On Finding Stories

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I've run quite a few storytelling workshops in the last few weeks and one of the questions that comes up pretty universally is this: How do you find the stories you tell?

The question intrigued me because I didn't have a ready answer. I know my stories, and I know that I accumulate them like I do boarding passes, but I was completely speechless as I tried to deliver an answer. "Me, speechless" is a rare event, so after hearing the question several times in a single week I decided to take a long walk and think about it. I was in Calgary, so a *brisk* walk was definitely in order.

What an interesting exercise. I spend a lot of my time in the world of technology and lately a lot of my storytelling workshops have been delivered to professional sales audiences who want to use the storytelling techniques to create a higher level of engagement with their customers. Their jobs are made harder by the fact that when they engage with an executive at a client company they have a very short interval – perhaps 90 seconds – to guide the conversation where they would like it to go. That's about the limit of time that a busy executive is willing to "donate" to uncharted waters. So the sales person better have a good idea about where they want the conversation to go before the ever make the meeting happen, or they'll be shown the door before things really get started. And that's why it is so important to give some thought to story selection. But where do they come from? And how does a person ensure that the stories they collect and use are relevant?

This was the conundrum that faced me during my walk around downtown Calgary. As I ran through a mental inventory of my current story collection I realized that even though I work in high-tech, most of my anecdotes have little to do with technology. Why is that? Why are my stories NOT about the industry I work in?

After a considerable amount of thought, I reached what is probably the closest thing to an answer that I can offer for the moment.

I spent the first 20 years of my career working on the highly technical end of the converged telecom, IT and media industry. I speak fluent bits and bytes, can hold my own with the best of the bit-weenies and propeller-heads, and can discuss the **exciting** nuances of one protocol over another (wake me up when it's over). But let's face it: That's pretty rarified air and the number of people who care about the inner workings of the technology itself is fairly small compared to the number of people who care about the implications of technology. And truthfully, that's where my interests lie as well. I am far more interested in technology as an enabler of economic growth, universal healthcare, more impactful education, transparent government, and healthy competition than I am about where the bits go and what their first names are. In other words, I behave more as a generalist than I do as a technologist and my collection of stories bears that out.
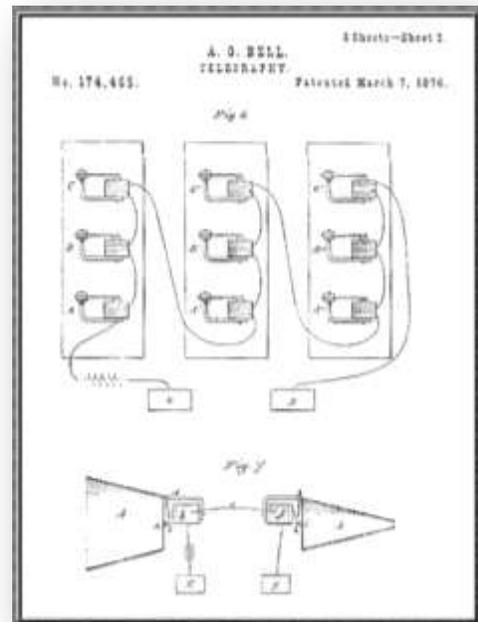
Let's examine that. When I was knee-deep in the technology itself I spent a lot of time reading industry journals, technology white papers, technical books and international standards. I recall one particular winter evening in 1994 when I was alone at home: my wife and kids had flown out to California to visit family. I was sitting in front of a roaring fire in the fireplace, enjoying a nice single malt, when I suddenly realized that I was reading – brace yourselves – a telecommunications transmission standard from the International Telecommunications Union. The worst part was that I was really enjoying myself, something I realized with a feeling of dawning horror.
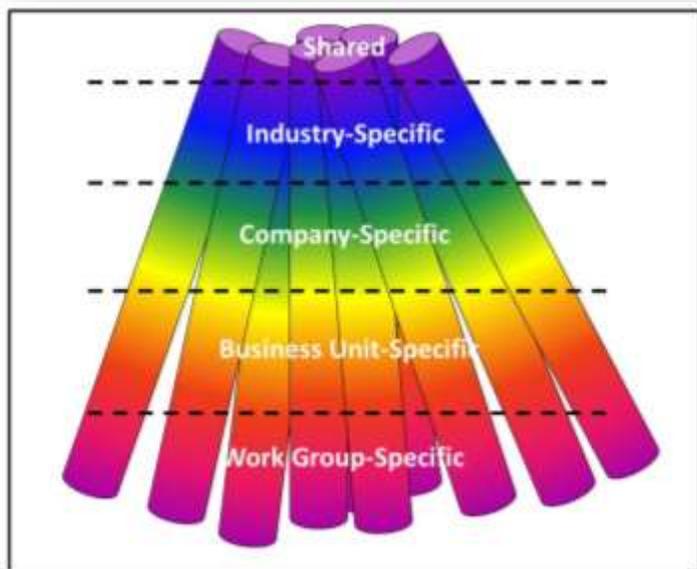
I rarely descend into the bowels of the technology anymore; my work just doesn't often call for that level of granularity. As a generalist I spend my time dabbling in the atmospheric level where information freely mingles.

Consider the drawing I created at left. Down at the work group level, the organizational silo still reigns supreme, as do the stories

that emerge from that level of the organizational layer cake. The stories here are as specific as the work groups that create them, and therefore have relatively little relevance for more general audiences. For example, a story about UNIX™ told by one programmer to another might be well received and appreciated, but someone in Accounting or Human Resources would most likely not find it entertaining. The point is that thanks to division of labor practices within the modern corporation, work groups tend to be very task-specific, and the stories that are to be harvested there are equally narrow in scope. This is why Dilbert cartoons are either riotously funny or irrelevant: The reader is either in the inner circle or not.

As we climb the food chain, the entities – and their stories – become increasingly general and applicable. Business unit stories work well within the larger audience of the business unit itself, perhaps even with people in similar business units but in different companies. A product management group in one company faces the same general challenges as a product management group in a different company, regardless of how different their companies are.

At the company level stories are broadly applicable because the audience is larger and the story is based on a more general field of anecdotal information than it is when told at the work group tier. For example, we all know stories about Apple, and Microsoft, and GE, and Amazon, because the stories have broad appeal and applicability. They're not universal, but they're close.

And at the industry-specific level? Here the stories are rich, abundant and for the most part universally-applicable. A story that works in telecom, for example, can usually be applied to a media or IT audience as well because the industries are so highly integrated and interdependent. For example, a telecom anecdote about the deployment of 4G LTE is meaningful to a media audience because the more bandwidth that is available for transport of content, the better the quality of the content stream. That same anecdote will be appropriate for an IT audience because LTE means more bandwidth, more bandwidth means more data, and more data means better and richer analytical yields from Big Data stores.

So what do I conclude from this? It's interesting. Fundamentally, I am an "information generalist" when it comes to identifying and collecting stories. Sure, I have my share of great stories that I can share with work group-specific audiences, but I rarely – if ever – let them out of the work group. When I'm in listening mode, I "scan" for stories that can be applied to a broad array of audiences. These are typically about universal truths, and in the world of business those truths include challenge, opportunity, social impact, economic success, technological innovation, and advances in such things as education, healthcare, government, and global business. These are forces with universal impact and applicability, and the "non-human" sources I go to for stories are just as diverse – and are the subject of the next journal entry.

Thanks for reading.