



KNOWLEDGE MANAGEMENT AND THE PRACTICE OF STORYTELLING

*The Competencies
and Skills Needed
for a Successful
Implementation*

JOHEL BROWN-GRANT, PhD



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Implementation

BY

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INVESTOR IN PEOPLE

*To Paulina, my mother and first storyteller,
whose life continues to be the most exciting story
I have ever heard.*

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ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Johel Brown-Grant is a storytelling strategist and knowledge management practitioner with extensive experience in the practical application of storytelling to transfer critical knowledge in organizations. A sought-after speaker, his practice-driven workshops, seminars, and presentations focus on finding storytelling solutions for complex organizational problems requiring a communication strategy.

Grant's professional experience includes substantial work developing knowledge resources to support process improvement and operational efficiency in business, science and technology, higher education, and the federal government. He has written about user-centered design, information and communications technology, and knowledge management. His most recent publication was the coauthored book *Assessment of Knowledge Strategies* by Emerald publishing.

A former Fulbright scholar, he holds graduate degrees in Information and Knowledge Strategy, Linguistics, English Literature, and Communication and Rhetoric with a specialization in Human-Computer Interaction.

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PREFACE

The Importance of This Book

Even though there is a burgeoning storytelling discussion in the field of knowledge management (KM), and narratives and stories are being applied as methods to transfer knowledge, not much has been said about the practical side of storytelling. Unfortunately, the literature lacks a careful analysis of what it actually takes to do storytelling to foster knowledge exchange throughout an organization. There have been discussions on some of the skills needed to engage in storytelling, but a comprehensive account of the competencies and skills needed to engage in enterprise storytelling is severely lacking. This book, therefore, answers the following questions: “how do you actually do storytelling in an enterprise environment?”, “What do you need to know to implement a storytelling initiative?”, “What specific practices can help you acquire or apply storytelling competencies and skills?” The ultimate goal of this book is to provide practical arguments, rooted in robust academic research, to advance the analysis, study, and application of storytelling in knowledge management.

The Book’s Premise

The premise of this book is unique. It is based on the idea that, in a knowledge organization, storytelling is not the result of an individual narrative act; rather, it is the by-product of a complex set of activities that frame the inception, development, organization, delivery, and evaluation of narratives in order to support the creation, transfer, storage, and application of knowledge throughout an enterprise operation. The book examines the competencies and skills needed to carry out that complex set of activities in two areas:

- *Personal competencies and skills:* These are the rhetorical and performative competencies and skills that an individual needs to craft and tell a story, retell a narrative, and communicate and collaborate with the audience to shape the narrative.
- *Strategic competencies and skills:* These are the research and evaluation competencies and skills required to elicit and capture stories, understand the

organizational culture and define its storytelling needs, determine the value of narratives in relation to organizational needs, conceive a storytelling strategy, and evaluate its impact on the enterprise.

At a given point in the life of an organization a knowledge worker may be required to develop proficiency in one or both of these areas to respond to a critical knowledge sharing need; this book offers practical ideas to address those challenges.

Who Is This Book Written for?

First and foremost the book is written for knowledge management practitioners who are developing or implementing storytelling initiatives to support a knowledge management strategy, but need a comprehensive understanding of the practicalities involved in a storytelling initiative, or need useful information to evaluate the effectiveness of their storytelling project. This book is ideal for knowledge management practitioners who, as part of their storytelling initiative, may need to develop training resources to coach or train others to craft or tell a story that shares critical knowledge. This book will also benefit those knowledge management practitioners who need to elicit stories from other knowledge workers, but may lack the tools to do it effectively to uncover tacit knowledge.

Most importantly, this book offers knowledge management professionals practical advice to connect specific storytelling practices and activities to knowledge management methods and approaches. This book will prove useful to other knowledge workers, particularly those in the fields of change management, organizational development, and data analytics, because it details the specific competencies and skills needed to meet the unique challenge of creating and presenting a narrative to frame complex processes, intricate concepts, difficult problems, and innovative solutions.

Structure and Organization of the Book

This book is organized in four sections and nine chapters:

Section I, Conceptual Review, offers a review and analysis of the concepts that provide the foundation for the methods, practices, applications, and recommendations offered throughout the book.

- *Chapter 1: Understanding the concept of storytelling*

This chapter provides an in-depth analysis on the concept of storytelling and its various manifestations. It includes an examination of the cognitive basis of storytelling and its universality across cultures; and introduces a discussion on what it means to practice storytelling.

