



# **STORYTELLING AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT: WHAT'S THE STORY SO FAR?**

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## **ABSTRACT**

One of the realities of knowledge management is that individuals, teams and organisations are constantly searching for better ways to share their knowledge. Could the use of stories and storytelling help in this search? This article reviews the key ideas associated with the concept of stories and the use of storytelling as a tool for knowledge-sharing in a corporate environment. The authors explore the use of an existing three-part model for storytelling, as well as the benefits to be obtained from the use of storytelling. An implementation plan is presented to help guide individuals and organisations that are planning to use stories and storytelling as part of a knowledge-sharing strategy.

## **1 INTRODUCTION**

Stories and storytelling have been with us since the beginning of human existence – in one sense stories and storytelling help to define our humanity. For thousands of years, as man evolved, stories were used to pass on what wisdom and knowledge had been accumulated. In early times, storytelling was used to explain significant and often frightening natural events, and special types of stories were written about heroes and gods and were used to bind individuals to common belief systems and to explain natural phenomena (e.g. myths). Moral tales conveyed the first codes or laws that ensured the

harmony, co-operation, and ultimate success of early human populations. Since prehistory, stories have taken many forms, from written texts (such as the Bible) to forms of story depicted through pictures (rock painting and other forms) and tapestry (such as the famous Bayeux tapestry). Perhaps the oldest forms of story, and one that continues today, is the oral tradition, passing on wisdom, knowledge, and culture through the spoken word.

In the modern world in which we live stories have taken on a new meaning: a way of communicating not only in the traditional domestic environment but in the workplace as well. According to McLellan (2002)

Stories, including narratives, myths, and fables, constitute a uniquely powerful currency in human relationships. Stories speak to both parts of the human mind – its reason and emotion. Stories provide a tool for articulating and focusing vision. Stories provide a medium of communication, both internally within an organisation and externally to customers, potential customers, business partners, business rivals, investors, and others.

As part of this interest in stories in the workplace, Boyce (1995:107) says ‘the significance of story and storytelling is apparent when one reviews the current body of published research’, and Reamy (2002) says that since storytelling represents a ‘significant form of knowledge’, knowledge management (KM) practitioners need to understand how it (storytelling) is being used in the enterprise. This article will explore the context in which stories can be used in a corporate setting, with specific reference to the use of stories as a tool for knowledge-sharing. The article concludes with a suggested implementation plan for those considering the use of storytelling to support a KM strategy.

## **2 WHAT ARE STORIES?**

The oldest stories told are myths, legends, and folktales. Every culture has its own set of tales and passes it on from generation to generation by word of mouth. The purpose of these stories was varied and complex, and included stories concerning the creation of the earth and the cosmos, the creation of humans, their trials and death, moral lessons, religion, and tales told purely for entertainment. Swap, Leonard, Shield and Abrams (2001:110) describe stories as ‘powerful conveyors of meaning and tacit knowledge.’ Boje, Luhman and Baack (1999:342) trace the history of the development of studies of stories and storytelling from the 1970s and they offer this definition: ‘A story describes a sequence of actions and experiences done or undergone by a certain number of people, whether real or imaginary.’ This idea is similar to that of Hansen and Kahnwieler (1993:1392) in their comprehensive overview

of related research from 1978 to 1991. Hansen and Kahnweiler (1993:1392) say that stories ‘happen naturally’ and ‘enjoy widespread acceptance as a means of communication’. They possess a setting, a cast of characters and a plot that resolves some sort of crisis. A similar view comes from Hannabuss (2000:411) who sees stories as following a ‘coherent narrative pattern’ that is broadly chronological and reflects a cause-and-effect logic.

Orton (2002) identifies two schools of narrative theory that offer alternative definitions of ‘story’ these being Story–Feature: goal-directed behaviour, a series of causal changes, descriptions that explicate sequential elements and Structural–Affect: goal meaningful to the audience, theme of significance to the audience, empathy for the protagonists, suspense, curiosity or surprise for the audience. Orton’s view is based on his interpretation of the two main types of story structure, but his view is not supported by Reamy (2002) who looks at the following possible schema for stories, clearly supporting only the Story–Feature approach. For Reamy five stages of equilibrium make up a story: equilibrium, disruption, recognition, effort to restore and results of efforts. Alternatively this is seen as introduction, explanation, initiating event, emotional response, complicating actions, outcome, reaction to the outcome.

