

ENDLESS KNOTS I

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[Inside Social Networks](#)

Spring 2005 New England KM Cluster meeting

A blog-ish report

At seven on this frigid Boston morning and with gloves on, I'm trying to punch a long telephone number into my Blackberry in time for a teleconference about online facilitation with people an ocean away. My driver is kind to drop me right by IBM's Research Building (in Cambridge near MIT); I pierce through the icy air, pontificating into my mouthpiece, then settle on the back of a chair in the lobby, half-standing for the rest of the call as I watch people arrive for the "Inside Social Networks" conference. Some look familiar.

The in-person meeting is in a windowless conference room with two large screens, seating maybe 50 people at tables set in kindergarten squares of four. Podium to the left; tables for panel speakers across the front; on the wall behind, big white paper for the graphic facilitator. Someone is videotaping the whole thing.

Pre-meeting buzz comes from people making links. The group threads back along a string of dot-coms through Lotus and then back to Digital, 20 years ago the dominant computer technology player in the world (and the largest employer in the area, thus the many ex-Digits here). There are a few stars and an eerie number of the workless, aka consultants.

There already are two people at our table when we sit down. The knowledge-management director from a remarkably long-lived networking company (the technology kind) greets my driver enthusiastically, says he met both of us at an Open Text event five years ago (nope, I wasn't there). The consultant at our table says she's been to our house for a book party. We save a seat for a colleague from the west coast whom we've met the night before for dinner. I set up my laptop to take notes.

"We're asking everyone to put away their laptops," says the host. I don't as I'm taking notes for this report.

"Nothing is for attribution." We can talk about what is discussed in the session, the host says, but we can't identify who says it. This puts a bit of a crimp in my report.

"How many people have used LinkedIn?" The host shifts to the topic. Most have used the online social networking site that bills itself as a business aid. "How many have gotten anything out of it?" Two raise their hands. Polling continues until it comes out that most people in the room, in this room of online aficionados, expect to make their new connections face-to-face.

The not-for-attribution keynote speaker, whose bio is on the [public site](#) takes the microphone, dips his head, and starts talking as his slides, which he offers to send to those who want them, go up on the screens.

Knowledge management is in its mid-life crisis, he says. Knowledge, data and information are integrating into "content management". Some organizations have combined knowledge and learning including the World Bank. We're moving toward the next big thing—"knowledge objects" that combine knowledge creation, personal information and KM. But the reality is that you don't even know where to keep your simplest information like contacts...On your cell? Your PC? Your PDA?

The Information Work Productivity Council, a consortium of companies, sponsored research done by our speaker. They surveyed 500+ Americans working in IT to see

how people perceived the problem of integrating all this disparate information. Some teasers he shares from the companies in the study:

- Intel does 18k telecons and 900 videocons each week. They've combined their productivity, KM, and collaboration groups (this is new; last I checked, May '03, they were still disparate efforts there). Intel differentiates people who travel a lot from those who don't, whom they call "cube captains".
- Cisco has a program called "Change the Way We Work."
- BT has "AdvisorSpace," all-inclusive online spaces for those who work in their call centres around the world.
- PriceWaterhouseCoopers has a program called "connected thinking," with recommended behaviours for people to follow.

The study found:

- People use technology "3hrs 14mins/day" (yikes, my number is scarily higher)
- Of that, email occupies 45% of their time, 1.58 hrs
- People's coping strategies are not particularly sophisticated
 - For example, "check your email frequently to manage volume"

Advice from study:

- Use as few devices as possible (good one)
- Learn one piece of software only and learn to use it really well (really good one)
- Paper still useful; lists help; get instruction in searching (here, here!)

Next, he throws out the red meat we're all secretly waiting for. (Remember, this is about "social networks".) Here's his current hit list of cool technology that I'm passing along without review:

- For organizing web information, [Onfolio](#)
- For searching your own files, [X1](#) and desktop [Google](#)
- As a challenge to Outlook, Chandler, under development from [Mozilla](#), (yes! I use Firefox, their browser, and love it)
- For "people who love information display", [TheBrain](#) (network display a la Inxight without the complex plumbing underneath).
- Haystack project at MIT, which I have no idea what it does.

