

The Power of Connections

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Many years ago, while still living in California, I began my writing career by submitting feature articles to local magazines in the Bay Area. I always gravitated toward offbeat subject matter, which made my stories interesting – and desirable.

One day I sat down to write a feature piece, the subject of which has long since been lost in the mists of time. But as I set to writing I realized that I didn't really know what a feature article was, even though I'd been writing them for several years by the time I came to that realization. For the record, Wikipedia defines a feature story as a "human interest" story that is not typically tied to a recent news event. Feature stories usually discuss concepts or ideas that are specific to a particular market, and are often quite detailed. For example, a story about the history of a landmark building that is being renovated, or a piece on the behind-the-scenes goings-on of a particular town are feature stories.

Anyway, I grabbed the dictionary off the shelf (this was years before the Web and digital dictionaries were still a dream) and turned to the entry on feature story. And there I saw it: a few words over from 'feature' was the word 'feces.' Never bring one to ignore an intriguing pathway, I followed it. The dictionary entry for 'feces' led me off on two side trails ("See also..." is my favorite part of any definition) which were equally intriguing. The first was "scatology;" the second, "coprology." So off I went, down the rabbit hole. Scatology is the study of animal droppings, a field important to wildlife biologists because from scat can be determined all kinds of things about a particular species including what they eat, how often they eat it, how healthy the prey was, whether the animal that dropped the scat has any parasites, how widely the animal ranges, and all sorts of other things that are actually quite interesting, in a weird sort of way. So I called my alma mater's biology department and was soon on the phone with a genuine scatologist, a wildlife biologist who specializes in the analysis of wildlife – droppings, which are known as 'scat' to those who care enough to name such things. We ultimately met and I spent a day with him in the field, and I'm delighted to tell you that it was one of the most interesting days I have ever had.

The other trail that feces took me down was 'coprolite.' A coprolite is, and I'm not making this up, a fossilized dinosaur dropping. A paleo-scat, as it were. I have one on my desk; that's it over there. Once again I got on the phone and called the paleontology department, where I soon



found myself talking to a coprologist – yes, there is such a person. How do you explain THAT at a dinner party? Anyway, he agreed to meet with me, and once again I had one of those rare and wonderful days, learning just how fascinating the stuff is (was?) that came out of the north end of a south-bound dinosaur. He showed me how they slice the things on a very fine diamond saw and then examine them under a high-power microscope to identify the contents, just as the scatologist did with owl pellets and coyote scat.

Had I not allowed myself to fall prey to serendipity (Wikipedia: “A “happy accident” or “pleasant surprise;” specifically, the accident of finding something good or useful while not specifically searching for it), I never would have found those remarkable people, and never would have written what turned out to be one of most popular articles in that particular magazine.



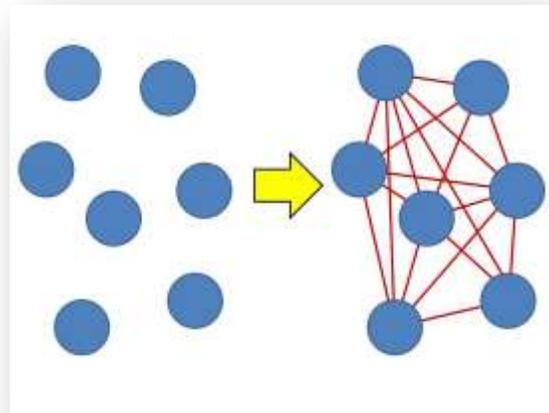
Another time, this time more recently, my wife and I were out walking with our dogs in the field near our house. At one point near the end of the walk I turned around to check on the dogs and saw one of our dachshunds rolling around on his back the way all dogs do when they find something disgustingly smelly. This was no exception: He had found the carcass of some recently dead animal, too far gone to identify but not so far gone that it didn't smell absolutely horrible. I dragged him home with my wife following about 30 feet behind me

and gave him the bath of baths to eliminate the smell. Anyway, once smelled like a dog again I felt that old curiosity coming on so I went downstairs to my office and began to search Google for the source of that horrible smell that's always present in dead things. And I found it. The smell actually comes from two chemicals, both of which are so perfectly named that whoever named them clearly had a good time doing so. The first of them is called cadaverine; the second, putrescine. Can you think of better names for this stuff? Interestingly, putrescine is used industrially to make a form of nylon.

So what's the point of this wandering tale? Storytellers are always looking for sources, and the question I get more often than any other is about the source of my stories. The answer, of course, is multifaceted, but in many cases I find stories because I go looking for them but leave my mind open to the power of serendipity. For this reason, I personally believe that the best thing about Wikipedia is the button on the left side of the home page that says, “Random Article.” I use it all the time, just to see where it takes me.

This smelly article makes the case for the need to knowledge-share within an organization, whether a work group or an entire enterprise.

Imagine that each of the blue circles in the diagram at right is a person in a company who possesses some amount of knowledge that is relatively unique. The left side of the diagram shows seven knowledge silos that have no ability to share with each other. The right side, however, is fully connected – a mesh network, as it is called. Every node (person) has access to the knowledge of every other node (person). So the real value of a connected enterprise that has adopted a knowledge-sharing culture doesn't lie in the individual knowledge silos, but rather in the connections that exist *between* the knowledge silos. This is the phenomenon that Silicon Valley pioneer Bob Metcalfe, the inventor of Ethernet, was describing when he coined the concept of Metcalfe's Law: *The power of a fully connected network increases as a function of the square of the number of nodes in the network.* In other words, when new nodes (knowledge bases) are added to the network (enterprise), the value of the entire knowledge assembly doesn't go up incrementally – it goes up exponentially. Think of the value of the World Wide Web, or of such Web-based resources as Wikipedia. The value doesn't lie in any one element of the network, but rather in the power of the connected whole. So what happens when your enterprise, or that of your customer, adopts a knowledge-sharing philosophy based simply on the idea that every person in the company accepts the responsibility to share what they know when they come to know it, and to accept the fact that they don't have the right to decide whether a knowledge nugget is important to someone else. That's their responsibility. The only requirement placed on each employee's shoulders is to share. How hard is that?



I'm off to Wikipedia to see where it takes me. Thanks for reading.