Boyce (1996:6) provides a comprehensive review of writings about storytelling in organisations. He quotes Wilkins and Martin (1979) who identified three functions or types of organisational story and legend: generating commitment, making sense of the organisation and control. This is somewhat different from Kaye and Jacobson (1999:46) who see stories fall into the following categories: personal histories; events and circumstances; future possibilities. More recently O’Connor (2002:37) conducted research in a high-technology start-up environment. She classifies narratives in the environment explored into three types: Personal (founding and vision stories), Generic (marketing and strategy stories) and Situational (historical and conventional stories). Christie and Mhlophe (cited in Nussbaum & Lessem 1996:122) bring an African perspective and seek to classify stories into different types, using a four-worlds model, using the four points of the compass to highlight cultural differences associated with each ‘world’. For yet another perspective, Shaw, Brown and Bromiley (1998:42) discuss the use of stories at 3M (the US-based company) in the strategic planning function to gain a shared understanding and to encourage teamwork. They say a good story defines relationships, a sequence of events, cause and effect, and a priority among items: these elements will be remembered as a complex whole.

What can be learned from these various classification systems of stories offered by the authors included above? It seems there is no single common agreement as to the type of stories that exist. Any classification system should however take into account two key factors: the context or environment in

which the stories are created and told (individual, team and organisational setting); the focus or purpose for which the stories are told (at the level of the individual, team and organisation). In the next section of this article such an environment will be explored further.

### 3 STORYTELLING IN A CORPORATE ENVIRONMENT

Sole (2002) looks at three building blocks for stories in a corporate setting. This three-part model will be used in this and later sections of this article:

- *Story-crafting*: design of the story, including level of complexity, relevance.
- *Storytelling*: who tells the story, whether it is oral or recorded, using different type of media formats.
- *Story-listening*: monitor the reception, use the feedback for design and content of future stories

Each of the three elements of this model will now be explored in more detail.

#### 3.1 THE STORY

In the literature search conducted, the Sole model was the one that was found to be structured in such a way so as to be readily implemented by an organisation seeking to introduce storytelling. Other authors (Boje 1991:342; Hattersley 1997:3; Reamy 2002) do not offer such a structured approach allowing for easy implementation. Hence, the three-part Sole model has been adopted for this article and it is worth spending time to understand the first component: the story itself. The story needs to be crafted or created. It needs to be captured. It needs to be told. Looking at story-crafting, Hattersley (1997:3) says effective narratives have had the same structural characteristics throughout history, and can be treated as components of three strategies: opening, building, closing:

- *Opening strategies*: getting their attention. Start in the middle (avoid a long lead up); begin with a vivid, concrete image (memorable words or pictures) with your audience inside; put the familiar in a new light (new perception of an old problem).
- *Building strategies*: hold their attention. Convey a clear sense of direction (identify the issues, tell them what you will cover, important issues); overcome obstacles (explain challenges involved); maintain suspense: do not deliver the ending too soon. Portray character in action: audiences identify more with people than with abstract ideas. Make the narrative about an individual or group.

- *Concluding strategies*, driving home the point. Respect the audience's expectations about timing, not too short, not too long, stick to time committed. Draw the lesson or moral (do not simply summarise but draw out the lesson). Point to the next steps (provide a call to action).

Looking at story capture, Roth and Kleiner (1997:173) say that frustration exists in many organisations because managers have few tools with which to capture institutional experience and disseminate its lessons. They propose the 'learning history' which is a written narrative of a company's recent set of critical episodes, from 20 to 100 pages, captured in two columns: right-hand column carries events described by those who took part in them, left-hand column carries analysis and commentary by learning historians. Once completed it is used as a basis for group discussion by those involved and those who can learn from it. It is a 'jointly-told tale' based on community storytelling. Why do learning histories work? Roth and Kleiner (1997:175), based on their extensive research, claim they build trust, raise issues through anonymity of inputs, and assist with transferring knowledge.

Having explored the crafting of the story, attention is now turned to the second element of the three-part Sole model.