What technologies doesn't this speaker like? Blogging (uh-oh), wikis, and things in general that don't use keys (like tablet PCs).

Then he takes a little foray deep into the kinds of projects we work on. He mentions a study he did (I'm losing track of studies; maybe this is the same one as above) of information and social networking behaviours of high performers (so identified by their supervisors). They interviewed them and did social network analysis on them:

- These "assiduous networkers" (his term) had more contacts than others in their organizations, including with new people
- They're sought out by others
- They are very reciprocal about networking, taking time to send information in response to receiving it, etc.
- They are "big experiential learners"
- They regard information they get from other people as more important than what they get from databases

A telling statistic: They asked these people how much help they get from their organizations in managing their information: Only 4% (four percent) said "a lot". Finally, the speaker credits Gordon David, at University of Minnesota in the US (also the home of Gerlach and Hine, the two great networking theorists of the late 1960s-early 1970s), as the godfather of information management in academia.

The short Q&A, dominated by someone with some sort of problem that I can't follow, provokes no taking of notes.

During the break, everyone is close by the coffee, reading one another's name tags. "You're famous," says a woman who looks as if she might be. "What are you doing here?" We sidle over to the keynoter, whom we've met before, to commiserate about how hard publishing is. As we talk, I think about how wonderful life might be as a knitting shop owner...and then I ask him for his editor's name.

Next, "Social Context - Team Dynamics: Building Synergy Out Of Diversity", the first three anonymous panellists listed on the public web page. I notice my spellcheck doesn't like the use of "out of" in the title; it wants it to be "from". I wonder who wrote it, picture all the meetings and emails and telecons that went into developing the agenda, and how no one probably anticipated someone like me sitting here, typing away, taking notes to pass along to you.

Each speaker will make a few remarks to spark a conversation; it's not meant to be a Q&A, our host says.

The not-for-attribution professor from a prestigious Boston college specializes in social network analysis:

- Where people's ties are embedded, meaning they have links to multiple nodes, they last longer, and are less likely to dissolve over time.
- Proximity is still a chief determinant of communication frequency (He shows the graphic of the Tom Allen data from the 70s; I press him for current references in the non-Q&A later; he shrugs. "It's true but I can't cite references for you.")
- Rotate people to build networks (hmmm, where have I heard that before?)
- Cross-staff projects (or this?)
- Reward instead of punish for networking (finally).

Second panellist, a researcher in social network analysis and collaboration, whose facility is hosting the event, has a slide with pictures of people communicating instead of bullet points. She talks about three principal qualities that sustain relationships:

- Access, meaning that people are available, can be reached
- Awareness, meaning that people pay attention to what's going on, sense their environments; and
- Trust (just can't get away from it.)

She doesn't believe people can establish trust without face-to-face. (Major tongue-biting situation ensues).

Third panellist, a KM blogger, who's been online for many years, begins by showing us a greeting card. Even Hallmark is catching on, she says. "It's not who you know," it says on the front. Open it up: "It's who knows you." She talks about the connections that lead her to this room, citing links among those she'd known before, including us (we'd met 20 years ago at Digital). She teaches us the word *cynefin*, Welsh for "place of my many belongings," says it's a more accurate description of the many places where our identities reside.

"Fisherman are always tending to their nets," she says, stressing the importance of nurture in networks. She suggests managing your network with an Action Plan, where relationships are catalogued for "increase" or "decrease". Look here for [someone remarkably like her](#).

And then people start talking about terrible things, like www.Flamewarriors.com, worth-looking at, about all the horrid behaviours that come out in online communities; a scary book on a stalker who terrorized one of the first online communities; and then comes the corker, when someone lets slip that some of the social networking companies are selling their databases. Everyone gasps.

The conversation continues, with people throwing in random connections, like www.Jigsaw.com - "put one contact in, get two out" - eventually leading to a familiar one: What's the difference between networks and communities? My driver offers the analogy of a network to a system, and there is much nodding of heads.

Time for lunch: soggy sandwiches in paper lunchboxes. I fixate on the orange on the next table; I got an apple instead which it feels too cold to eat.

