The Future of KM? Design Thinking! So here are 5 Elements to 'ECHO'…

Arno Boersma

The article addresses the timely intersection of knowledge management with design thinking. As knowledge management is seemingly grasping for its last breath according to many, the rise of human-centered design thinking has everything KM needs to thrive. By injecting key elements of design thinking - Experimentation, Collaboration, Human-centeredness, and Optimism (ECHO) - a powerful combination emerges that gets most value out of knowledge in ways that resonate with people. The article underlines this much-needed integration by way of real-world examples related to development and why Knowledge Design Thinking is the future of KM. It will help KM practitioners in development create solutions that resonate more with the people they are serving.

Keywords: knowledge management, design thinking, institutionalisation of KM, knowledge sharing

The context and its challenges

The future of Knowledge Management? It's been right in front of our noses for quite a while now: it's called Design Thinking. Or, perhaps by 2020 commonly known as: Knowledge Design Thinking. I believe success in KM is more about high-touch than high-tech, which means an emphasis on user experience and human behavior. Design Thinking has come of age and is now a mature, widely applied domain which we as KM practitioners in development can embrace. It has already become increasingly popular among KM practitioners, just like 'lean', 'agile' and organizational learning approaches.

For those who are not familiar with Design Thinking (DT): it is a problem-solving approach used to create new solutions. These solutions were at first often tangible products, such as electronics and furniture, but now include services and other more knowledge-intense processes. DT is often called "human-centered" because people and their needs are at the epicenter of this approach. (For more information, go online and read IDEO's Design Kit: The Field Guide to Human-Centered Design). Of course many KM programs are human-centered already, but Design Thinking can exponentially elevate KM to become an accepted critical business process. For one, DT is much more practical than KM, thus compensating for KM's often theoretical and abstract perspective. Together the two disciplines are much better suited to solve today's complex problems and can provide a better approach in facing development challenges in uncertain and changing conditions, such as the UN's 17

Sustainable Development Goals. In the end, development is about people, so a stronger focus on them, the beneficiaries, is critical to create successful solutions.

So what are these DT elements that are so appealing? I use the acronym 'ECHO' to remember them: Experimental, Collaborative, Human-centered and Optimistic. There are many KM practitioners who are already applying some of them, for example the emphasis on collaboration with various stakeholders. But a more comprehensive adoption and integration of ECHO elements would be even more beneficial than applying any specific one. For each of them, I'll elaborate based on my own experience in countries like Burundi and China, as well as my recent projects at the World Bank Group. (For a video series where I discuss Design Thinking, KM and 'ECHO' with leading design thinker Jeneanne Rae, go to YouTube).

1. It is 2020: Knowledge Design Thinking has made KM much more *experimental*

Too often knowledge strategies and road maps are linear with little room to deviate or tolerance for – dare I say - failure. Whereas trying-failing-learning would actually be much more in the spirit of KM, because whatever the outcome, insights always emerge. DT values creativity over the more structured approach of KM and is all about experimenting, learning and being agile in response to how the target audience responds. Not being afraid to fail is can be conducive to solving complex knowledge problems in times of uncertainty and ambiguity.

Let me give you an example of a project I co-designed. Consider 'The Forum', a week-long knowledge and learning event for about 1500 World Bank Group staff from around the world. The World Bank Group, a global organization with over 15,000 development professionals from some 160 different countries, working in over 120 offices, faces phenomenal geographical and cultural challenges when it comes to learning. Knowledge and learning events like this have traditionally included a week of homogenous blocks of experts speaking to participants to 'share knowledge' and 'provide learning'. Before replicating this format, we turned to our own experience as consumers of these events, as well as research on how people retain knowledge. The goal was to make knowledge 'stick'.

For inspiration we looked at concepts of knowledge sharing from within and outside the organization, knowing full well that not all would be guaranteed to work for development professionals. Internally we knew that people appreciate informal networking to share insights over coffee or lunch. Externally we were inspired by proven concepts such as the Genius Bars of Apple Stores, Wikipedia, TED talks and BBC's Hard Talks. It resulted in an event that was quite experimental with 250 mostly small interactive sessions based on 10 learning formats that were truly high-touch and human-centered.

