

by George Pór

The Knowledge

The emerging theory and practices of knowledge ecology are making 20th-century ideas of management and business obsolete. The hallmark of effective managers no longer rests on how well they control information, but how well they encourage the healthy exchange of ideas in the workplace. Not only do such exchanges create social and economic value for business; they also increase its capacity to collaborate effectively in learning partnerships of all kinds, inside and outside the formal organization.

For example, think of an organization as an ecosystem, a living organism. When all of its constituents perform in concert, sharing and coordinating their efforts to enhance the possibilities for all members and the organization as whole, the ecosystem thrives.

Likewise, “knowledge ecology” is about studying and enhancing the ways in which the parts of knowledge-generating systems relate to and coordinate with one another. It provides a framework for organizations that want to maximize their benefits from emerging technologies and encourage effective collaboration among their members.

Most managers today understand that Web-enabled communications have made their function of “information gatekeeping,” in large part, obsolete. They even realize that people are their most important assets. Some of them also understand that what the members know is what makes or breaks their organizations. However, they also must take the next step, which is to recognize that knowledge is not a “thing” that can be “managed” like physical assets. Rather, it is an organizational capacity produced by collaborative relationships, which a manager must nurture.

The core practice of knowledge ecology is the art of “knowledge gardening”: that is, the seeding and feeding of healthy knowledge ecosystems. Nurturing an organization’s knowledge ecosystem is both a key component of competent leadership and a strategic imperative for today’s organizations.

The First Steps

To create a healthy knowledge ecosystem, we first must abandon many of the old concepts of “management” as we know it. As French novelist Andre Gide once said (as quoted in Bela Banathy’s *Guided Evolution of Society: A Systems View*), “One does not discover new land without consenting to lose sight of the old shore.”

Some managers still are guided by the old habits and processes of command and control, rather than inspired by the full

The theory of “knowledge ecology” supersedes old ideas of management and business. In a 21st-century economy, the measure of an organization’s mettle is no longer the money in its coffers, but the intellect of its members.

potential of their members (previously known as “employees”). These types of managers hold a company back from developing the resilience and flexibility it needs to respond to rapidly changing technologies and markets. And that will be the difference between a business that succeeds and one that struggles, or dies.

Indeed, what must take the place of our “old shores” is a practice more akin to shared learning, in which managers—who themselves become master learners, coordinators, and coaches—lead by example, and inspire and acknowledge contributions of knowledge from all who work with them.

What a company knows is a strategic asset. However, it also can be a liability if it is not fostered by its leadership and members. We’re living in a time when knowledge, intelligence, and wisdom have become the most powerful engines to generate social and economic value. Therefore, the vibrancy of a corporation’s knowledge ecosystem is a more reliable indicator of its future performance than the extent of its financial might.

Money, for example, indicates only a corporation’s past performance on the market. The vitality of its knowledge ecosystem, however, indicates its potential to meet rapidly evolving strategic challenges and opportunities. A company can have billions of dollars in the bank, but if that company is not in tune with the requirements of a knowledge-based economy, it’s very likely that it will not survive.