It's one o'clock, time for the technology panel. I feel really stupid by now with my laptop. Everyone else has put theirs away. Finally so do I and now I'm taking notes on the handout that has everyone's presentations in it. The first panel guy looks distractingly like someone else I know only I can't remember who so most of the time he's talking I'm thinking about that person not him.

He tells a dot-com-era story about never knowing where good technology will end up, i.e. don't write off social networking technology just because its current instantiation might be off/trivial/without-a-business-model/etc. These are not his words precisely but he illustrates his thinking with the story of a kid in the late-90s who wanted investment to develop a "binge-o-matic", technology for college students to analyze their binge drinking. That technology eventually ended up in pharma serving a monitoring function in labs.

He's a good story teller, drops a lot of credentials into his tale, and gets my attention with a nod to his in-laws. I write down these words: "manage structure and permissions very simply" and "ease of contribution and consumption."

The next fellow pulls me right in with his mantra: "We always get the technology right and the sociology wrong." He's a recovering dot-com

technologist now working on "social physics" at Harvard. He's earnest, soft-spoken, humble, outrageously intelligent, and says things in that off-hand way where you feel like you ought to know precisely what he's about but, alas, you have no clue. He references "foafnets", which I never get the hang of, and "folksonomies," which I eventually decode as an alternative to "taxonomies," only these come together because of us folks, how we naturally group things.

He tells his own networking story of tracking down a luminary in the social networking business world, as if this person's networks were light-years away from his. Wait. I know the person he's talking about. He's the guy who's been asking us for access to our database for 15 years. That guy. Whew. Chief scientist of the chief social networking company. You just never know.

The last speaker is one of the CIOs of a very large technology company. He shows a screen shot of its [insert primary color that is not red or green] Pages, a visually appealing directory of people's expertise. He's soft-spoken, too. I hear him best when he asks why people like me aren't willing to post the names of all the people we know on social networking sites. What is so precious that I'm trying to protect? He gives me pause of course. Why am I so precious about my network? When I want to help someone, I throw open the doors. I think I just don't want anyone coming in uninvited—or even looking at it for that matter.

Another break. I end up defending myself to the CIO but I think I sound stupid.

By the time I get back, I've missed the opening presentation, which my driver tells me is by an architect who's just started working on the intersection of virtual and physical spaces. The only thing I hear him say is that face-to-face environments are very important.

Next comes an obviously MIT brilliant guy with an .mpeg about the spread of an innovation, he says, though I, for one, can't understand what his movie is showing, which thingie that's moving across his screen is people, which is adoption of the idea, etc. But it looks cool and he's excited to show it.

The last guy, [Bill Ives](#), (having seen an excerpt from this report on [Wayne Yang's blog](#), Eight Diagrams, has OK'd use of his name here), is a dedicated blogger, who wins us over with his opening confession. He's seriously technologically inept, as in he doesn't know how to retrieve his voicemail on his landline. But he knows blogs.

What do blogs bring organisations? He's interviewed people in business, NGOs large and small, entrepreneurs, individuals, and has found that everyone says the same thing: When I need to know something, I don't go to the enterprise KM system. I go to the smartest person I know. And those people are blogging all over organisations.

He gets my best-of-show award for this single comment: his blog is his "personal knowledge management system." He begins with a simple post, to which he can add links to documents, to other URLs, to discussions, to anything, all in context, dated, and easy to search. (He's designed his feeds from other blogs to bypass Outlook and go directly into his blog.)

He mentions that the "Forrester analysts," those fine folks at MIT who brought us system dynamics modelling, have started blogs, that in Kenya, there are group blogs; and, since it's January, there are blogs for the rest of us, "mind over platter" and "thinking thin".

During the week, he blogs about Portals and KM; on the weekends, it's art and cooking. The last words in the handout, his, are a variation on the greeting card that our old friend from Digital showed this morning: "You are who links to you," the caption on the network map of his blog.

The wrap-up session is mercifully short, focused around what we're all going to do next. People say some wonderful things, none of which I write down, but I do remember mine: I say I'm taking my name off the social networking site and...I'm going to start a blog, of which this is the waaay toooo lonnggg prototype.

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