

In a world in which every business is now a digital business, one of the bigger challenges is to create workplace cultures that can continue to cultivate new capabilities and new concepts.

Such workplaces put employees at the centre of a new vision that treats learning as a continuous process, not an episodic event, and as a company-wide responsibility, not one confined to the human resources department alone.

People in highly competitive fields want to go to work feeling and knowing that they're doing something for a purpose. Their motivation can't just be about the extrinsic drive of the pay cheque because talented people could pick that up in any number of different places.

Continuous learning cultures dedicate resources, set expectations and align corporate culture with the goal of enabling employees to get the learning they need, when they need it, throughout their careers.

Millennials and other young employees who have grown up in this self-directed learning environment now expect it as part of their working lives, and will move elsewhere if employers fail to provide it.

As such, executives investing time on efforts to develop talent more rapidly throughout their organisations may find that they begin to attract all the talent they can possibly handle, as word spreads that their organisation is committed to developing its own talent more effectively than other businesses.

Leaders at knowledge-first, talent-driven companies know this, and will be as focused on getting the best return on talent as they are on strategy and finance, making talent considerations an integral part of every major strategic decision.

And such a firm would have little issue with retaining talent; after all, why would anyone leave an institution that was helping them to develop faster than they could anywhere else?

Narrative learning is the most naturally adopted collaborative workplace learning solution of all

In the coming years, organisations that take the lead will be those building open learning cultures, in which better rounded, learning workers are increasingly empowered to look across traditional departmental silos to suggest and discover innovations that improve both customers' journeys and the organisational capacities needed to deliver them.

In such organisations, the responsible information officer's ability to manage mission-critical learning may now prove one of the most potent emerging differentiators in driving a business's competitive knowledge creation, transformation, advantage and responsiveness to change.

Yet, if only on the basis of time and attainable focus, not all workplace leaders will be equally equipped to do this.

For most, the publishing know-how it entails may also not be core business, and if it is not in their background, there may therefore be some uncertainty even about the skills required.

In any highly functioning community's development, however, effectively acquired and disseminated knowledge is the route to all breakthrough.

And, the more workplace knowledge becomes fragmented by change with people working off site and remotely, the more important will become the use of workplace social technologies in capturing, containing and distributing organisational learning by turning to advantage the knowledge that exists.

Certainly – as long as human beings remain a key feature of the workplace mix – those best able over the long term to organise, plan, articulate and develop the knowledge their organisations contain, keeping it simple by communicating it clearly via both recognised, proven and emerging publishing models, would appear to stand the best chance of engaging the workplace in making the journey of perpetual digital transformation an enduring success.

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Narrative learning: my credentials

Through narrative learning, I am motivated to implement what I know, have studied and experienced in socially-driven workplace learning to build better, more knowledge-productive and more satisfying places in which to work.

In this, my skills are almost certainly scarce, and as, to the best of my knowledge, the creator of narrative learning, I believe myself possibly uniquely qualified at present to take on this work, at least in Sydney.

For one, I am a national newspaper-grade sub-editor and former employee at the Australian Financial Review newspaper group at Fairfax Media in Sydney. That is, in publishing, I am a professional sense-maker. (This is not to suggest I'd discourage others from doing this; quite the contrary, as the more there are of us, the more seriously this will be taken as a necessary future workplace discipline.)

Most likely, more pertinently for most readers here, I have an MBA (Technology) from the University of New South Wales in Sydney, whose forward-looking focus is on creating the organisations of the future, through the management of organisational strategy, knowledge innovation, new product development, sustainability, people, culture and change, as driven by technology.

I also have first-hand experience of the collaborative workplace publishing practices of which I write. In 2013, I worked on documentation for a major software development at the Commonwealth Bank of Australia, using collaborative workplace social technologies, from which much of the hands-on learning expressed here has come.

Please read the related LinkedIn post, based on that experience, *Some rules for effective workplace wiki publishing* (<http://bit.ly/1T7A54P>).

Narrative learning is deeply strategic and concerned with preparing an organisation and its intellectual resources for its future, its digital transformation and its adaptability to change.

To this end, I have translated my most important MBA study materials into a workbook comprising over 10,000 questions. Just in case anyone should run out of things to ask within their organisations, these questions are ready to be adapted and applied within businesses making determinations about risk, innovation and new product development, sustainability and organisational development for agility and adaptability.

I first got excited about the scope for collaborative innovation in 2006 on reading the work of then Harvard Business School professor Andrew McAfee on the potential of "Enterprise 2.0." McAfee's insight was

that the traditional barriers to innovation result when people with ideas are hindered by distance or hierarchy, or simply by not knowing who is whom, who is qualified, interested or accomplished in what, or even that each other exists.

Yet through blogs and wikis, McAfee and his supporters proposed, an organisation could open up and enable those within to identify and reach each other and thereby capitalise on the specialised sum of personal knowledge of those within the firm, wherever it could be found. And they could be effective in capturing precisely the emergent organisational learning that results from change.

Through that reading, my skills and subsequent study, I discovered a passion for documenting and transforming knowledge to drive organisational learning, using the best tools ever invented for the purpose.

As a director of the award-winning Shiro Architects, I have also acquired an innate interest in how the "knowledge architecture" of faster learning organisations will inevitably transform their workplace strategies, behaviours and knowledge communities.

On the back of researching and publishing a piece entitled, *The evolution of workplace strategy into a discipline of FM* (<http://bit.ly/2n8fR39>), for Australia's *Facility Management* magazine, I was invited to chair an expert panel session addressing the evolving workplace at the Total Facilities Conference at Darling Harbour, Sydney, in March 2017 (<http://bit.ly/2tD7ps7>).

As knowledge productivity will likely come to feature more prominently as a concern in office environments, better, more scientific processes will emerge for evolving their design in alignment with the knowledge and needs of tenants and their teams.

As the workplace itself becomes increasingly virtual and remote, this must necessarily centre on the evolving design of the work the organisation must execute, the knowledge it must articulate and capture, and the tools it uses to continue to do so.

This means, as its impacts will inevitably be felt in both physical and virtual dimensions, however the organisation of commercial community is exercised, organisational learning, development and transformation will become every bit as important in the businesses owning and operating commercial property as in all others occupying it.

Please contact me at either at graham@shiroarchitects.com, via [@cloudcitizen](https://twitter.com/cloudcitizen) at Twitter or LinkedIn ([grahamlauren](https://www.linkedin.com/in/grahamlauren)) if you'd like to know more, or call direct on 61 + (0) 416 171724.