### **3.2 THE TELLER AND THE TELLING**

Having crafted and captured the story (following whichever is the preferred of the alternative approaches offered in the previous section), the next step is to develop an understanding of the teller (or tellers of a jointly-told story) and the telling of the story. Several authors have very specific views as to how stories can be told in a corporate environment: Denning (2000:XV) is a great enthusiast for the use of storytelling: he sees this as a natural, easy, entertaining, energising activity, one that anyone can turn his or her hand to; Shaw *et al.* (1998:42) discuss what a good storyteller needs to do: set the stage (define the current situation in a coherent manner), introduce the dramatic conflict (what is the main challenge involved), and reach resolution in a satisfying and convincing manner. Kaye and Jacobson (1999:44) describe storytelling as a highly effective instructional tool as it enables people to understand things in meaningful and relevant ways: 'as a collective act, storytelling encourages people share a broader understanding of things ... that might not otherwise be achieved'. They describe the typical sequence in storytelling as being the story: someone tells it, someone (or group) listens; the understanding: listeners and narrators gain depth of understanding; the shared meaning: groups use shared understanding as a metaphor and a kind of shorthand for wider understanding. Kaye and Jacobson (1999:44) place heavy emphasis on the collective nature of storytelling and say that storytelling opportunities can happen in three ways: spontaneous (casual, opportunistic

occasions for storytelling), existing (regular, ongoing occurrences during which storytelling can happen), deliberate (planned opportunities for exchanging and sharing stories with the goal of organisational learning).

Some researchers have begun to investigate how to use technology to leverage storytelling. Dorner, Grimm and Abawi (2002:45) look at digital storytelling. Davenport, Agamanolis, Barry, Bradley and Brooks (2000:456) look at *Very distributed storytelling* (where the stories are told other than on a face-to-face basis, using a variety of information technology methods), while Reamy (2002) debates on how we should capture stories, and whether face-to-face is more powerful and has greater impact than virtual stories (those told where the teller and the listener are not present together in the same physical space, but rather one connected by a number of different media types), concluding that face-to-face is not necessarily more powerful as virtual delivery than as delivery mechanism.

In summary, there is no particular restriction on who can tell a story: the skills of the storyteller are widespread, even if they can be enhanced through training and practice. Storytelling can happen in a number of ways: one-to-one, to small or large groups, in a single venue or with the assistance of technology over great distances. The broadest definition of storytelling would also encompass any means at the storyteller's disposal to tell the story: in written form, orally or even using a variety of electronic media. Naturally the method of telling the story will vary according to a number of factors, including the nature of the story, the teller and the listener.

The next section will look at the listener as the third element of the Sole storytelling model.

### **3.3 THE LISTENER**

In the broadest sense of storytelling, the 'listener' may be defined as real or present (in the same physical and temporal space) or virtual (in the sense of not being present, not in the same physical and temporal space, rather displaced by time and/or space). The 'listener' may also enjoy receiving the story via a variety of media: single (for example, oral) or multimedia (for example, animated over the Internet) means. Storytelling is certainly a collaborative activity, in the sense that at least two parties must be involved (the teller and the listener). At times the number of tellers may rise dramatically (such as in the use of industrial theatre to carry a particular story, where actors play out the roles of characters portrayed in the narrative); at other times the storyteller may be on his or her own but face a potentially larger group of listeners (such as at a large venue used for a corporate gathering).

Building on the idea of the listener's role being key, and the collaborative aspect of storytelling, Denning (2001:50), for one, says 'one is never entirely sure what the audience's reaction to a story will be because so much depends on what the listeners themselves bring to it'. It is critical to understand the nature of the audience in terms of the ability to understand and interpret the story, to identify with the characters portrayed, to, in a sense, find the story credible. As highlighted by Sole (2002) in her model, the reaction of the audience is key. Not only will this help the teller to gauge the reception of the story but will aid in the retelling of the story on a future occasion as well as in changes to the construction of the current and other future stories. How this feedback is obtained is little discussed in the literature, but can obviously include some of the more recognised techniques such as individual and group discussion (largely informal in nature), by written feedback (using either printed or electronic data gathering techniques) or by observation of body language using direct, visible or indirect means). This feedback activity once again emphasises the essentially collaborative nature of storytelling: without the feedback mechanism in place there will be little hard proof that knowledge-sharing has taken place.

This section of the article completes a review of the three elements of the Sole model. The next section will explore the benefits of storytelling, specifically in a corporate environment.

## **4 BENEFITS OF STORYTELLING**

Although claims have been made by a number of authors as to the benefits of storytelling in general (for example Denning 2001:51; Sole & Wilson, 2002; Reamy 2002), it is worth structuring the potential benefits in line with the three-level structure of the corporate environment: one that focuses on the individual, team and corporate entity. This avoids any sense of organisation (functional, geographical or other structural) limitations, whilst helping to identify the parties that stand to gain from the benefits of storytelling.