Ecology

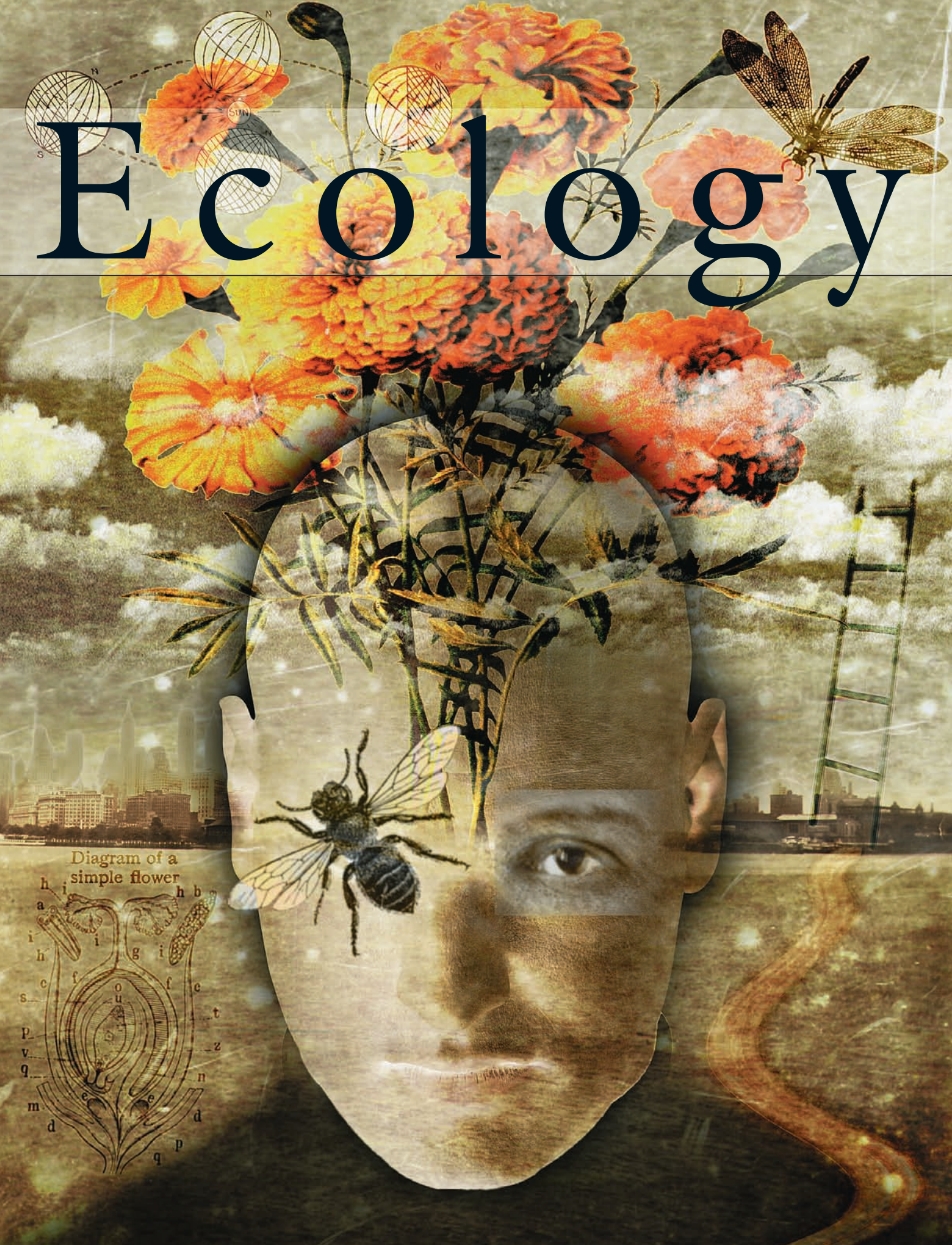


Diagram of a simple flower





Management Meets Education

There was a time when an MBA degree meant a partial, if not total, shift from learning to doing—from student to employee. That model also is quickly becoming obsolete. In a knowledge economy, no managers can afford to rely on what they have known in the past to see them through their careers indefinitely.

They must continue to learn, and managers and educators alike must create environments in which learning is ongoing and “stealthy”—that is, invisible and effortless. “Stealth learning” happens simply by doing our work in virtual and real-world environments specifically designed to develop new capabilities.

As a result, management development no longer is limited to organizations such as business schools or corporate universities. Organizational professionals develop new skills and better maps of the knowledge landscapes in which they travel through “peer learning” or “collaborative learning.” Also known as “c-learning,” a term coined by the Gartner Group, collaborative learning occurs everywhere people interact, and it is most prevalent in environments optimized to support their collaboration. If their environments, and their potential, are not optimized, it starves the organization’s knowledge ecosystem.

To promote a healthy knowledge ecology, managers have a new responsibility before them. To inspire their members’ best contributions, they must:

- Be master learners and encourage better practices of individual and c-learning.
- Elicit the leadership qualities in all who work with them.
- Become future-responsive, anticipating and articulating future possibilities.
- Be a model for all of the above, so that others can learn to do the same.

If managers are not master learners, they will not be able to absorb and apply the new practices they need to win in the marketplace. If they cannot inspire leadership in all of their members, they cannot mobilize the full potential of the organization to deal with a broad range of situations.

If the primary goal of all business is to generate value for its surrounding market ecosystems, we can say the same for education. The difference is that most business organizations deliver that value through their goods and services as their primary market offer, while educational organizations tend to do so through staging, eliciting, and guiding learning experiences for their customers.

However, even that differentiation may disappear or become more nebulous, as more businesses realize that selling memorable experiences is what brings customers back. The subtitle of *The Experience Economy*, a popular management book by two Harvard professors, B. Joseph Pine II and James H. Gilmore, tells it all: “Work Is Theater and Every Business Is a Stage.”

Moreover, as managers play a more prominent role in educating their members, and vice versa, the line between business school and the workplace also will become blurred. The shift between learning and doing will become not a shift at all, but a continuation, as people move from one collaborative learning environment to another.

Working and Learning in Cyberspace

Mastering the right combinations of social and electronic technologies for collaboration, learning, and coordination of action is an essential ingredient of organizational effectiveness. Recognizing that, more organizations are using online environments to connect their members to each other across the office, the campus, or the world.

Cyberspace, however, will neither replace nor diminish the value of face-to-face communication. It will, in fact, oblige us to become smarter about how and why we use the latter. When someone convenes a meeting that brings together 20 managers from around the world, both the convener and the participants are aware of the combined value of their time and attention. As face-to-face meetings become more expensive, planners will take more care to ensure that each meeting is effective and efficient, and that all participants enjoy and benefit from the interaction. And as the volume of work done in cyberspace increases, so, too, will the value of well-designed, face-to-face events.