In DT, experimentation goes hand-in-hand with capturing the lessons on the way. It is an iterative process. As such, the process of organizing the event was documented in a newly

launched internal Wikipedia, which was consequently referred to when others organized subsequent events. And since a key element of DT is to dare to fail, we were honest in our assessment. For example, one format (Experts on Call) was set up for people to have 15 minute face-to-face chats with an expert. Scheduling was done online but became a logistical nightmare when people showed up late to the sessions – 8 in parallel - or when sessions ran late. However, what happened was that people just stayed and the sessions became group sessions to just about everyone's satisfaction. It was not the format we thought of initially, but highly valuable all the same. This failure was a great teachable moment. (For more information on The Forum, see the online presentation given to the Food Security and Nutrition Network, www.fsnnetwork.org).

2. It is 2020: Knowledge Design Thinking has made KM much more *collaborative*

None of us knows as much as all of us. Much has been written about the wisdom of crowds and open innovation ("not all smart people work for you…"). Still, KM is still too often done in isolation, disconnected from the mission of the organization or business process, a.k.a. "the flow". DT bridges this gap from the start, as it propagates building on the multiple perspectives of the challenge at hand. As such, collaboration with all stakeholders across the knowledge eco-system is key to move ahead. This includes management, whose commitment is a prerequisite; but also means insisting on diversity of players when considering solutions. It assumes problem-solving has both a bottom-up and a top-down perspective that increases support as parties involved feel a sense of ownership.

Let me give you an example, building on the previous example of organizing of 'The Forum' at the World Bank: we wanted to make sure inclusiveness and collaboration was ingrained in the design of the event. Organizing the event became a silo-busting exercise both in preparation and execution. Although our department took the lead, our director engaged departments from across the organization and convinced them to delegate staff to help organize. This organizing team including the director sat in an open workspace - unheard of at the time - as we prepared to the event. This workplace lay-out was highly conducive to collaboration. A meeting table right in the middle ensured that you were always up to date, as you would hear what was being discussed, even if you weren't part of the meeting. Also, country-based staff, from Africa, Asia, and Latin-America were given preferential access to the event, as they often don't have the face-to-face learning opportunities people at headquarters enjoy; and we wanted collaboration to be truly global. People from across thematic areas collaborated on designing the learning formats. Speakers and facilitators were not left to their own devices; instead, they were trained and coached in their roles, resulting in much improved delivery and more dynamic presenters. Needless to say, the knowledge flowed freely as collaboration reached unheard of levels. Silo-busting was not a goal in itself, but was a great by-product of organizing the event.

3. It is 2020: Knowledge Design Thinking has made KM much more *human-centered*

As with most disciplines, success in KM means understanding the needs and motivations of people. Creating solutions around those needs will inherently make their knowledge work easier and them more productive because it is relevant to them. This can be challenging because sometimes what people say they want, may not be what they really need. We've all heard that we need to listen to WIIFM, and that: "no, if we build it, people won't just come". This is where human-centeredness and empathy, key characteristics of DT, really help.

DT starts with being inspired by the people you're trying to help; really putting yourself in their shoes. These same people often consider that knowledge is power, and who do not like change. KM initiatives will be much more successful if the motivations of knowledge workers have been identified and taken into account as part of the design process.

Let me give you an example: I was asked to create a global knowledge transfer policy for a multinational firm. They were especially concerned about knowledge flows to China, because once the knowledge was there, it was at risk of being copied by competitors. They needed a clear process, with accountabilities at each step along the way. I set off to talk to relevant stakeholders, mostly in China, and it became clear that for this to work, it wasn't about creating a policy. It was about understanding how Chinese culture perceived knowledge and how the knowledge was managed. A more human, less legal or administrative approach was called for and I started to look at the challenge from a cultural perspective. Chinese culture is based on Confucian philosophy, which advocates loyalty, friendship and filial piety. The Chinese are more group-oriented and place a strong emphasis on collective identity, a key characteristic that helps to facilitate the acceptance of KM-based work practices. Also, there is the ever present "unspoken rule" of Guan Xi: the relationships between people and organizations. The notion of rejecting a request for certain knowledge by a befriended but external party is a challenge for Chinese employees.

As I delved into Chinese culture, local Chinese employees described a different perspective of knowledge ownership. For example, in the West all knowledge created or applied during working hours would generally be considered company property. However, Chinese employees distinguished their own knowledge (acquired through education, training, and previous employment) and network knowledge (sourced from people within the private networks, such as employees who served in the military together) from company knowledge (which they could call upon when needed). In first instance, the employees thought a policy to protect corporate knowledge was limited only to the latter, whereas they used all three knowledge types in their work.