### **4.1 BENEFITS TO THE INDIVIDUAL**

The benefits to the individual can be found both in the giving and the receiving, both as a storyteller and as a story listener. As a storyteller the individual stands to benefit in terms of personal satisfaction (feeling of self-esteem), recognition (the story itself is a valuable contribution), belonging (telling the story helps in relationship-building). In summary, the individual through storytelling can help not only in creating and sharing knowledge but also can be empowered as part of the broader team or organisation (Denning 2000:51; Sole & Wilson, 2002; Reamy 2002).

One example of support for these ideas comes from Sole and Wilson (2002) when they say, ‘stories can be a very powerful way to represent and convey complex, multi-dimensional ideas. Well designed, well-told stories can convey both information and emotion, both the explicit and the tacit, both the core and the context.’ Further support for the benefits of storytelling to the individual comes from Denning (2000:XV) who provides a list of powerful benefits: stories can enhance and change perceptions, are easy to remember; are inherently non-adversarial; they engage our feelings. In terms of the way people learn, Swap *et al.* (2001:106) ask why stories are powerful and offer the following explanation based on cognitive learning mechanisms: the availability heuristic: stories make events more top-of-mind; elaboration: use words and images to create vivid means of remembering; episodic memory: based on direct experience. It is not within the scope of this article to explore the issues surrounding how people learn, but clearly the ease with which stories can be recalled, and the learnt lessons applied, makes them a potentially powerful knowledge-sharing tool for the individual.

#### **4.2 BENEFITS TO THE TEAM**

Moving from the level of the individual to the team immediately brings on the realm of teamwork and collaboration. Just as in the case of the individual, the team can be both teller and listener. In the telling role, both the creation of the stories told as well as the telling activity itself could be team-based activities. Roth and Kleiner (1997:173) emphasise this ‘jointly told tale’ aspect of storytelling in their learning history approach. Here both the development of the story and the lessons to be learned, that is, the knowledge gained, take place as a team-based activity. There is little doubt that the storytelling circle idea is one that can also complement the approach of building and sustaining Communities of Practice (Wenger, McDermott & Snyder 2002:188). Providing a time and place for the creation and telling of stories can go a long way toward building a sense of community, shared values and common interest.

A further example from the literature of the team-based benefits comes from Sole and Wilson (2002) who say stories may be particularly useful in a number of contexts, namely initiating a new idea (in a team setting), socialising new members (team building), mending relationships (within and between teams), sharing wisdom (within and between teams).

The review of benefits will now focus on the level of the organisation as a whole.

### 4.3 BENEFITS TO THE ORGANISATION

If the value of storytelling is to be maximised then surely the benefits must not only be felt at the level of the individual and/or the team, but also the link to achievement of corporate objectives which is too tempting a prospect to miss. As outlined earlier in this article, a number of authors have identified a wide variety of reasons why storytelling should have a place in the organisation's portfolio of effective management techniques. Specifically, the potential for knowledge-creation and transfer (sharing) is widely claimed, especially in assisting with the difficult task of creating and sharing tacit knowledge.

There are many examples of the use of stories at the organisation level reported in the literature, amongst others at Denmark's *Novozymes*, who use stories for strategy communication (Leading Danish company enjoys telling tales 2002), and at the Singapore Institute of Management with IBM (SIM and IBM establish innovative strategy centre 2002). Brown and Duguid (2000:77) tell the story of the Xerox copier repairmen. 'The constant storytelling about problems and solutions, about disasters and triumphs over breakfast, lunch and coffee serves a number of overlapping purposes. 'Stories are good at presenting things sequentially, causally, the better to understand what happened and why.' Stories help to develop a common outlook, foster collaboration. War stories give the representatives a shared framework for interpretation that allows them to collaborate even if formal processes assume they are working independently.

Gill (2001) says 'stories also provide an aid to remembering knowledge that is shared' and that 'the greatest benefit of using storytelling in Knowledge Management (KM) may come from its ability to capture tacit knowledge ... [which] is implicit in the minds of people, many of whom literally don't know how much their experience has taught them.' Gill (2001) quotes the example of a story created by IBM Global Services for a UK retail customer, where a dropped grocery bag incident was turned into a story and was deliberately shared at a water-cooler. Two days later the story had reached 600 listening posts around the organisation, in six countries and three languages.