- *Chapter 2: The practice of storytelling as knowledge management*

In this chapter, the conceptual foundations of knowledge management are explored with particular emphasis on the differences between tacit and explicit knowledge. The focus then turns to the practice of knowledge management and its functions and variations across organizations. The argument continues exploring how storytelling can work as a methodology to support knowledge capture and knowledge sharing.

- *Chapter 3: Literacy, competencies, and skills*

Chapter 3 opens with a substantial review of the concepts of literacy, competency, and skills. These concepts are then explored within the framework of storytelling to carefully build a foundation that provides the definition and characteristics of the storytelling competencies and skills. The discussion closes with the classification of the storytelling competencies in three separate groups: Rhetorical, performative, and ethnographic.

Section II, Competencies and Skills, offers an exhaustive analysis of the rhetorical, performative, and ethnographic competencies and skills required for the practice of storytelling. Each chapter offers important contextual information in the form of a competency matrix which summarizes the competencies and associated skills, selection rationale, practical applications, and impact questions for further discussion. Additional resources included in the chapters are guided instructions for the implementation of competencies and skills, and information on the potential challenges associated with their implementation.

- *Chapter 4: Rhetorical competencies and skills*

This chapter discusses the rhetorical and discursive foundations of storytelling, including an analysis of the basic structure of a story. The chapter then identifies and reviews the specific rhetorical competencies associated with storytelling: plot development, character development, persuasion, and audience analysis.

- *Chapter 5: Performative competencies and skills*

Chapter 5 reviews the concept of performance, the types of performance and its implications for the telling of stories. The discussion continues with an exploration of the connections between performance and knowledge sharing, with a keen interest on tacit knowledge. The performative competencies associated with storytelling (performance development and performance co-production) are then identified and explored in detail.

- *Chapter 6: Ethnographic competencies and skills*

The discussion in this chapter begins with a review of the concept of ethnography and a rationale for its inclusion in an analysis on storytelling

and knowledge management. Ethnographic methods are then examined to determine the competencies that are applicable to the storytelling environment. Those competencies are ethnographic observation, ethnographic interview as storytelling interview, and narrative analysis.

Section III, Assessment and Evaluation, presents an extensive discussion on assessment and evaluation of storytelling competencies and skills, including conceptual reviews and guided instructions to measure the efficacy and impact of storytelling.

- *Chapter 7: Assessing storytelling competencies and skills*

This chapter explores the definition and types of assessments used for the systematic collection of information in knowledge organizations, with a specific focus on the assessment of competencies and skills. What follows is a careful examination of the practical considerations required to assess the rhetorical, performative, and ethnographic competencies and skills associated with storytelling.

- *Chapter 8: Evaluating the effectiveness of storytelling*

Chapter 8 continues the discussion on assessment, but from a different vantage point. In this chapter, the argument is about evaluating the effectiveness of storytelling on the organization. The analysis provides guidance on the implementation of a storytelling audit, as a pre-assessment activity, to obtain an overall picture of storytelling practices in an organization. The discussion then focuses on the assessment of storytelling outcomes, using the Kirkpatrick model as an illustration, to measure the effectiveness of storytelling.

Section IV, Lessons and Takeaways, provides a reflection on insights and recommendations resulting from the discussions and analyses held in the previous sections.

- *Chapter 9: Lessons learned*

The final chapter covers lessons learned and recommendations on the kind of role this book could play within the field of knowledge management, potential pathways or models organizations could follow to develop storytelling competencies and skills, the role of competencies and skills in building a case for organizational storytelling, and the urgent need for a holistic approach to developing and implementing storytelling strategies. The chapter concludes with a proposal for a standard institutions could use to develop storytelling competencies and skills in order to help harmonize the preparation and training needed to craft and tell stories in knowledge organizations.

INTRODUCTION

Storytelling is the most emblematic expression of the human spirit; it transcends civilizations, societies, cultures and traditions; yet, it is found in the deepest memories, thoughts, and impulses that guide life's journeys. There is a temptation to reduce storytelling to technical definitions which appear within the confines of specific domains such as literature, journalism, theater, cinema, and other fields. However, to truly understand the impact of storytelling on the human experience, it must be studied from a holistic perspective, one that considers the multilayered and multidimensional facets and elements that make the telling stories so essential to who we are as a species. In recent years, there has been a surge of interest in storytelling as a method to understand knowledge sharing in organizations. Knowledge management journals, conferences, and even workshops and certificate programs routinely explore the concepts of narratives and stories and their ability to enable connections that will support the creation and transfer of knowledge. This attention to storytelling from a knowledge management perspective is not isolated; the use of narratives to explain problems and issues, and illustrate concepts and ideas, has gained wide popularity in the business community. However, despite the fascination that has come from the rediscovery of storytelling, the use of narratives and stories is still perceived as a resource that could add secondary value to organizations. Some organizations consider storytelling as a non-essential soft skill, and others view it as an "interesting" practice. In most organizations, storytelling does not yet have the gravitas that comes from a time-tested strategy or a critical resource affecting institutional goals. Storytelling does not figure prominently in strategic plans or discussions about an organizational vision and mission.