Where cyberspace will thrive most is in its capacity to provide a “place” where groups can share their energy and genius freely and easily. Cyberspace allows for both synchronous and asynchronous interactions, in which groups can work, share, and learn together.

To be viable in the knowledge economy, an organization must develop competence in designing and nurturing diverse kinds of c-learning communities. Some of these c-learning communities also are known as “communities of practice” and refer to groups of colleagues who face the same types of challenges, and who learn together to become better practitioners. Their primary purpose does not lie in a specific, goal-oriented project, but in their shared and collaboratively negotiated learning agenda. As technologies that enable c-learning continue to improve, communities of practice—the stewards of organizational competence—will become more and more strategic and valuable to the organization.

“Competition Is Dead!”

Author James Moore, who has championed the idea of a market ecosystem in which all organisms function in concert, wrote, “Competition is dead!” This makes sense, considering that if value is created through sharing—not hoarding—knowledge, then an organization’s most valuable strategic advantage is its capacity to share knowledge across multiple organizations. When

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an ecosystem functions well, players easily can find their unique niches and contribute to the whole what they do best. If, in a given niche, I cannot provide as high a value as someone else, I must discover and redefine my true niche.

For example, here's a story to illustrate that point on a personal level. Recently, I attended an invitational conference of an international group of computer scientists, biologists, artificial intelligence experts, sociologists, and other researchers. I had prepared a presentation that was scheduled for the last day. However, as I conversed with other participants during the first two days, I twice found it necessary to revise my presentation. There was no point to wasting everybody's time, I thought, by elaborating on issues that already were covered by somebody else.

Thinking of the workshop as a miniature ecosystem, and each participant as a species occupying a certain knowledge niche, I noticed how the unfolding patterns of our shared knowledge evolved and shifted with each new presentation. Given the new and continually changing shape of the workshop's implicit "issues map," I saved those elements of my original presentation that added unique knowledge value to that evolving mini-ecosystem, and abandoned those covered by other participants with more coherence and clarity. Doing so allowed me to refocus my ideas on issues about which I had a more unique contribution to make. (To read this presentation, titled "Designing for the Emergence of a Global-Scale Collective Intelligence: Invitation to a Research Collaboration," visit www.co-i-l.com/coil/knowledge-garden/kd/designing.)

Knowledge Ecology: The Next Steps

AN ORGANIZATION OR COMMUNITY THAT ASPIRES TO go beyond knowledge management, and instead develop shared intelligence and collective wisdom, must take several steps to achieve that goal:

- 1. Mandate** that a self-selected team engage in a learning expedition that explores ways to improve dramatically the vitality of your knowledge ecosystem. It will use, among other tools, a Web-enabled network of focused conversations to foster discovery and collaboration.
- 2. Empower** the team to acquire the resources it needs to carry out its mission.
- 3. Choose** or ask the team to choose a focus for a strategic conversation about your organization's future actions.
- 4. Engage** and use the power of your knowledge ecosystem to make that conversation highly effective, efficient, and enjoyable.

Organizations can thrive in continuously shifting market and technical conditions only if they learn to grow, harvest, and leverage the unique mix of knowledge and capabilities of all of their members.

Distributed Intelligence, Collective Wisdom

Knowledge ecology is about recognizing and honoring people—their knowledge, their expertise, and intelligence—as the main source of value creation. "Honoring" includes providing them with the best available tools, methods, and expert facilitation of knowledge development, as well as encouraging productive conversations. In a well-nurtured ecosystem, relevant information, successful practices, and mutual inspirations feed one another.

The health of a knowledge ecosystem requires that business leaders, HR executives, and management educators provide sustained attention to the right cultural and technical conditions in which people, and their relevant knowledge, can blossom.

Recognizing what knowledge is relevant also is a key part of success. Spectacular failures have happened to organizations that have been successfully climbing a mountain in their knowledge landscape, but that have chosen the wrong mountain to climb.

However, when an organization designs its knowledge ecosystem to unleash the potential of its members' creativity and collaboration, it equips itself with the collective wisdom it needs to know what knowledge is relevant and what is not. It will have, first, a better understanding of the interrelatedness of the parts within it; and second, a better intuition about the future.

Verna Allee wrote in *Knowledge Evolution: Building Organizational Intelligence*, "Wisdom is ... a highly creative and connective way of processing knowledge that distills out essential principles and truths. Wisdom tells us what to pay attention to. Wisdom is the truth seeker and pattern finder that penetrates to the core of what really matters."

Discovering the "essential truths" within an organization is the true goal of knowledge ecology. And now, with the emergence of the Web and related technologies, there are even more opportunities to create intricate connections and collaborations within and among diverse knowledge ecosystems.

But even in these conditions, an organization can't afford to be simply *knowledgeable*. To understand and respond to the kaleidoscopic patterns of new opportunities and potential dangers to its mission, an organization must mobilize the distributed *intelligence* of its members and listen to the collective *wisdom* of the whole. **Z**

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