In short, based on empathy and a deep understanding of the local knowledge workers, the solution was to design a knowledge awareness program, not a written knowledge transfer

policy. Consequently, as part of the KM program, we conducted many workshops focused on how to say 'no' without harming professional relationships. With a human-centered approach, delving deep into the needs and motivations of the Chinese colleagues - as with any intended beneficiary in development projects - helped in shaping a solution that worked. (More about this project online at Emerald Insight: 'KM in China: Western heads in Eastern hands?')

4. It is 2020: Knowledge Design Thinking has made KM a change agent through *optimism*

It is often said KM efforts are 80% change management; the remaining 20% is about the right tools support the knowledge worker. Optimism - a belief that we can all create change - is a key ingredient in DT's DNA. It is a great trait to adopt into KM.
But of course just believing behavior change is possible is not enough; people don't mind change, they mind being changed. It is not something you can force upon people. They must want it for it to be successful. So the optimism to keep pushing for behavior change needs to be rooted in a deep understanding of the people involved.

Let me give you an example, one of how not to do it, in the spirit of learning from failure: I learned the hard way that you can't force people to change their habits, while on a project in Burundi. I was asked by a beverage company early in my career to launch a nutritious energy drink in a yet untested African market; Burundi was their first market on the continent. The taste of the drink was 'different', not at all like the clear, sweet sports drinks we all know. To create brand awareness and get the product on the market, I had organized various activities, including a marathon straight through the capital of Bujumbura. In my drive to have everyone try the product, I had made it the *only* drink available during the run. That was a big mistake. Not only had I disregarded the needs of the runners to stay easily and comfortably hydrated, I had assumed they would change their drinking habits and preferences on the run! Needless to say, this didn't go over well with the runners who were not pleased that it was all they could get. They ended up complaining about the drink to onlookers along the route, who then started bringing garden hoses from homes to hydrate the runners. I learned: forget what you're holding – in my case an energy drink – and go and ask people what they want first.

5. It is 2020: Knowledge Design Thinking has made KM much more fun and impactful

Integrating the above 4 ECHO elements into KM makes it much more messy, fuzzy, and chaotic. And that's not to everyone's taste. But I would consider it a lot more fun, rewarding and gratifying than following linear processes with fixed milestones and safeguards. It's enriching, and as long as lessons are captured, shared and applied, the return on knowledge can actually be higher even though it may seems less efficient.

Let me give you an example: Another project I was involved with at the World Bank was collecting best practice examples in knowledge management. Instead of the usual interviews, calls for filling databases, or after action reviews, we organized the Knowlympics. We were by no means the first organization to do this, but linking winter sports with key knowledge processes made the competition come alive from Asia to Latin America (Collaboration? Figure skating in pairs!; Just in time knowledge delivery? Speed skating!). Needless to say this created lots of buzz as sports is a great analogy for many things: team work, practice, expertise, right equipment etc.

The most fun element came at the end, at the medals ceremony. No one other than Jamaican bobsledder Devon Harris, their first team captain, presented the medals after an inspiring elaboration of how Jamaica developed their bobsledding team. I guess one could also just watch the movie Cool Runnings, but it was one of the best KM stories I have ever heard. He explained how they built their performance around their strength as sprinters and then consequently improved the rest by observing other teams and practicing, practicing, practicing. They reached a point where athletes from countries like Germany and the US, leaders in bobsledding, came and watched their techniques.

In short: the sports metaphor created a great buzz before the event and vibe during the final ceremony. In addition, a very practical internal booklet was created with 101 tips & tricks for knowledge sharing in development based on the many real operational examples submitted to the Knowlympics. (For more information: The Knowledge & Solutions Ideabook; 101 Tips and Tricks). Fun was injected, and it succeeded where previous best practice collection exercises had failed. We thought the examples were too valuable to end up in an information graveyard that databases usually become; we wanted for them to come alive and be much more accessible.

So the future of KM? I would call it Knowledge Design Thinking. Its key principles of Experimentation, Collaboration, Human-centeredness, Optimism (ECHO) and *fun* will help in making KM initiatives more desirable, feasible and viable. Yes, it will require much deeper analysis and engagement with the development practitioners and clients we are trying to help, but it will help us create better solutions for our knowledge workers and hopefully greater development impact. And we'll have a lot more fun doing it. So let's ECHO Design Thinking as KM practitioners in development!

About the author
Arno Boersma has lead KM initiatives at the World Bank Group since 2007, and currently manages the new UNDP initiative; the Centre of Excellence for Sustainable Development of Small Island Developing States in Aruba. His work takes place at the intersection of knowledge management, sustainable development and design thinking.
Email: arnovation@gmail.com