One reason to explain why storytelling does not play a more prominent role in organizational discourse is because discussions about the topic lack the intellectual force of other established fields of knowledge. Discussions about storytelling based on serious scholarship and research would require resources that many organizations may not be able to afford. Therefore, to include storytelling topics in the organizational discourse, it must be stripped down to its most fundamental elements to address what may be very complex issues.

Concepts such as the impact of narratives on cognition and memory, sense making and wayfinding, and cultural decoding are not typical in discussions about organizational storytelling. Knowledge management, however, has begun to explore storytelling with a sharper perspective. The relationship between storytelling and tacit knowledge, for example, is now the source of exciting conversations and discussions that are reshaping the field.

Another reason why storytelling is still an emerging topic in organizations is because it is not seen as an organizational practice with strategic ramifications. Individual facets of storytelling can become prominent in organizational discourse; for example, storytelling is often associated with its performative quality, which by itself is an important knowledge sharing component, but even that trait is reduced to the speaker's ability to use storytelling to persuade audiences to attain a specific goal. As a result, storytelling is not seen as the sum of many interconnected parts, but rather as single instances of, perhaps, an innovative approach or new idea introduced in a project or process. Some organizations still struggle to connect the knowledge creation aspects of storytelling, such as the co-production that occurs between the audience and the storyteller, or the crafting of the story with an attention to how each element may impact tacit knowledge. Missing is also the connection between those knowledge creation activities and the knowledge capture elements in storytelling, such as the implementation of a storytelling interview or a storytelling audit. To understand storytelling in an organizational context, it must be approached as a complex and interwoven set of practices based on sophisticated competencies and skills that must be developed and nurtured in a strategic way.

Section I

CONCEPTUAL REVIEW

INTRODUCTION

Discussing storytelling within the context of knowledge management requires a careful delineation of several foundational concepts to have a clear picture of the complex possibilities that emerge from the intentional use, and application, of stories to enhance the operational input of an organization. In three chapters, this section provides a deep exploration of the concept and the practice of storytelling within the context of knowledge management, and with a focus on how competencies and skills can significantly impact the value storytelling brings to an organization.

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UNDERSTANDING THE CONCEPT OF STORYTELLING

1.1 DEFINING STORYTELLING

When I conduct storytelling workshops I like to begin by asking the audience what is storytelling. I ask this because I want to see what they think, what definitions they carry over from formal education and because I want to make sure that we begin the workshop with a common understanding of the concept. I find that having an agreement on the definition ensures a more effective outcome and greater success when attendees participate in the workshop activities.

Conceptual discussions about the meaning of storytelling usually involve debating the distinction between a story and a narrative. Even though there are valid arguments for and against the distinction between the two terms, both of them will be used interchangeably in this book to offer a simpler and more streamlined discussion. Yet still, defining storytelling is a very complex endeavor, because it is the result of the richness and complexity that is the human experience. Even though at its core storytelling is the art of weaving narratives about incidents, events, or occurrences, understanding storytelling requires exploring it in many dimensions and from many vantage points to fully experience its richness and nuance. When the concept of storytelling is explored in greater depth, a more expansive and layered set of definitions emerge:

- *Storytelling is action:* The story is the direct result of an action or a series of actions done or performed by an entity. Without those actions the story would not exist. The action is the story.

- *Storytelling is a framework*: Stories work like a frame that provides context and meaning to the human experience. Narratives are a support structure that helps us define, explain and understand the complexities of the world we inhabit.
- *Storytelling is a function*: Stories operate as an instrument or a device used to accomplish objectives in the world. Stories can be used to lead or change organizations, to encourage and motivate groups, to commemorate milestones, to start or end a journey. At every stage and phase in life, stories have a function; they play a role that keeps us connected as a society.
- *Storytelling is a way to think*: We perceive and experience the world as a massive connection of stories that can have an influence upon our decision-making. Stories can also determine the direction of our thoughts; we can use them to rationalize decisions, reflect on ideas, clarify processes, and illustrate concepts.
- *Storytelling is a method*: When used systematically to accomplish a goal, stories become an effective methodology. In knowledge management, storytelling is a methodology to share knowledge, in education it is a method of instruction, in medicine it is an approach to promote good health and improve the quality of care.
- *Storytelling is a practice*: Storytelling becomes a practice when the collection of skills, competencies, and abilities that define it are routinely implemented to perform a job.