For more on the benefits to organisations, Stewart (1998:165) discusses the use of storytelling in a number of cases, including: at Fortune itself; at Eskom with a Zulu *imbizo* [*imbizo* is isiZulu word for a gathering with an unmediated exchange of views]; the Xerox copier repair men example, in so doing naming the Eureka database (of repairmen stories) which is credited with US\$100 million in savings; at IBM for winning global accounts through making tacit knowledge explicit and shared.

Finally, if more proof is needed concerning the benefits of corporate

storytelling at the organisation level, Boyce (1996:17) identifies a number of applications of shared storytelling including: expressing the organisational experience of members or clients; confirming the shared experiences and shared meaning of members and groups within the organisation; orientation and socialisation of new members; co-creating vision and strategy.

Thus concludes the review of a sample of the benefits of storytelling at the three levels examined: the individual, the team and the organisation. The next section looks specifically at the KM context.

## 5 STORYTELLING AND KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT

Brown and Duguid (1998:90) discuss the concept of 'core competency' for firms: it is both 'know-what', explicit knowledge and the more elusive 'know-how', the 'particular ability to put know-what into practice.' Know-what circulates with ease, know-how is embedded usually in collective work practice. This can be hard to spread, benchmark or change. Brown and Duguid call tacit knowledge (know-how) dispositional, only revealed in practice and in communities. It is difficult to move the know-what without the know-how, and they give an example of best practices at Hewlett-Packard that did not travel well. It is against this background of know-how/know-what that this article now turns to the issue of storytelling in a KM context.

The modern organisation can be seen as being made up of individuals who act together as teams to achieve corporate goals. One of the key challenges is how to obtain maximum performance from these teams, in particular where those teams' performance rests on their ability to *leverage* what they know. Perhaps the best-known way of interpreting this opportunity for performance through teamwork is in the implementation of the Community of Practice (Wenger *et al.* 2002:206). Several examples have already been quoted in this article (Roth and Kleiner 1997; Shaw *et al.* 1998; Lawrence 2002) on the collaborative aspect of storytelling. Further evidence comes from Smart (1999:250) who looks specifically at the role of narrative in collaborative knowledge-making in the Bank of Canada. Here both the objective of the storytelling and the means to develop the story depend on collaboration.

Another example of the support of collaborative working comes from Hannabuss (2000:402) who looks at how to elicit knowledge using storytelling. He looks at the classic consciousness/competence parameters and most importantly examines, within a collaborative framework, how to elicit unconscious tacit knowledge in order to make it accessible. Brown and Duguid (1998:101) discuss the related concept of coherence, where the lack of synergy removes the reason for the firm's existence (in effect undermining

the very need for collaborative effort). They see knowledge-creation often happening only in the community, and that it is difficult to separate knowledge from the community. They also discuss the concepts of stickiness and leakiness, the idea that knowledge often flows more easily among organisations than within them (Brown & Duguid 1998:102), introducing the concept of the virtual team or virtual collaboration.

What are the tools that people have for knowledge-sharing? There are certainly a number of formal and informal knowledge-sharing tools from which to choose. For explicit knowledge the choice is much easier: a wide variety of document types and media exist for explicit knowledge-sharing. Tacit knowledge-sharing is much more difficult. Swap *et al.* (2001:98) provide a useful study of the main alternatives, including mentoring and storytelling as two of the main tools, whilst Sole and Wilson (2002) provide a broader, more useful comparison amongst the five main tools they identify: storytelling; modeling (read Swap *et al.* on mentoring); simulation (not discussed by Swap *et al.*); codified resources and symbolic objects (used solely for explicit knowledge). Sole and Wilson (2002) see the essence of a knowledge-sharing story as two-fold: it offers a streamlined experience (quick, simple, tellable) and offers a surrogate experience (the listener could have been there, the story is credible). Swap *et al.* (2001:98) support the use of stories as they discuss pattern recognition, based on long years of experience, as evidence of the use of tacit knowledge by experts, using rules-based reasoning. They see the 'socialisation' element of Nonaka and Takeuchi's SECI model (Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995:15) as a sharing activity that can be supported by storytelling as a means of knowledge-sharing. This Nonaka and Takeuchi developed the SECI model. This is perhaps one of the best known of the knowledge-management models, where they describe the spiraling process of interactions between explicit and tacit knowledge: socialisation (sharing between individuals); externalisation (involves conversion of tacit to explicit); combination (takes existing explicit knowledge and combines with new explicit knowledge); internalisation (conversion back from explicit to tacit).

Buckler and Zien (1996:394) looked specifically at innovative companies in the mid-1990s in the United States of America (USA) (including 3M and Apple), in Japan (Sony and Toshiba) and Europe (Club Med and Océ amongst others). They found extensive use of stories to reinforce the innovative culture and knowledge-sharing in the business: in a sense the ultimate form of constant learning. Buckler and Zien (1996:405) conclude that storytelling is an act of creating future opportunities, through the sharing of knowledge. Stories create a 'living collective memory' of the lessons learned.

Several authors express a note of caution about the use of stories and

storytelling as a universal cure for all KM ills. Clearly some judgment must be exercised, they say, as to where and when stories are used. For example, Swap *et al.* (2001:103) express some reservations about the use of stories: indiscriminate use of stories to transfer critical skills, managerial systems and norm and values would be misguided. Ready (2002:69) gives this warning: ‘storytelling should by no means be viewed as a panacea. Seen in those terms, it runs the risk of becoming another passing fad. Like other management techniques, it can help build an important part of an organisation’s capabilities, but only in conjunction with other tools and the hard work required to use them well’.

Sole and Wilson (2002) sound a note of caution about storytelling as a cure-all and identify traps in using stories: seductiveness (go too deep into the story to see the meaning), single point of view (may lose relevance to listener), static-ness (stories need regular revision so as to update and keep relevant). They also suggest that stories are used appropriately: not for example, in specific skill-building situations where practice makes more sense, or in emergency situations (Sole & Wilson 2002).

Reamy (2002) sees a problem with the use of stories, in that ‘the knowledge embedded in stories is difficult to codify in such a way as to capture the richness and multiplicity of stories without losing the immediacy and power of the storytelling experience.’ He also expresses concern that ‘storytelling is divorced from any systematic foundation that would give it both a dimension or rigor and practicality’ He suggests the creation of a ‘rich and powerful’ knowledge architecture to overcome this problem. A related concern comes from Snowden (2000:52) who discusses the Nonaka and Takeuchi SECI model (referred to above, Nonaka & Takeuchi 1995) and identifies certain deficiencies, in particular the difficulty of making some tacit knowledge explicit. Denning (2000:93), despite his overwhelming enthusiasm for stories and storytelling, suggests where not to use a story, including the following: where the audience does not want one; where analysis would be better; where the story is not ready; where a story would be deceptive. The corollary of where not to use stories is how to stop people from doing what comes naturally. Reamy (2002) says that we do not need to push people into telling stories and we could not stop them if we wanted to. The key question should rather be ‘what kind of stories will they tell?’ Will the stories told have a positive or negative effect, will they dwell on the past or deal with what organisations need to know today?

The last part of this article will focus on the implementation of storytelling in the organisation.

## 6 IMPLEMENTATION OF STORYTELLING IN THE ORGANISATION

In this section there will be a review of some of the published research advice and guidance to be followed when tackling the implementation of storytelling as well as the presentation of a project check list to support the implementation of storytelling in the organisation.

A number of authors have shared their advice about how successfully to implement a storytelling initiative in a corporate setting. The following is a brief summary of what are some of the most useful ideas. Weil (1998) tells how Hewlett-Packard in 1989 hired a corporate archivist who collected not only many documents but also over 100 oral histories, from front-line workers to executives. These oral histories formed the basis for the anecdotes that could be structured into stories. Perhaps other organisations could adopt this approach as well? Oral histories were also used by Eisenhart (2001), who discusses research around the conduct of the 2000 census in the US. She says that finding ways to transfer knowledge from individuals to present and future colleagues is a 'pressing concern' for government. They developed a video archive of experiences captured and lessons learnt, both good and bad.

Sole and Wilson (2002) offer suggestions for story use: be clear as to why you are sharing your stories, keep it simple and accessible, try using more than one medium, monitor how a story is received, and hone story-listening skills. These suggestions fit well within the model of story/teller/listener. A similar approach is suggested by Kaye and Jacobson (1999:46) who recommend the following: storyteller coaching, topic assistance, audience consideration, and debriefing.

A strongly practical approach is adopted by Brown and Duguid (1998:91). They recommend recognising practices as they occur in reality, not what is in the documentation. 'Otherwise they will miss the tacit knowledge produced in improvisation, shared through storytelling and embedded in the communities that form around these activities' (Brown & Duguid, 2000:78).