1.1.1 Storytelling in Other Domains

Even though the conceptual basis of storytelling is the creation and delivery of narratives for an audience, its manifestation varies depending on the domain where it is used. This book discusses storytelling within the context of knowledge shared in an organization; yet, in journalism, storytelling is about reporting stories that are newsworthy to members of a target community. Cinematic storytelling is about involving the audiences in a multisensory experience where the narrative is constructed with multiple elements, devices and techniques. From a literary perspective, one of the important elements in storytelling is the writer's voice, their style, and other rhetorical devices used to bring life to the written word. In video games and similar gaming systems, the story is the product of highly immersive and interactive experiences that give the audiences the power to affect the eventual outcome of the story; the story

is, in fact, created with and by the audience, who acts simultaneously as participant and contributor in the narrative experience. Data storytelling is about creating narratives that simplify the complexity of information into relatable content for non-technical audiences. In marketing, storytelling is about messaging that will help match consumer's desires with existing products; in branding, storytelling is the creation, promotion, and projection of an identity that reflects the intrinsic values of an entity.

1.2 THE COGNITIVE BASIS OF STORYTELLING

The most fundamental appeal of storytelling is its universality; narrative traditions can be found in every human society and can be traced back to thousands of years (Sugiyama, 2001) when oral and visual narratives first appeared and paved the way for written stories. The ability to tell stories and create narratives is said to begin in childhood (Haden, Haine, & Fivush, 1997; Salmon & Reese, 2016) at the same time when other cognitive abilities emerge, such as lying, the understanding of false beliefs and moral culpability, the ability to keep secrets and detect pretending behavior (Bietti, Tilston, & Bangerter, 2019), and the ability to understand the difference between right and wrong, and deception and veracity (Cadinu & Kiesner, 2000). From childhood through adulthood, the universality of storytelling is manifested in its capacity to engage our cognitive abilities to feel emotions, activate memory, and enable sensemaking.

1.2.1 Emotion

In a study by Stephens, Silbert, and Hasson (2010) on mirror neurons, it was discovered that, during communication about a story, the speaker's and listener's brain activity showed significant coupling, whereby the brain activity of the person listening to the story matched or mirrored the brain activity of the person telling the story. This mirroring of the brain activity between the person telling the story and the listener suggests that, even at a cognitive level, storytelling can invoke feelings of empathy. Other empathetic feelings occur when storytellers use narratives to elicit emotional (positive or negative) reactions from the audience. In this case the listeners in the audience connect the emotional charge in the story (love, hate, sadness) to similar emotional experiences in their lives, thus mirroring their emotion to the one displayed in the narrative. As a matter of fact, character-driven stories with emotional

content result in better understanding and better recall of key points in the story, and they foster voluntary cooperation and a desire to help others when the audience shares the emotions of the characters in the story, and subsequently mimics those feelings and behaviors (Zak, 2014, 2015).

Another example of the emotional power of narratives comes from the experiments conducted by Joshua Glenn and Rob Walker (2012), who discovered that the perceived value of everyday objects sold at an auction website increased when a story was added to the object's description.

These examples confirm that, because emotions play an essential role in the ability to make decisions (Damasio, 1994), stories can use emotions to influence the reaction and response of an audience toward a particular goal. Emotion is the glue that connects the storytellers and the audience, and the members of the audience with each other; in that sense, emotion facilitates social cohesion. Bietti et al. (2019) give a detailed account of the arguments favoring a social cohesive function for storytelling, including the use of storytelling within families to reminisce about events, the use of storytelling to begin new relationships and consolidate bonds and maintain and strengthen collective expertise, all within the framework of a shared reality.

1.2.2 Memory

There is a deep connection between storytelling and memory; narratives are accounts of events and experiences, and memory is the ability to recall and relive them. Memories, specifically long-term memories, are expressed in episodic form describing a sequence of personal or autobiographical events; another type is the semantic memory that accounts for a general understanding of life and world occurrences; a final type is procedural memory which accounts for tacit knowledge about procedures, techniques and routines. Most stories follow the framework of episodic memories to account for past events the storyteller has experienced and later recounts for an audience; in that sense, storytelling is mostly episodic. Audiences expect the episodic nature of storytelling because that is how they understand and organize the world. Author Will Storr explains that, to understand the randomness and complexity of the world, "the brain sorts through an abundance of information and decides what salient information to include in its stream of consciousness" (2020, p. 49). This is what episodic memory does; it uses narrative to simplify the complex; it filters the important information and releases it in cause and effect sequences. In other words, Storr argues that the