Stewart (1998:166) suggests two main actions: find out what type of stories are being told already, how story-rich the place is then learn how to enlist the everyday teaching power of stories. This is essentially a story-mapping approach, much like knowledge-mapping as used more widely in other KM initiatives.

Ready (2002:68) sees the following elements of a storytelling leadership programme, but one which could equally well be implemented to support storytelling as part of a KM initiative: get the top team actively engaged; develop a collective point of view; consider all available alternatives; get the

right team in place; coach the storytellers and orientate the participants; use stories to stimulate dialogue, reflection and action.

Armstrong (1992:200) provides a useful check list as to how to go about writing one’s own stories, as does Denning (2000:197) who builds a useful list of steps in the construction of the springboard story, covering such issues as: the story should be relatively brief; it must be intelligible to the specific audience; the story should deal with a specific individual or organisation.

Table 1 has been developed based on the application of the US-based Project Management Institute’s Body of Knowledge approach to project management (Project Management Institute 2004). The table is intended to be used as a high-level check list for the phases involved in implementing a storytelling project in a corporate environment. The details of the project plan will vary according to the specific circumstances and objectives of the project undertaken. Storytelling in the context of this plan should be taken to include the main elements of the storytelling model: the crafting of the story, the teller and the telling, the listeners.

**TABLE 1** \_\_\_\_\_  
**STORYTELLING IMPLEMENTATION PROJECT CHECK LIST**  
**(TOBIN AND SNYMAN 2004)**

Item
<b>Concept phase</b>
Scope of the use of storytelling identified (type of storytelling initiative).
Ownership of storytelling defined.
Executive champion (project sponsor) agreed.
Storytelling business case approved.
Storytelling strategy and KM strategy aligned.
High level project timetable defined.
Initial project risk assessment completed.
High level roles and team defined.

Item
<b>Planning phase</b>
Overall project plan and management system developed.
Sub-projects and detailed work breakdown structure completed (e.g. developing stories; training tellers and listeners)
Project team defined with responsibilities.
Detailed project budget in place (e.g. for media involved in storytelling)
Overall schedule developed with dependencies and critical path identified.
Quality parameters for the project agreed (e.g. quality in stories themselves; quality storytelling; quality listening).
Detailed risk plan developed (e.g. what might impact this project).
Project communications plan developed (e.g. who do we need to tell what and by when and how).
Use of internal and external resources and contractors (if any) identified.
Execution phase commencement agreed.
<b>Execution phase</b>
Project scope delivery commences (e.g. crafting the stories; identifying how the stories will be told and by whom; identifying the listeners; deploying the stories).
Project tasks completed according to plan (e.g. getting feedback on the success of the deployment of stories).
Project monitoring and control in place in line with project plan.
Execution phase completion signed-off.
<b>Closure phase</b>
Project closure completed for contractual and performance items.

Item
Post-implementation review held (e.g. how successful was the deployment of storytelling?).
Lessons learned captured (e.g. into storytelling knowledge base).
Results of the project shared inside and outside the organisation.
Post-project benefits assessment plan in place (e.g. value of storytelling monitored on an ongoing basis).

## 7 CONCLUSION

In this article the authors have traced a brief introduction to the subject of stories and storytelling in a corporate environment. A three-part model was used better to understand the key issues associated with storytelling in a corporate environment: the crafting of the story; the telling of the story; the role of the listener(s). A review was presented of some of the benefits of storytelling at three levels in the organisation: for the individual; for teams; for the organisation as a whole. The article concluded by presenting some of the previous research findings and recommendations from a cross-section of sources as how best to approach the practical implementation of storytelling. To these ideas was added the storytelling implementation project check list as a more practical ‘how-to’ guide to the launch of a storytelling initiative. It is hoped that as a result of reading and absorbing the ideas presented in this article more organisations, particularly those who have not done so before, will explore the use of stories and storytelling as tools for improved knowledge management.



- 1 This article is an adapted version of a paper entitled ‘Storytelling: a tool for collaboration and sharing of knowledge’ presented by Peter Tobin at the International Conference on collaboration and sharing of knowledge, University of South Africa, Pretoria, 30–31 July 2003. The article is also based on Peter Tobin’s doctoral studies at the Department of Information Science, University of Pretoria.

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